

African Journal of Contextual Theology
 SIST, Attakwu – Enugu
 P.O. Box 9696, Enugu, Nigeria
ajct@sistenugu.com

Subscriptions

The *African Journal of Contextual Theology – AJCT* – (ISSN 2141-3037) is published annually. The subscription price is the following:

Nigeria: N500 per issue

Foreign: US\$20.00 per issue (including postage)

Payment may be made in cash or by cheque, payable to:

Spiritan International School of Theology, Attakwu
Enugu, Nigeria

The issues are available from Spiritan International School of Theology (cf. address above).

Permissions

For information on how to request permissions to reproduce articles / information from this journal, please visit www.sistenugu.com / SIST Journal.

All editorial correspondence should be sent to:

The editor-in-chief

African Journal of Contextual Theology

Spiritan International School of Theology, Attakwu

P.O. Box 9696 Enugu, Nigeria

e-mail: nwachukwums@gmail.com ; editorajct@yahoo.com

Advertising

Enquiries about advertising and requests for review of Books should be sent to:

The Editor – Advertising

Spiritan International School of Theology, Attakwu

P.O. Box 9696 Enugu, Nigeria

African

Journal of Contextual Theology



The Door in Our: Midst

Re-Enforcing the Mission of the Church

Vol. 5

December 2014

Published by the Spiritan International School of Theology, Attakwu- Enugu, Nigeria

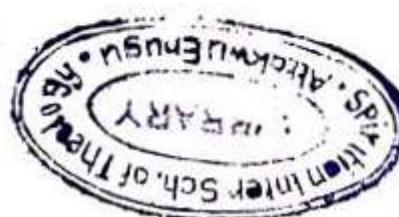
ISSN 2141-3037

December 2014

Vol. 5

CONTENTS

Editorial: Christian Faith and Commitment to the Poor in <i>Evangelii Gaudium</i> MarySylvia NWACHUKWU, DDL	1
Option for the Poor in the Church's Life and Thought Historical and Theological Survey Chibugo LEBECHI, DDL	9
Poverty and Global Economic Justice in Our Era Dozie UDOEZE, CMF	33
"You always have the poor with you but you do not always have me" (John 12:8): Charity as Worship of God Ayodele AYENI, C.S.Sp	53
Who are the Poor in Our Midst? MarySylvia NWACHUKWU, DDL	77
Yahweh, The Advocate of the Poor Philip IGBO, CMF	103
Holy Spirit, Father of the Poor Ikenna Bona UGWU, C.S.Sp	123
Re-Reading Deutero-Isaiah's Oracles of Salvation to the Ears of the Poor Today A Practico-Pastoral Imperative Gerald Emem UMOREN	151
Poverty Alleviation in Africa: A Christian Response Jake UTONKO	171



ONE

OPTION FOR THE POOR IN THE CHURCH'S LIFE AND THOUGHT HISTORICAL AND THEOLOGICAL SURVEY

Chibugo LEBECHI, DDL

1. Introduction

The phrase 'preferential option for the poor' is a demand that priority be given to the service of the poor and the disadvantaged in the society. This phrase became pronounced in the teachings of the Church after it has been institutionalized by the Latin American Bishops' Conference in Medellin in 1968¹, and in Puebla in 1979.² That notwithstanding, concern for the poor has a long history in the ministry and life of the Church. Christ acknowledged this as an indispensable part of his ministry as is evident in Luke 4,18-21. He also showed its significance in his public life and ministry. The Church down the ages has striven to uphold this

¹ The Medellin conference was the second General Conference of the Latin American Bishops. In the conference's document, the bishops argue that effective evangelization means giving "preference to the poorest and the most needy" in the society. This involves shunning a "rich hierarchical church" and being in solidarity with the poor. See *Poverty of the Church: Latin American Bishops, Medellin, 1968, nos.*, 1-3,7-10, 18. Available from <http://www.shc.edu/theolibrary/resources/medpov.htm>: accessed 2 April, 2014.

² See *Third General Conference of the Latin American Bishops, no.III.4.* Available from, http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/speeches/1979/january/documents/hf_jp-ii_spe_19790128_messico-puebla-episc-latam_en.html: accessed 2 April, 2014.

vital legacy of its master. My aim in this essay is to investigate how the Church has been faithful to this ministry to the poor from the Patristic era to the present. The focus shall be on the official teachings of the Church, which comprises papal letters, other major Church documents and some aspects of the teachings of regional bishops.

2. Patristic Foundation of the Ministry to the Poor

The Church has since its inception seen the ministry to the poor as an integral aspect of its missionary activity. In the Patristic era³ when the Church was still in its formative stage,⁴ the Fathers strove to keep alive this fundamental mission as an essential aspect of the Christian life. According to a second century homily – Second Clement – sharing with those who have nothing, is the nub of Christianity.⁵ For

³ This is a period within the second century, spanning from the end of the Apostolic age (i.e the end of the time of the twelve apostles – about AD 100) to the 8th century. Both the east and the west agree on the beginning of the Patristic era, that is, about 100 AD, but they differ as to when it ended. While the east maintains that it ends with John of Damascus (d. 750 AD), the west identifies the end of the Patristic era with Isidore of Seville (d. 636). Cf. Hubertus DROBNER, *The Fathers of the Church: A Comprehensive Introduction*, trans. Siegfried Schatzmann, Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2007, p5.

