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POVERTY ALLEVIATION IN AFRICA: A CHRISTIAN RESPONSE

Jake OTONKO

1. Introduction

The times talk to us of so much poverty in the world and this is a scandal. Poverty in the world is a scandal. In a world where there is so much wealth, so many resources to cater for everyone, it is disheartening that there are so many hungry children, that there are so many children without an education, so many poor persons. Poverty today is a cry.¹ The struggle against poverty has been, for the past two decades, an utmost concern of the various world administrations. The above observation made by Pope Francis is apt as today we live in a world where majority of the citizens are living in pitiable conditions: with no water, no electricity, bad roads, no shelter, no hospitals, no security, and no food. And the story seems to be everywhere the same. The misery and poverty in the world is now a refrain in a song sung daily by millions of people all over the world to whom the situation presents a particularly pitiable scenario. Thus, one could surmise that our contemporary world showcases a paradox: the world is rich, but its people are poor. Even though this same scenario is noticeable in all parts of the world, the situation in Africa seems to be more appalling. In neither of the development

¹ Pope Francis, Meeting with Students of Jesuit Schools - Q&A, 6/7/13.

indices, whether education, health, water, environment, infrastructure, access to justice, maternal/child mortality etc. does the continent score a pass mark. Africa is among the poorest continents of the world, according to statistics released by the United Nations Development Index judged by the standard of living of its citizens.

Thus, the above assertion which Pope Francis made about the world seems to typify Africa more than any part of the world. Viewing cursorily, today, African nations typically fall at the bottom of any list measuring small scale economic activities, such as income per capita or GDP (Gross Domestic Products) despite a wealth of natural resources. The bottom 25 spots of the United Nations (UN) quality of life index are regularly filled by African nations. In a recent survey, 34 of the 50 nations of the UN list of least developed countries were in Africa. In many African nations, the GDP per capita income is less than \$200 U.S. per year, with the vast majority of the population living on much less human conditions. Africa's share of income has been consistently dropping over the past century, by any measure. In 1920, the average European worker earned about three times what the average African did. Now, the average European earns twenty times what the average African does.²

Although GDP per capita incomes in Africa have been steadily growing, measures are still far better in other parts of the world, such as in Latin America which suffers from many of the same human constructed disadvantages as Africa. Thus, Africa that ought to be one of the richest continents in

² Mathias Ikechukwu ODIGBO, "The Church, Social Action and Social Responsibility in Nigeria," In *Koinonia* Vol.3 No. 2, June 2007, p88.

the world in terms of mineral resources and arable farmland, wallows in poverty, hunger and related social ills. What then is the problem with the world today? What is the missing link that has not been filled in that the inhabitants of the world have to suffer this much in the midst of plenty? How can the citizens of the world of so plenty live in such poverty conditions? What can be done to ameliorate the situation? It is the consideration of these puzzles that Pope Francis x-rays the poverty situation in the world today and finds a panacea for this ugly situation in the ageless prayer of St. Francis of Assisi.

2. The Notion of Poverty

The word 'poor' is burdened with a variety of meanings, which are sometimes exploited for ideological reasons. According to the *Reader's Digest Great Illustrated Dictionary*, to be poor means: 'having little or no wealth and few or no possessions; to be dependent on charity or public funds; destitute; wanting or lacking in financial or other resources.' It also means 'lacking in mental or moral quality: ignorable, inferior, inadequate, inefficient; lacking in desirable elements or constituents.' It could also mean 'to be bad, ill or weak; lacking in value or quality; trivial; lacking in quantity; humble; needing or deserving pity; pitiable.' To be poor, therefore, is simply a descriptive rather than an evaluative notion.³

The general dictionary meaning of poverty includes such ideas as state of being poor, living in lack and inferiority. O. A. Ogunlana, for instance, defines it as "a state of lack to

³ *The Reader's Digest Great Illustrated Dictionary*, Vol. 2. London: Reader's Digest Association Ltd., 1984, p1582.

which an individual, family, community and even a country can be subjected.”⁴ From this definition, one can assert that poverty is a deplorable condition of life, a state of penury and wretchedness that could spell doom for an individual, family, community or country so afflicted. S.N. Ezeanya, a late Archbishop of Onitsha and Metropolitan of the Onitsha Ecclesiastical Province, in a Lenten Pastoral Letter in 1992, identified the victims of poverty to include:

... those who lack adequate food, shelter, clothing, medical attention, education, because of lack of money to provide those needs, and those girls who, on account of hardship take to prostitution... Those who are deprived of personal liberty, the refugees turned beggars overnight, the destitute, and the beggars on the streets with nobody to take care of them.⁵

C. Oputa further adds the jobless, the aged, widows and orphans to a long list of the victims of poverty and goes ahead to argue that the plight of poverty is so unbearable that it makes the afflicted sometimes so desolate and despondent that they tend to lose hope not only in themselves but also in God and man like.⁶ No wonder then, that C. Oputa and A. Adedji have respectively described it as “next to slavery ... the

⁴ O. A. OGUNLANA, “Domestic and International Responses to Poverty Alleviation in Nigeria.” Paper delivered at the Workshop on Alleviation of Poverty through Cooperative Groups, Organized by Central Bank of Nigeria Staff Multipurpose Cooperative Society Ltd., October 9th – 11th, 2000 at Abuja, p1.

⁵ S. N. EZEANYA, *The Poor in Our Midst*. Lenten Pastoral Letter, Onitsha, 1992, p12.

