

Pope Francis's Pedagogies of Compassion: Take-Home Implications for the Regeneration of the African Indigenous Social Wisdom – Ubuntu

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Introduction

The papacy of Francis is renowned for its pedagogies of compassion and the insistence it must be embodied in our daily lives as legatees and altruists of compassion. The virtue of compassion is not alien to Africans, its entire elements are encapsulated in their indigenous philosophy of humanism; conceptualized as Ubuntu. The African renaissance is providing the energy for the discourse to regenerate Ubuntu to meet the continent's yearning for emancipation.

The relationship between Francis's pedagogy of compassion and the discourse to regenerate the African indigenous wisdom is pollinated by many implications and tasks for the continent. The contribution of this paper is its articulation of some of the implications and the challenge it poses to African religious and secular communities to act in faithfulness to the pedagogies and regeneration narrative. The paper starts by elaborating Francis' definitions and pedagogies of compassion followed by the description of the regeneration theory and African indigenous social wisdom, Ubuntu. In the succeeding section, the article articulates some ponderable implications and concludes with a take-home question; what will you and I do as Africans to embody the rich pedagogies of compassion and the regeneration discourse?

Pope Francis' Pedagogies of Compassion

His former predecessor, St. Pope John Paul II was a progressive missionary. His immediate predecessor, Benedict XVI was a traditional theologian. Apart from being a progressive missionary like his former predecessor, Pope Francis is a twitterite and a social media super star (Martin 1). With great savvy for social media, he launches and sustains his papacy of compassion for the poor, which he defines and explains within and outside the box of their orthodox meanings. In all his teachings, it is clear that Francis intends to bring "changes that are mostly matters of

contextualizing moral teaching and giving priority to mercy and to the needs of the poor” (Boyle 54).

Description of Compassion

Francis’ description of compassion is a matrix of religious, philosophical, empirical and personal persuasions. That is, he dedicates every work, speech and opportunity he has to teach, to expound on various dimensions and implications of compassion. Where compassion is a familiar topic, he reinforces it; where it is not or even thought of, he spellbinds his audience by laudably inserting or exerting it. Francis’ definition of compassion takes the virtue to old, new and wider horizons, making it ubiquitously available to everyone to know, give and receive compassion. His position on compassion is “oblige us not to turn our backs [to experiences] that prevent people from living a life of dignity” (Pope Francis *Misericordia et Misera* 19).

Francis hinges his definition of compassion on God, whose name is mercy and of whom we are commanded; “be compassionate as your Heavenly Father is compassionate” (Pope Francis *The Name of God*). This invitation is to all humanity and it must internalize, inculcate and impart compassion. In terms of scope and context, compassion is binding on everyone and must be seen in social context or human endeavour (Boyle 50).

Compassion is opening the heart to wretchedness, showing generosity and tenderness to the penitent, that is everyone who is wounded and in need of healing (Pope Francis, *The Name of God*). It is emotional involvement or show of affective disposition and relationship towards the members of the human community.

In addition, compassion cannot be a “parenthesis”, it must be “manifest and tangible” (Pope Francis, *Misericordia* 1) in “exhortative” and “performative” forms (Pope Francis, *The Name of God*). Compassion is the inclusive hospitality to everyone, for example, church members whose marital problems keep them from communion and the dissidents of the Church’s teachings who are estranged. God’s compassion does not discriminate and it “requires us to banish indifference and hypocrisy, lest our plans and projects remain a dead letter”(Pope Francis, *Misericordia* 19).

Compassion is healing, and it must be geared toward the health of the sick and the sexually abused (Burton). It is the creative approach of evangelization that brings joy to those who are harmed (Boyle 38). However, the essential emphasis that is missing in Francis’ pedagogy is the concern for the healing of the perpetrators as well.