⁴ The period is thus designated because it is a time largely characterized by the definition, formulation and transformation of Christian doctrine and faith. Very significant is the formulation of the doctrine of the Trinity. See Lewis AYRES, *Nicaea and Its Legacy: An Approach to Fourth-Century Trinitarian Theology*, New York: Oxford University, 2004, p18.

⁵ Cf. 2 Clement 16.4. See 2 Clement, available from <http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/2clement-lightfoot.html>: accessed 4 April, 2014.

Gregory of Nazianzus, it is a perfect way of following Christ. By so doing we offer him our love and service.⁶

The Fathers saw the dichotomy between the rich and the poor as a pastoral problem that needed some pastoral solution. In their writings, they tried to point out the causes of the divide and proffered some solutions. Some of the causes are greed, avarice, and selfishness. According to them, it is because people are so much attached to worldly things that they crave for more material acquisitions for themselves without the willingness to share it with others. Cyprian of Carthage did not mince words in his condemnation of such "insatiable greed" (*insatiabili cupiditatis*).⁷ It pained him that this attitude was also seen among the clergy. Some bishops at the time were so much engrossed in amassing wealth to the extent of acquiring estates through deceit and giving people loan on huge interest rates.⁸ As many people remained impoverished, they and a few others continued to swim in excessive wealth.

The Fathers saw this kind of situation as against the mind of God, who created everything in the world for the enjoyment of all. As such, it was an obligation for those who had more to

⁶ Gregory of Nazianzus *Oration* 14.40. Migne, PG 38:906. See also Gregory of Nazianzus, *Sermon on the Love of the Poor and Those afflicted with Leprosy*. Francis Toal ed. *The Sunday Sermons of the Great Fathers*, vol. 4 (Chicago IL: Regnery, 1963), 45; Basil the Great, *Homilia in Divites*, Migne, PG 31:325.

⁷ Cyprian of Carthage, *The Lapsed*, no.6. See Maurice Bévenot, trans. *St Cyprian: The Lapsed the Unity of the Catholic Church*, Westminster, MD: Newman, 1957, p17.

⁸ Cyprian of Carthage, *The Lapsed*, no. 6.

let go of some of what they had so that others could benefit.⁹ The crux of their teaching on fostering this common sharing revolved on the consciousness and promotion of the common good. By this, each person was responsible for the common welfare by creating a more humane world for the good of all. This could only come about through imbibing the spirit of detachment. No one should hoard anything, but take what he/she needed at a time and let go of the remaining. Riches bore more fruits when they served the common good. Otherwise, they would be wasted, and the poor was thereby robbed.¹⁰

The promotion of the dignity of the human persons as creatures made in the image of God played a key role in the argument of the Fathers for the common good. To ignore this was seen by them as inflicting deep wound to humanity and a

⁹ Cyprian of Carthage. See also *Shepherd of Hermas*, 2nd Commandment, also 10th Similitude available from <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/02012.htm>, accessed, 8th April, 2014; Basil The Great, *Hom. on Ps 14*, Migne, PG 29:261. Cf. Basil the Great, "On the Love of God and Our Neighbour," in Francis Toal ed. *The Sunday Sermons of the Great Fathers*, vol. 4 (Chicago IL: Regnery, 1963), pp40-42.

¹⁰ Cf. Basil the Great, "On the Love of God", pp39, 41-42. See also Gregory of Nazianzus, "Sermon on the Love of the Poor," in Toal ed., *Sunday Sermons*, 55. Cf. Irenaeus of Lyons, *Adversus Haereses*, BK. 4, Ch.30:1-3, in John Keble, trans., *Five Books of St. Irenaeus Against Heresies* (London: James Parker and Co., 1872), pp397-400. See also Clement of Alexandria in his *Quid dives salvetur*, 13. See Mordaunt BARNARD (ed.), *A Homily of Clement of Alexandria: Who is the Rich Man that is Being Saved?*, New York: E & J. B. Young, 1901, pp31-33.

neglect of God.¹¹ This aside, the fact that we are made in God's image, means we have a common origin and identity; one race, sharing the same kinship.¹² Therefore, we owe ourselves a duty of service in order to care for what is part of our nature. Since the sharing and the promotion of the common life is incumbent on everybody, they viewed it as gross insensitivity to allow anyone to languish in poverty.¹³

Another basis for the patristic call that the world's resources be made accessible to all was their notion of God's absolute ownership of everything on earth. They stressed that human beings were mere custodians of God's properties. That some people had more than others was a matter of God's benevolent design. In this arrangement, God wished to use them as instruments for extending his goodness to others.¹⁴ As

¹¹ Gregory of Nazianzus, *Oration* 14:23. Migne PG 38:888. See also Gregory of Nyssa *Oration* 1, See HOLMAN, *The Hungry are Dying: Beggars and bishops in Roman Cappadocia*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001, p199.

¹² Gregory of Nyssa, *De Pauperibus Amandis*, Migne, PG 46:476. See also Gregory of Nazianzus, *De Pauperum Amore*, Migne, PG 35:868. Text paraphrased by me.

¹³ Gregory of Nyssa, *De Pauperibus*, Migne, PG 46:465. See also Gregory of Nazianzus, *De Pauperum Amore*, Migne, PG 35:868; Basil the Great, *Hom. on Ps 14*, Migne, PG 29:261.