To be compassionate is to be attentive to the “signs of time and the legitimate concerns of people” and to bring good living to those disillusioned and oppressed especially by our irresponsible attitudes and Western imperial ideologies like “our Sister Earth” (Pope Francis, *Laudato Si* 2), young people (Pope Francis, *Christus Vivit* 39), indigenous communities (Pope Francis, *Querida Amazonia* 6) and family traditions (Pope Francis, *Christus Vivit* 78). Compassion toward indigenous communities means saving them from colonialism perpetuated by globalization (Boyle 44-45).

In general, compassion connotes generosity, commitment, fidelity, patience, forgiveness, gratuitousness, love, consolation and appreciation. It means helping those “experiencing suffering and pain” to rejoice (Pope Francis, *Misericordia* 13). Consequently, no law or system should impede the expression of compassion (Pope Francis, *Misericordia* 11) as a self-initiated or other-initiated “vigilance and solidarity” (Pope Francis, *Misericordia* 14). Church and humanity must flourish with compassion, the legacy of “witness [and] solidarity” with the needy, “commitment” for the common good, and the task of transforming “unjust social structures” (Pope Francis, *Amoris Laetitia* 290).

Legatees of Compassion

The first legatees or beneficiaries of the supreme virtue of compassion is humanity. Francis decries that; “our humanity is wounded” (Pope Francis, *The Name of God* 42). Due to the first sin and the modern traits of colonialism, predatory capitalism, exploitative globalization and imperial interactions “humanity is deeply wounded” with complacency, covetousness, slaveries, pleasure seeking and blunting conscience, in fact they have “shut out the poor and God’s voice” (Boyle 38). Francis is sanguine in stating that “humanity needs mercy and compassion” to heal, which we all can give (Pope Francis, *The Name of God* 16).

Other beneficiaries of compassion are “our Sister, Mother Earth” (Pope Francis, *Laudato Si* 1-2) and the Amazonian, African and global Indigenous communities. These global communities are devastatingly exploited by predatory capitalist nations and multinational corporations and colonial institutions. Badly wounded by our “irresponsible use and abuse” our sister earth now “groans in travail” for compassion ” (Pope Francis, *Laudato Si* 2). Consistently overwhelmed by imperial and capitalist attacks and cultural genocide, indigenous communities and capacities are whining the “cry that rises up to heaven” with the demand for the compassion that emancipates,

empowers, decolonizes and indigenizes (Pope Francis, *Querida Amazonia* 9).

Those on the “peripheries” also need mercy and compassion (Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium* 20). These are out cast because of abortion, sexual identity assertion, dissension to the Church’s teachings, and the abandoned and aided to die because of age and health complications. Despite the fact that the concerns of these “peripheries” create ripples in morality and bioethics, they undeniably need mercy (Boyle 36).

Young people and families equally need our compassion to find joy and to live again. Regrettably though, youths are dangerously confronted with “sexual and financial scandals” (Pope Francis, *Christus Vivit* 40) and our families are threatened by the “culture of the ephemeral” (Pope Francis, *Amoris Laetitia* 124) characterized with objectification, entrapment, fears, forced migration, and the “mentality against having children” (Pope Francis, *Amoris Laetitia* 42) or as I tag it, procreational apathy. Francis enjoins us to try a little harder to take the first step and to become involved in bringing mercy and compassion to these visible and invisible legates. Who are the altruists or apostles of compassion?

Altruists of Compassion

The altruists of compassion are the collective, individual and institutional “we” (Pope Francis, *Querida Amazonia* 21). That is, every one of us is under the obligation to initiate and accompany the other in bringing healing to the wounded humanity and sister earth. The royal “we” is also explicated as follows:

Young people and families must first of all be compassionate to themselves. He charges young people to stand up against the factor that wangles them “to ignore their history, to reject the experiences of their elders, to look down on the past and to look forward to a future that [it] holds out” thus become slaves to its vested interests (Pope Francis, *Christus Vivit* 181). They must smartly identify and resist imperial systems and exploitative agendas. Couples and family members are required to show compassion towards each other and collaborate with external supports to address their challenging experiences (Pope Francis, *Amoris Laetitia* 26).

It is important for religious and political institutions to be unrelenting in creating supportive programmes for those struggling with matters of existence and subsistence. Institutions also must be attentive and at work in “changing social structures that harm the people” (Boyle 45). In *Evangelii Gaudium*, the Pope recommends “the characteristic

feature of [the new] evangelization”, that is, “a radical” pastoral response which must make the Church to go beyond its boundaries to bring joy and soothing to the wounded (Boyle 37-38). It behooves on church ministers: lay and clergy to be the guide, support, comfort and discerners of justice for the wounded members (Pope Francis, *Misericordia* 10, 12).

Other commendable altruists of compassion are the Indigenous communities. Like family members and young people, indigenous communities are charged to be self-compassionate and “not let themselves be taken in by the siren songs and the self-serving proposals of power groups” that are harmful to them (Pope Francis, *Querida Amazonia*, 42). It is necessary for indigenous communities to stand by their cultural wisdom and defend them from imperialists and capitalists. The Pope clearly restates that the imperative to revive inculturation theology cannot be overstated (Pope Francis, *Querida Amazoni* 66)

Specifically, the collective “we” commands us all to be responsible in our dealings with the predated sister earth and the members of the wounded humanity, that is the legatees reckoned above. Our responsibility to our “Sister, Mother Earth” demands the promotion of “ethical principles” and “environmental education” to enshrine a salubrious relationship and “ecological equilibrium” with her, as exemplified by the Indigenous communities (Pope Francis, *Laudato Si* 210). Also, unflinching “confident attention” must be shown towards the identity and wisdom as well as the plights and struggles of indigenous societies across the world (Pope Francis, *Querida Amazoni* 9). The Church is not opposed to “the autonomy of culture” but “has the greatest respect for it” (Pope Francis, *Querida Amazoni* 67), therefore its future pastoral programmes must portend supportive response to the emancipatory struggles of the wounded indigenous communities (Pope Francis, *Querida Amazoni* 21).

In general, the Pope’s pedagogies for the wounded and periphery resonate with the ongoing renaissance to regenerate Ubuntu, the African indigenous principle of shared humanity and compassion.

The Regeneration of African Wisdom

This narrative entails mobilizing Africans to acknowledge, appreciate and access as well as participate in the processes to recover, revitalize and re-empower their identity, peoplehood worldview and agency. The regeneration discourse decries the loss of Africa’s agency, which has cost Africans confidence in themselves and their social values as well as wisdom. Consequently, Africa is bereft of self-initiatives and suffering from syndromic consumerism, copyism, mimicry, dependency and distrust in Africanity. Regeneration

collaborates with the efforts to re-ignite the pride for Africanity and trust in Afro-indigenous visions to re-assert its agency. Seme explains that regeneration is not the comparison of Africa to Europe but the introspective appreciation of Africa's indigenous capacities to address its anomalous experiences. Chingono describes it as taking a holistic view of Africa using its indigenous lens to Africanize the social, political, educational, practice and research processes and attain higher and advanced standard of life envisioned by their own worldviews (213). The regeneration discourse is buoyed by the vision to emancipate and empower Africa, the survivor of colonial machinations. Francis' pedagogies have not only recognized the legitimacy of indigenous wisdom, they are also galvanizing massive support for their regeneration for "the common good".

The fundamental goal of the regeneration struggle is to ideologize or mainstream Ubuntu. In attesting to this goal, Murithi asserts that the successful regeneration of African wisdom will significantly determine effective peace-building in Africa (16). Genger advocates for the mainstreaming of Ubuntu to be able to fight against corruption in Africa (26). Mugumbate & Chereni are vehement about the theorization of Ubuntu to enhance social work in Africa (33). Khomba, Vermaak, & Gouws have also posited for the institutionalization of Ubuntu and developed a balanced scorecard model for measuring African political, financial and economic development, as a paradigm shift from the Western dominant model (2). As depicted, Ubuntu is not just the commonly shared "spirit in African communities" (Chaplin 1), "the dialectics of learning about Africa" (Lumumba-Kasong 35) and the wisdom for "re-visioning education in Africa" (Takyi-Amoako and N'Dri 1), it is essentially about the indigenization of Africa's daily social spaces so that Ubuntu will become the African ideology or paradigm for creating meaning, asserting Africa's agency and determining developmental trends.