¹⁴ Gregory of Nazianzus, *Sermon on the Love of the Poor*, Toal ed., *The Sunday Sermons*, 53-56; See also, Gregory, *Oration* 14:29. Migne, PG 38:888. Basil the Great, *Homily on Psalm 14*, Migne, 26:261; Basil the Great, "Homily in Time of Famine and Drought," in Susan Holman, *The Hungry are Dying*, 191-192; Ambrose of Milan, *Expositio Psalmi CXVIII*, Michaela Zelzer, ed. *Sancti Ambrosii Opera*, Wien: Österreichische Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1999, 149; Augustine of Hippo, "Sermon" 50.1-2, in See John Rotelle ed. *The Works of Saint Augustine: Sermons 20-50*, New York: New City,

articulated by Brian Daley, for the Fathers, “earths produce is given to us by God for our common use... individuals are simply stewards of a common supply”.¹⁵ It was thus, for them, an act of strict justice for the rich to support the poor with some portion of what was intended for humanity as a whole. That was why this should not be done with pride as if they were doing some favor to the poor. They should rather give humbly because what they possessed was not theirs but God’s.¹⁶

3. The Medieval Church and Responsibility to the Poor

The Medieval period or the Middle Ages is said to have begun with the collapse of the Roman Empire in the fifth century. This marked the end of classical antiquity and stretches to the sixteenth century.¹⁷ This was a period of outstanding metamorphosis in the history of the Church. Very significant was the great schism of 1054.¹⁸ This was also a period when

pp344-345. Cf. John Chrysostom, Homily 10:3-4 on I Cor. *Shepherd of Hermas*, 2nd Commandment, also 10th Similitude.

¹⁵ Brian DALEY, “The Cappaodian Fathers and Option for the Poor,” in Daniel GROODY (ed.), *The Option for the Poor in Christian Theology*, Notre Dame IN: University of Notre Dame press, 2007, p80.

¹⁶ Ambrose of Milan, *Expositio Psalmi CXVIII*, Zelzer, ed. *Sancti Ambrosii Opera*, 149. See also Augustine of Hippo, *Sermon 50.1-2*.

¹⁷ That is from about 476 AD until 1517 AD, the dawn of the Protestant Reformation. See Peter DINZELBACHER, “The Middle Ages,” in *The Encyclopedia of Christianity* 3 (2003): 522.

¹⁸ This was the event that precipitated the final separation of the East and the West, leading to a situation where both the bishop of Rome (Pope Leo IX) and the Patriarch of Constantinople (Michael Cerlarius) excommunicated each other. See *Schism of 1054*; available from

the Church mingled so much with secular affairs heightened by the rise of the Papal States.¹⁹ The ground to this was prepared by the Papal Revolution of Pope Gregory VII in 1073.²⁰ With this, the Church was disentangled from the control of the civil authority thus making it assume superiority over the civil order. This was based on the theology of the 'key of Peter' (cf. Matt 16:19).²¹ This gave a very superior status to the Church helping it to expand its horizons and to amass great wealth. This had some adverse consequences. Some corruptions and abuses crept into the Church. This would necessitate a call for reformation in the 16th century. In its pursuit of wealth, the Church of the Middle Ages became somehow a bourgeoisie Church. A case in point was the issue of the sale of indulgences.²² It was as if "grace and

<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/587056/Schism-of-1054>; accessed 20 April 2014.

¹⁹ This was a situation where by the pope exercised sovereignty over some territories as civil leaders. See Georg DENZLER, "Papal States," in *The Encyclopedia of Christianity* 4 (2005), 28-29.

²⁰ Prior to this time, there was a close connection between the church and the state such that the Emperors interfered so much in the affairs of the church, hence, the emergence of *caesaropapism* (combination of the secular and religious government, in which the secular is superior) and lay investiture (the act of civil government appointing and investing the religious leaders).

²¹ With this, the popes at the time asserted that Peter was given the authority over earthly affairs. So, as the successors of Peter, the affairs of both the church and the state were under their authority.

²² The doctrine of indulgence developed in the Church about the thirteen century. It is a practise whereby people obtain freedom from sin through the merit of Jesus, Mary, and the Saints upon the fulfilment of certain conditions. In the early medieval period this condition came to be associated with sacramental penance. Meanwhile, later in the medieval era, the church opened the door whereby people could also substitute the sacramental penance with

forgiveness are on sale at bargain prices”.²³ This impinged so much on the character of the Church and the understanding of salvation. The Church became almost like a market where the highest bidder won. As it were, there were such satires like, “the Court of the Romans is nothing but a market. There the laws of the senators are up for sale. In this consistory, if anyone would argue his case or that of another, let him first read this: unless he gives money, Rome will deny him everything; he who gives more money, argues his case better”.²⁴ The consequence was that the poor seemed to have no place any more in the Church, while salvation seemed somehow privatized.

In spite of these aberrations, the medieval Church was not entirely heedless to the plight of the poor. Alleviation of poverty and the duty of the rich to the poor as members of the same community were still stressed.²⁵ For instance, the third Lateran Council (1179 AD),²⁶ in one of its decrees, states that

money. See Markus WRIEDT, “Indulgences,” in *The Westminster Dictionary of Church History: The Early Medieval and Reformation Eras I*, (2008), pp334-335.

²³ John O'MALLEY, *Trent: What Happened at the Council*, Massachusetts, MA: Belknap, 2013, p39.