Ubuntu

Ubuntu is a South African concept but as a social philosophy, it is extant in every African community. Murithi demonstrates that, "ubuntu is found in diverse forms - throughout Africa" (28). It is not only "widely used in North and Southern Africa" but also deeply "reflected in different languages in Africa" as an ethics principle (Asike 3). It is an African concept whose nomenclature and meaning are not polluted by colonialism, and as a result, the required wand to power Africa's search for emancipation and agency.

Essentially, Ubuntu means being or existence and relationality. It equally means compassion or compassionate relationality between human beings and with nature. In Ubuntu, existence is possible because of human graciousness, thus, I am because you are, and you are because I am. To be is to be compassionate. My existence is the outcome of the compassion of humanity? therefore my essence is to be compassionate such that it can be said of each person “you are generous, you are hospitable, you are friendly and caring and compassionate, my humanity is inextricably bound up in yours, ‘we belong in a bundle of life’” (Tutu 31). In this light, *Ubuntu* principally defies every irresponsible act or form of violence, be it corruption, bloodletting, oppression, exclusion, neglect and abuse (Genger 23) Violators of *Ubuntu* are aberrant and losers of their essence of being, namely their humanity (Gyekwe 8), for example, to be corrupt means harming the humanity you share and benefit from and losing your personhood.

Ubuntu is an African exhortative and performative wisdom. Exhortatively, it educates and inculcates moral values, spiritual beliefs and social responsibilities that uphold the social order. Performatively, it brings compassion, fraternity, solidarity, support, community, harmony and respect into the lives of the community members. The key elements of Ubuntu include: (1) Humanism which is that appreciation of life as sacred, shared, relational and communal. (2) Personhood implies being as a unit in interdependence and with moral and social responsibility for each other such that, in situations of dissociation or “cruel wicked, selfish, ungenerous or unsympathetic [acts] — it would be said of that individual that he is not a person”, they have lost their personhood (Gyekwe 8). (3) Community and harmony implies that cordial togetherness and effervescing cohesion are prime and irreplaceable. (4) Common good in Ubuntu means each person has their wealth but they are altruistic in sharing it and “there is no tension or opposition” practising this act of common good (Gyekwe 14). (5) Duty and responsibility mean everyone is obliged to fulfill their duties to maintain the existence and prosperity of the community. Social responsibilities in Ubuntu are “humanitarian, social and duty-oriented rather than rights-oriented” (Gyekwe 17). In the pre-invasion times, Africans did not have to learn or develop with another culture’s wisdom but with Ubuntu. This conciliating accord “gave the true unity, vision and agency with which they fashioned their destiny and confronted their challenges” (Senghor 168). The great African pre-colonial civilizations we know of were built with dominant influence of this shared social principle, for example’ the Bantu iron ore and melting industry, the Benin earth-works, the Nok sculptures, the Sene-Gambian megalithic complexes, and many other works of “Africa’s monumental architecture” (Emeagwali and Dei 6). This romantic and glorious era of Africa has been lost to colonial invasion whose legacies are a bundle of activities that continue to disrupt the people and leave them without an empowering

ideology or wisdom. This is the context that necessitates the regeneration of Afro-indigenous wisdom, which is clearly appreciated in Francis' pedagogies of compassion.

Emerging Implications to Appraise

Francis' teachings on compassion have a kaleidoscope of implications that relate to regeneration discourse and give it additional inspiration. The first implication is that the entire gamut of the pedagogies of compassion are not new to Africans, because they subsist in the African indigenous socio-philosophical principle, Ubuntu. In spite of that the pedagogical positions spur on Africans to proudly have a recourse to their rich indigenous capacities which they grossly left untapped for imperial forms and wisdom; a development that Francis demurs without mincing his words.