²⁴ Cf. Bernard BISCHOFF (ed.), *Carmina Burana: Die Lieder der Benediktbeurer Handschrift in vollständiger deutscher Übertragung*, Munich: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag 1979, p110. Cited in English in Anthony PERRON, “The Bishops of Rome” in *The Cambridge History of Christianity: Christianity in Western Europe, c 1000 - 1500*, ed. Miri Rubin and Walter Simons, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009, p34.

²⁵ John GILCHRIST, *The Church and Economic Activity in the Middle Ages*, London: Macmillan, 1969, pp76-77.

²⁶ This was the eleventh ecumenical council held in the Basilica of St. John Lateran Rome in 1179, and convened by Pope Alexander III.

the Church of God, as a devoted mother, is bound to provide for those in need.²⁷ It is on record also that the Church at this time built a lot of hospitals and hospices and allocated one third of its income to the care of the poor.²⁸ The Church also tried to assist the poor through *montes pietatis*, which were charitable institutions that lent money with little interest or even without any to the poor depending on the circumstances.²⁹

The efforts made by some religious orders to improve the life of the poor at this time is also worthy of note. They resolved to correct the impression that the Church was for the rich. This they did through their renunciation of worldly possession, identifying with the poor, thus bringing them close to the Church and giving them hope that the Church was also that of the poor. Not just that, they also made effort to enhance the state of life of those in need. Some monasteries and religious orders developed monastic tithes whereby they paid tithes on their income for the care of the poor.³⁰ Some others, like St Francis of Assisi, gave their entire possessions to the poor. Pope Innocent III also tried to lead the Church

See Paul Pixton, "Lateran Councils, in *The New Westminster Dictionary of Church History: The Early Medieval and Reformation Eras* 1 (2008), p378.

²⁷ Third Lateran Council 1179 AD, no.18. Available from <http://www.papalencyclicals.net/Councils/ecum11.htm>: accessed 22 April, 2014.

²⁸ Cf. Brian TIERNEY, *Poor Law*, nos.39, 70-71, 78-79. See GILCHRIST, *The Church and Economic Activity*, pp77-79.

²⁹ Arthur MCPADDEN, "Montes Pietatis," in *New Catholic Encyclopedia* (1967): 1086-1087.

³⁰ See Giles CONSTABLE, *Monastic Tithes: From Their Origins to the Twelfth Century*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1964, p226.

back to its ministry of service, especially to the poor. It was actually his effort on this that led to the founding of the Mendicant order, who went out of their way to beg for the poor.³¹

4. The Church and the Poor in the Early Modern Era

This period spans from the 16th to the 19th centuries. One of the outcomes of the alarm raised by some scholars against the bourgeoisie mentality of the preceding centuries was the Protestant Reformation of the 16th century. This was spearheaded by Martin Luther through the publication of his Ninety-five Thesis.³² Some other reformers followed suit. Even though the Roman Catholic Church condemned some actions and theological arguments of the reformers,³³ it

³¹ See PERRON, "The Bishops of Rome," p34.

³² The ninety nine theses is a compilation made by Luther in the sixteenth century outlining some of the abuses he saw in the church. See Richard VILADESAU, "Reformation," in Michael GLAZIE and Monika HELWIG (eds.), *The Modern Catholic Encyclopedia*, Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1994, pp693-694.

³³ For instance, the idea of '*Sola Scriptura*' (Bible alone) which, for the reformers, denotes that in matters of faith and Christian life, the scripture is the only normative authority. Luther is quoted to have said at the Diet of Worms, 1521, that "Unless I am convinced by the testimony of the Scripture or by evident reason – for I can believe neither pope nor councils alone, as it is clear that they erred repeatedly and contradicted themselves – I consider myself conquered by what the Scripture adduced to me, and my conscience is captive to the word of God." Joachim KNAACK and Georg KAWERAU, *Martin Luther's Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe 127 vols*, Weimar: Hermann, 1883), 7.838.4-7, cited in Mark THOMPSON, "Biblical Interpretation in the Works of Martin Luther," in Alan HAUSER and Duane WATSON (eds.), *A History of Biblical Interpretation: The Medieval through the Reformation Periods*, Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003, p300.

nevertheless saw the need to embark on some reforms in the Church. This led to such reforming councils, like the Council of Trent, convoked on December 13, 1545, by Pope Paul III.³⁴ Even though it is undeniable that it was Luther and his fellow reformers that set the agenda for the council, I agree with John O'Malley that Trent should rather be seen as a council directed towards "reform of the Church" and not designated as "Counter reformation" council, as some scholars do. This is because the main concern for the bishops that gathered at Trent was the reform of the three offices in the Church, viz the papacy, the episcopacy and the pastorate. By this they aimed at curtailing the luxurious lifestyle of the papal court, the loose morals of some members of the clergy, and financial extortions of the faithful for seemingly pious purposes.³⁵

On its move to eliminate the abuses in the Church, the Fathers of Trent also saw the need to promote the concern for the poor. The issue of giving alms to the poor was one of the top priorities in its discussions during the second session of the council, 7th January, 1546.³⁶ Among the documents that emerged soon after the council was the *Catechism of the Council of Trent*. Some of its contents were several injunctions on the propagation of the ministry to the poor. The

³⁴ See Benjamin WESTERVELT, "Council of Trent," in *The New Westminster Dictionary of Church History: The Early Medieval and Reformation Eras I* (2008), 650.

³⁵ O'MALLEY, *Trent*, 21-22. See also Robert BIRELEY, "Redefining Catholicism: Trent and Beyond," in Po-Chia HSIA (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Christianity*, vol. 6, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007, pp145, 148.

³⁶ See *The Council of Trent: Second Session*; available from <http://history.hanover.edu/texts/trent/ct02.html>; accessed 26 May, 2014.

Fathers decried all manners of oppression and neglect of the poor and the needy. Using Amos 5:1ff, they described how God detested maltreatment and indifference to the poor. They argued that the onus lies on the pastors as well as the richer faithful to shun whatever action that oppressed society, especially the poor. For them, all should see it as a bounding duty to assist those in need.³⁷ One can see that the Council of Trent tried to retrace the steps of the Church back to a very crucial aspect of its mission. It set the stage for what followed from the 19th century onwards.

5. Catholic Teaching from the Late 19th Century to the Present

Since the range of this period is vast, I have decided to arrange the discussions here under three sub-divisions, viz, Pre-Vatican II, Vatican II, and Post-Vatican II.

5.1 Immediate Antecedent to Vatican II

After the Council of Trent, it was as if the voice of the Church was silent on this until the ground breaking impact made by Pope Leo XIII in 1891 through his powerful encyclical *Rerum Novarum*. This document has remained the benchmark for subsequent official Church documents and teachings on social issues.³⁸ Among other things, the writing of the encyclical was

³⁷ See *Catechism of the Council of Trent*; available from http://www.awakentoprayer.org/trent_aid_poor.htm; accessed 26 May, 2014.

³⁸ See Todd WHITMORE, "Catholic Social Teaching: Starting with the Common Good," in Kathleen WEIGERT and Alexia KELLEY (eds.), *Living the Catholic Social Tradition*, Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2005, p59.

precipitated by the capitalist trend of the time created by the industrial revolution. The situation aroused a concern because, as the Pope expressed, instead of industrialization alleviating poverty, it ended up creating abounding wealth among a very small number of people and destitution among the masses.³⁹ Maximization of profits was preferred to the welfare of their workers, who were more or less like instruments for the employers' self-aggrandizement. This left most of the workers in a state of misery and wretchedness.⁴⁰ Moved with passion for the betterment of the condition of the workers, the Pope cried out for a revolutionary change. For him, the Church could no longer remain silent on societal issues adversely affecting the people. Otherwise, "by keeping silent we would seem to neglect the duty incumbent on us."⁴¹ As Donal Dorr notes, the Pope made it clear that it was high time the Church had a 'social conscience',⁴² by which it shows that its mission is not just to preach salvation in the world to come, but also includes such social issues as concern for the poor. This was succinctly expressed by Pope Leo XIII when he argued that it was wrong to assume that the Church should be so "preoccupied with the spiritual concerns of her children as to neglect their temporal and earthly interests. Her desire is that the poor... should rise above poverty and wretchedness, and better their condition in life; and for this she makes a strong

³⁹ LEO XIII, *Rerum Novarum*, no.1. See Claudia CARLEN, "Rerum Novarum," in *The Papal Encyclicals (1878-1903)*, p243. Hereafter, RN.

⁴⁰ RN 2-3, 14-27.

⁴¹ RN 16.

⁴² Donal DORR, *Option for the Poor: A Hundred Years of Vatican Social Teaching*, Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1992, p15.

endeavour”.⁴³ The struggle for the poor remains very important because since they occupy a special place in the sight of God, their situation stands as object of special consideration both in the Church and in the society.⁴⁴

Indeed, Pope Leo XIII and his immediate successors (Pius XI and John XXIII) strove to renounce all manner of activities that put people on the margins of the society. The special place given to the problem of poverty in their writings owed much to greed, absence of justice, lack of solidarity, love, spirit of common good, and above all, disregard for the dignity of the human person in the society.⁴⁵ To salvage the situation, all the above mentioned defects have to be done away with. As Pius XI stated, people should rather cultivate “a solicitous and active love”⁴⁶ towards one another especially the poor. Imbibing this will go a long way to reinforce the spirit of justice and welfare of all, for by then all would have realized that God owns everything while human beings are mere “stewards of God’s providence for the benefit of all”.⁴⁷ Meanwhile, the platform on which this would be enhanced is an environment in which everyone is imbued with the sense of appreciation of the equal dignity of the every human person. As John XXIII puts it, “the common good, since it is

⁴³ RN 28; cf. also nos. 23, 29-30. See also JOHN XXIII, *Mater et Magistra*, no. 3. Hereafter, MM.

⁴⁴ RN 37.

⁴⁵ RN nos. 2, 14-27, 33, 37; Pope PIUS XI, *Quadregesimo Anno*, no. 137. See Claudia CARLEN, “Quadregesimo Anno”, in *The Papal Encyclical (1903-1939)*, pp421-431. Hereafter, QA; JOHN XXIII, MM nos. 43-44, 65; John XXIII *Pacem in Terris*, nos. 58, 80, 87-88. See Claudia Carlen “Pacem in Terris,” in *The Papal Encyclical (1958-1981)*, nos. 113, 116-117. Hereafter, PT.

⁴⁶ QA no. 137.