The second implication is the validation of indigenous wisdom by the Pope; his compassionate stance for the agency of indigenous communities. This validation should thus significantly stimulate Africans and their allies to undertake the task of regenerating the overriding ideological principle of Ubuntu and restoring the lost agency. Africa is still derogated as anarchic without any wisdom to contribute to the modern world (Dalglish 57; Huntington 47). Invective arguments such as this should stimulate Africans to use their indigenous and other available resources to re-make their image because the failure to do so will mar it the more. Africans do not need an external challenge to develop their indigenous capacities and as such, the inspiration from Pope Francis cannot be ignored either.

Third, the Pope has evidently set his judgement on Africans and global indigenous communities against shying away from their identity, being skeptical about their wisdom, showing nonchalance towards indigenous concerns, tolerating ignorance for their culture and exhibiting repulsiveness to the discourses of regeneration, indigenization and Africanity. At the same time Africans must eschew these deplorable attitudes for their contraries. Oyewumi cautions against being "anti-nativists" who identify with African indigenous forms to please the West and meet its standards, but commends the "nativists" whose goal is to represent Africa as it is thus to attain self-confidence and agency (18).

Fourth, the pedagogies of compassion and regeneration discourse have lucidly recalled inculturation theology. Pope Francis' positions re-echo the imperative to revive and entrench this theology with a stronger vigour and renewed creativity. Recent past papacies may have been wary of indigenous "culture and context" and more inclined

to Western theology but Francis' papacy offers a strong support for its impactful return (Bevans 205). The dice with a more supportive atmosphere is cast; African theologians must not slumber on this opportunity any longer.

Sixth, *Querida Amazonia* vehemently acknowledges that the indigenous peoples have the "personal freedom" to practice their cultural capacities (20). It warns us not to "allow globalization to become "a new version of colonialism" and indigenous people from participating in the tyrannical forms that cause them spatial and cultural "up-rootedness" (14). The exhortation insists on the "need to respect the rights of the peoples and cultures and to appreciate [their] active involvement from within their own culture" (40). This is because they "are not just another party to be won over, or merely another individual seated at a table of equals. They are - principal dialogue partners, those from whom we have the most to learn - out of a duty of justice" (26). These statements clearly connote decolonialization and indigenization as well as the regeneration and the re-empowerment of indigenous forms. The needful now is for Africans in all walks of life to no longer shy or abase their indigenous thought forms but increasingly familiarize with and impart them. It is in this vein that the Pope challenges the Church, especially the one in Africa to act out of the box and support the regeneration process; "the church is not a static deposit, but the root of a constantly growing tree" (Pope Francis, *Querida Amazonia* 66) and "it does not deny the autonomy of culture but holds greatest respect for it" (67). What should become the currency is how African power and epistemic communities will explore this opportunity to bolster the continent's renaissance thus ably confront predatory ideologies and cultural genocidal schemes that are wounding its life and agency.

Conclusion

Pope Francis' papacy on compassion is a welcome pedagogy that is offering succor, meaning and freedom to the wounded earth and humanity. This gospel of hope is enjoying global appreciation, the legatees and altruists of compassion are testifying to this. Global and African indigenous communities are well ensconced in the pedagogies also as beneficiaries and givers of compassion. As depicted, the entire gamut of the pedagogies of compassion are well encapsulated in Ubuntu; the key factor powering the regeneration discourse in Africa. It is thus incumbent on Africans: groups and individuals to embark on various strategies that will embody the pedagogies and the regeneration discourse in their institutions and social processes; it is no longer an option that Africans must free themselves from the colonial bubbles, which make them to inhibit the development of their indigenous

wisdom. African theologians and scholars are offered the leeway to champion the decolonization of the religious and secular as well as the reclamation of their wounded indigenous representations. Pope Francis states that, Africans can be Christians but not Euro-Christian “because the faith cannot be constricted to the limits of understanding and expression of any one [i.e. European] culture” (Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium* 118). The pertinent take-home question therefore is: how can I, you and we as African individuals, groups and institutions embody the pedagogies of compassion and the discourse to regenerate African wisdom; Ubuntu?

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