⁴⁷ RN 22. See also QA 41-98, 136; MM 43-44, 65; PT 58, 80, 87-88.

intimately bound up with human nature, can never exist fully and completely unless the human person is taken into account at all times".⁴⁸ Those who are richer and well off should not take advantage of others. They should rather seek for ways to help them improve their economic well-being so as to live in conditions that conform to their human dignity.⁴⁹ This will be more fostered by the Fathers of Vatican II, as shall be discussed shortly.

5.2 Vatican II and the Poor

The Second Vatican Council remains a great milestone in the Church's effort to engage with the affairs in the society. This is mostly expressed in its leading phrase '*aggiornamento*', literally meaning updating of the Church and adaptation of its ways in line with the signs of the time. This still reiterates the earlier views that the Church's mission is not only spiritual but also temporal. One of the ways by which the council tried to engage with the realities of the modern world was its call for the enhancement of the status of the poor. This already began to reverberate from the moment John XXIII announced his intention to convoke the council. In his radio message of 11th September, 1962, the Pope declared that the Church, in all that she was and wished to be, was above all the Church of the poor.⁵⁰ It must therefore be ready to divest itself of the aura of a bourgeoisie Church to become a Church that identified completely with the affairs of the poor and those left on the margins of the society.

⁴⁸ PT 55; see also nos. 43, 89, 139; cf. JOHN XXIII, MM no.43.

⁴⁹ John XXIII, PT 87-88, 121-122.

⁵⁰ John XXIII Radio Message, 11 September, 1962, AAS, 54 (1962), 682. The Church should present herself as the church of all, and especially as the church of the poor. Translation mine.

The Fathers of Vatican II vehemently declared that, in order to properly extend the mission of Christ on earth, the Church had to toe the line of its master, who had a special place for the poor so that, just like Christ, it could surround “with love all who are afflicted with human infirmity... endeavours to relieve their needs”.⁵¹ In order to ensure that the Church was true to its mission, the Council Fathers admonished the religious and the clergy to strive to shun a life of luxury and materialistic tendencies. It would be out of place for the leaders of the Church to live in affluence while the majority of the faithful were suffering. They should rather live moderately and relinquish some of their wealth to take care of the poor. They also stressed the need for the Church not to present itself in such a way as to make the poor think that the Church was a place only for the rich. The clergy and religious should instead model their lives in such a way as to make the poor feel belonged.⁵²

The council’s document – *Gaudium et Spes* (The Church in the World of Today) has a more forceful presentation of this call to care for the poor. In it, the Fathers made it clear that the Church must be in alliance with the suffering humanity. It could not stay aloof but should be engaged in dialogue with the social life of people in order to be able to serve humanity in love. This was well articulated in the first paragraph of the

⁵¹ Vatican Council II, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*, 21 November, 1964, no. 8, in Norman TANNER (ed.), *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils: Trent to Vatican II*, vol. 2, London: Sheed and Ward, 1990, p855.

⁵² Vatican Council II, Decree on the Renewal of Religious life, *Perfecta Caritatis*, no. 13, in Vatican II, pp943-944; Vatican Council II, Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests, *Presbyteriorum Ordinis*, pp1063-1064.

document: "The joys and the hopes and sorrows and anxieties of people today, especially of those who are poor and afflicted, are also the joys and hopes and sorrows and anxieties of the disciples of Christ".⁵³ Hence, to be a Christian is to be one with the poor. The text laments that, despite the fact that the human community is blessed with unprecedented wealth, many are still deeply wounded. This is obvious in the widespread hunger and widening and unjust gap between the rich and the poor across the globe.⁵⁴ As such, the thrust of the message as it were was not just to share in the problem of humanity, but more on how the Church can repair and console the agonising humanity through the light of the gospel. The title, *Gaudium et Spes* – joy and hope – gives the leitmotif of its whole message, that, liberation of people, especially the poor, from despair and giving them a new life of bliss, a dignified life befitting creatures made in the image of God is very paramount in the mission of the Church.⁵⁵

Very important was the council's recognition that every human person possesses sublime dignity that must be protected and respected. This stemmed from the fact that all human beings by their origin shared ontological equality.⁵⁶ It exhorts each person to see the other as an *alter ego* (another self).⁵⁷ The text highlights the responsibility of all for the advancement of the common good. It is only by the commitment of everyone to the common good that justice can be promoted. This is true because it will eschew egoistic

⁵³ Vatican Council II, Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the World of Today, *Gaudium et Spes*, p1069. Hereafter, *GS*.

⁵⁴ Cf *GS*, nos. 4-9, 63,88.

⁵⁵ *GS*, nos.12, 19.

⁵⁶ *GS*, no. 29.

⁵⁷ *GS*, no. 27.

habits and motivate each person to think for all, as well as enhance the spirit of solidarity.⁵⁸ This cannot come about, unless people are converted. Thus the text enjoins all to have a change of character and outlook on life. This will go a long way to enhance the reform of the social structures that inflict injustice.⁵⁹ Those at the helm of economic affairs will also be propelled to promote economic development that will boost the life of every individual.⁶⁰

Above all, the document evidently establishes as an imperative the need for everyone to understand that every human person has an absolute and undeniable right to his/her share of the earth's goods. When people come to grips with this, it will bolster a just socio-economic order that can foster a more equitable distribution of goods. This is because those who are rich would have come to understand that they are not doing an offer of charity to the poor, but giving them what is their due as *bonafide* children of God, who is the owner of everything.⁶¹ From the forgoing, it is crystal clear that the Fathers of Vatican II made a notable effort to underscore the need to work for eradication of poverty and improvement of the life of the poor.

5.3 The Post Vatican II Church and The Option for the Poor

The pace set by the Vatican II on the ministry to the poor has continued to be heightened in the post Vatican II Church. Discussions on poverty and how to upgrade the status of the poor have been in the limelight in major papal texts and

⁵⁸ GS, nos. 21, 24, 30, 85-87.

⁵⁹ GS, no. 63.

⁶⁰ GS, nos. 65, 69, 70, 71, 85-87

⁶¹ GS, nos. 69, 71, 78

Church's official documents after the council. They vigorously point out that preferential respect (*praecipuam reverentiam*) for the poor is an essential and defining activity of the Church. It is as it were intrinsically aligned with the principles of the gospel.⁶² As Paul VI underlines, one of the major features of evangelization is action for justice. As such, the Christian message of salvation should not only revolve around ecclesiastical or religious activities. It should also include liberating humanity from all that oppress it; economic

⁶² PAUL VI, *Populorum, Progressio*, nos.81-82. See Claudia CARLEN, "Populorum Progressio," in *The Papal Encyclicals* (1958-1981), p198. Hereafter *PP*. See also PAUL VI, *Octogesima Adveniens*, nos.23, 42.cf no.5. Hereafter *OA*. For this, see *AAS* 65 (1971): 418, 431, 404. See also PAUL VI, Apostolic Exhortation, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*; available from http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/paul_vi/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_p-vi_exh_19751208_evangelii-nuntiandi_en.html; accessed 20 June 2014. Hereafter *EN*; John Paul II, *Redemptoris Hominis*, nos. 13-15, 18. See Claudia CARLEN, "Redemptor Hominis," in *The Papal Encyclicals* (1958-1981), 248-249. Hereafter *RH*. See also *Sollicitudo rei Socialis*, 3; available from http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_30121987_sollicitudo-rei-socialis_en.html, accessed 21 June, 2014. Hereafter *SC*; Catechism of the Catholic Church, no. 2448. Hereafter, *CCC*; Pope Francis, *Lumen Fidei*, 50-60. See *Lumen Fidei*, available from http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20130629_enciclica-lumen-fidei.html, accessed 23 June, 2014; *Evangelii Gaudium*, no. 95,178-181, 202. See *Evangelii Gaudium*, available from http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html, accessed 23 June, 2014.

oppression being among the obvious ones.⁶³ John Paul II also stressed this in his speeches and documents. He sees living under the intolerable burden of miserable poverty as a scandal.⁶⁴ According to the John Paul II, often workers are underpaid because the employers are trapped in an economic system that does not enable them to pay their workers properly. This is as a result of what he describes as the interplay between “direct and indirect employer”.⁶⁵

For Benedict XVI, commitment to the ministry of charity remains one of the three things that make the Church remain true to its character. Others are proclaiming the word of God (*kerygma-martyria*) and celebrating the sacraments (*leitourgia*).⁶⁶ 'Option for the Poor' seems to have indeed become a watchword for the pontificate of Pope Francis. The

⁶³ PAUL VI, *PP* nos.81-82; *EN*, 9, 12. See also John Paul II, *RH* nos. 13-15, 18; SC 31; BENEDICT XVI, *Deus Caritas est*, 20-25, 28-29; available from http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/encyclicals/documents/s/hf_ben-xvi_enc_20051225_deus-caritas-est_en.html, accessed 23 June, 2014; Pope FRANCIS, *Lumen Fidei* 176-186.

⁶⁴ See John Paul II' Lenten message, 1998; available from http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/messages/lent/documents/hf_jp-ii_mes_09091997_lent-1998_en.html, accessed June 27, 2014.

⁶⁵ By direct employer, he means the institution or person with whom one is directly in contract. While indirect employer refers to other elements that converge to determine the socio-economic system, which also conditions the attitude of the direct employer.

⁶⁶ BENEDICT XVI, *Deus Caritas Est*, nos. 20-25. See also John Paul II' Opening address at Puebla Conference, 28 January, 1979; available from <http://www.catholicculture.org/culture/library/view.cfm?recnum=5529>, accessed June 24, 2014.

Church, he maintains, must be the Church of the poor.⁶⁷ In so many ways, he has tried to show this through concrete examples and his lifestyle. It has remained one of the major engines of what is popularly termed the Francis effect.⁶⁸ According to Pope Francis, neglecting the poor is tantamount to neglecting God's injunction. Thus, he postulates that Christians should be very careful on how they treat the poor around them to avoid running on the wrong track which leads to failure.⁶⁹

Indeed, the post Vatican II popes have continued to raise prophetic voices in condemning everything that leads to poverty. One of the ways of achieving this is the strong emphasis on the consciousness of the dignity of the human person, which the world undermines through the exploitation of the poor and leaving them with no voice in the society. This often leads to them losing their personhood.⁷⁰ The fact

⁶⁷ Pope FRANCIS, *Homily for Inaugural Mass*; available from <http://www.news.va/en/news/pope-homily-for-inaugural-mass-of-petrine-ministry>; accessed June 24, 2014. See also Pope FRANCIS, *Audience with Jesuits Journalists*; available from <http://www.standard.co.uk/news/world/pope-francis-oh-how-i-would-like-a-poor-church-and-a-church-for-the-poor-8537241.html>, accessed June 28, 2014.

⁶⁸ Two vivid examples are (a) his decision not to live the Papal Palace but in the guest house (*Domus Sanctae Marthae* – a guest house for visiting clergies on business with the Holy See and a hotel residence of the members of the College of Cardinals during conclaves) (b) his opting to retain the pectoral cross he used as a cardinal.

⁶⁹ Pope FRANCIS, *Lumen Fidei*, 186-188, 193, 195, 198, 207.

⁷⁰ PAUL VI, *PP* nos. 42, 20; John Paul II, *RH* 1, 9, 10-11; JOHN PAUL II, *Centesimus Annus* no. 46. See *Centesimus Annus*; available from http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/encyclicals/documents

that the human society is still entangled in the crisis of minority rich and majority poor despite the technological, scientific, and economic advancement and increasing wealth across the globe is quite lamentable. It is only love that inspires people to move the cause for justice and welfare of all. Part of the reasons why many in the society are languishing in agonizing poverty while a few live in superfluity is because our world is still fraught with greed and self-centredness. Although people have right to private goods, “No one may appropriate surplus goods solely for his own private use when others lack the bare necessities of life”.⁷¹ It is therefore crucial that all work towards reinforcing a fraternal community in which the world’s economy serves all humanity not just a few.⁷²

Assisting the poor has to go beyond the rich giving them from their surpluses, or the government or the Church continuously providing aid to the poor. In other words, helping the poor should be devoid of paternalism or reducing them to mere objects of charity. They are human beings with a lot of potentials. They should be helped to build themselves up in order to accord them full respect of their human freedom and dignity. The most vital of all is how to help them to develop their capabilities so that they can take care of themselves and

[/hf_jp-ii_enc_01051991_centesimus-annus_en.html](#); accessed 24 June, 2014. Hereafter *CA*; *Deus Caritas Est*, nos. 28-29; *Lumen Fidei*, nos. 53, 55-56, 218, 192, 202-208

⁷¹ Paul VI, *PP* no. 23.

⁷² *PP* nos. 3, 19, 21- 24, 30-34, 43-44, 47-49, 56-60, 75; JOHN PAUL II, *Laborem Exercens*, no. 14. See Claudia CARLEN “*Laborem Exercens*,” in *The Papal Encyclicals (1958-1981)*, 302. Hereafter *LE*; JOHN PAUL II, *SC* nos. 12-19, 42; CCC no. 2447; FRANCIS, *Caritas in Veritate*, no. 32; FRANCIS, *Lumen Fidei*, nos. 33, 95, 203, 205, 263,

equally contribute meaningfully to the society. By this they maintain their respect, freedom, and dignity.⁷³

To speed up this entails a reconstruction of all unjust structures that inhibit human welfare. This will help to create a sustainable economic and social environment that will enable everyone to be gainfully employed. By this each person will be able to cater for his/her basic needs.⁷⁴ The emphasis here is on proper distribution of economic wealth. Donal Dorr calls this the "enlargement of the national cake".⁷⁵ This means speeding up economic growth so that the wealth of a particular nation be not concentrated in the hands of a few. In the same vein, the more advanced and developed countries should assist the less developed ones. They should help them to improve their lives rather than supply them with ammunitions when they have unrest. At the basis of the crisis in most the developing countries are inequalities and unjust social structures. When there is suffering in the midst of plenty simply because a few selfishly hoard what belongs to all, people cannot but rebel. It is therefore incumbent on all to fight this to a standstill for the good of all and save people from misery.⁷⁶

6. Conclusion

I have tried to make a general overview of what the position of the Church is on the "option for the poor," from the

⁷³ See JOHN PAUL II, *CA* nos. 46, 52, 57-58. See also *CCC*, no. 2405.

⁷⁴ PAUL VI, *PP* nos. 3, 20-22, 30-34, 42-44, 47, 75. See also JOHN PAUL II, *RH* nos. 15-17; JOHN PAUL II, *LE* nos. 8, 14; *CCC* nos. 2401-2405, 2446.

⁷⁵ DORR, *Option for the Poor*, p120.

⁷⁶ JOHN PAUL II, *RH* 15-17. See also FRANCIS, *Lumen Fidei*, 202.

Patristic era to the present. Although there are a lot to say on this, I limited the essay to the exposition of papal encyclicals and other major Church documents. It is clear from the above that the problem of poverty remains a social reality that poses serious theological challenges. The Church realizes that a lot still needs to be done to make things better for the society, especially the poor. Over the years, the Church has come to appreciate the fact that, for it to maintain its fidelity to the gospel as well as relevance to the society, it must not side-line the poor. In fact, moving on the side of the poor should occupy a central vision in the life of the Church just as it was for Jesus. It is a very fundamental aspect of its mission that should not be ignored. It is not optional but intrinsic to the very nature of the Church.

Even though there are considerable developments and significant shifts over the years, the Church has never neglected the voice of the poor. The most primary thing to be considered on which every other thing hinges is, the preservation of the dignity of every human person. This comes from the realization that we are one family of God and all the goods of the earth are given by God for the benefit of all. The awareness of these will enhance altruism and make people work for a just economic and social order that will enable everyone to use the things of this world in ways that conform to the dignity of all as creatures of God.