⁶ C. OPUTA, “In Search of a Better Society” in *Vanguard*, Monday, 1st June, 1998, p7.

greatest assault on human dignity” and as “the bane of unjust and inequitable society.”⁷

According to the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, “poverty is the state of one who lacks a usual or socially acceptable amount of money or material possessions.”⁸ Poverty is said to exist when people lack the means to satisfy their basic needs. In this context, the identification of poor people first requires a determination of what constitutes basic needs. These may be defined narrowly as ‘those needs necessary for survival’ or broadly as ‘those needs reflecting the prevailing standard of living in the community.’ The first criterion would cover only those people near the borderline of starvation or death from exposure; the second would extend to people whose nutrition, housing, and clothing, though adequate to preserve life, do not measure up to those of the population as a whole.

The problem of definition is further compounded by the noneconomic connotations that the word poverty has acquired. Poverty has been associated, for example, with poor health, low levels of education or skills, an inability or an unwillingness to work, high rates of disruptive or disorderly behaviour, and improvidence. While these attributes have often been found to be associated with poverty, their inclusion in a definition of poverty would tend to obscure the relation between them and the inability to provide for one’s basic needs. Whatever definition one adopts, authorities and laypersons alike commonly assume that the effects of poverty are harmful to both individuals and society.

⁷ A. ADEDEJI, “Let’s Build a New Nigeria” in *The Punch*, Monday, 4th May, 1998, p24.

⁸ “Poverty” in *Encyclopedia Britannica*. Chicago: Ultimate Reference Suite, 2009.

3. Poverty in the World: Africa in Focus

According to the United Nations, approximately 1.2 billion people live in extreme poverty throughout the world. Clean water and sanitation, adequate nutritious food, a safe job with fair pay, an education, medical care, and a decent place to call home are unfulfilled dreams to these brothers and sisters of ours. Every day, they must somehow find a way to survive on less than \$1.25. Even in the poorest countries, it is almost impossible to live on this meager amount. And in fact, many do not make it. Equally, every day, approximately 21,000 fellow human beings die of hunger and hunger-related diseases. And according to the United Nations Children's Fund, some 300 million children go to bed hungry every night.⁹

The above categories are created by social scientists indicating that people at this dire level of need are subsisting on less than US\$1 a day.¹⁰ The poverty referred to here is not simply about the lack of money. It means that people do not know where their next meal will come from or when it will come. They cannot afford decent living conditions. Their incomes are unpredictable and low. They lack access to the good things of life fulfillment and their expectations are greatly threatened. This undermining of human dignity makes the amelioration of poverty a moral as well as an economic issue. Poverty remains without question the greatest challenge facing African countries.

In Africa, the situation seems to be more appalling than most parts of the world. The roots of Africa's poverty and its

⁹ <http://www.unicef.org/mdg/poverty.html>. Retrieved 18-10-14.

¹⁰ www.action.org/commentary/commentary. Retrieved 12-10-14.

present crisis stretch far back into history; a history dominated by the plundering of Africa by more powerful outsiders. For more than four centuries the barbaric slave trade disrupted traditional economic and social systems based upon kinship and tribal loyalties, and robbed Africa of millions of young people skilled in tropical agriculture, mining and metal working. Incipient but growing trade with Europe was also beginning to reorient production and social structures. European colonial rule, which began as the slave trade was drawing to a close in the 1880s, hastened the dismantling of Africa's traditional structures and left a deeply entrenched and enduring political, social and economic legacy.¹¹

Over a thousand distinct ethnic groups found themselves within the frontiers drawn up by Britain, France, Germany, Belgium and Portugal at the 1884 Berlin Conference. This imposition of artificial geographical boundaries created tension and conflict which continue to find expression today in the civil war in Sudan, Congo Democratic Republic and Chad and the recurrent civil strife of Uganda, Nigeria and other African states. The colonial powers of Europe also established the terms upon which these newly created African states were to participate in the rapidly expanding international capitalist economy, in effect to serve the needs of European industrialization. Africa's oil palms were to supply the soap factories, its cotton Europe's textile mills, and so on. In return, European industries supplied Africa with manufactured goods, destroying in the process competing African manufacturers, particularly the textiles. Most Nigeria's textile industries have shut down and Nigeria is now only a good consumer of foreign fabrics.

¹¹ *Africa's Development Disaster*. London: Catholic Institute for International Relations, 1984, p6.

Although it is certainly not universal or limited to Africa, corruption is also a major problem in the region. Corruption diverts both financial aid and foreign investment (which is usually sent to offshore banks outside of Africa), and puts a heavy burden on native populations forced to pay bribes to get basic government services. Thus, in most African countries today, corruption has eaten deep into the fabrics of the social structure so much so that it seems to have turned the right way of life. And the consequence of this is obvious: few people are stupendously rich while the majority are abjectly poor and live in penury. Consequent upon the above, mortality rate in Africa arises from preventable diseases which affect pregnant women, infants and young children more than any other group. Diseases once common but now almost unknown in most of the industrialized world, like malaria, tuberculosis, tapeworm and dysentery often claim far more victims, particularly among the young in various parts of Africa.

In addition, the lack of maintenance culture has been an undoing to the development of the African states. This has turned many of the roads into death traps. Many of the buildings in government owned schools and hospitals are dilapidated, and many people seem unconcerned about public facilities. This is a cause of poverty because the money that could have been used for something else is taken and invested on projected that have been awarded and abandoned. So, instead of going forward, we are but moving backward.

Furthermore, despite other hot spots of war, Africa consistently remains among the top for ongoing conflicts, including long standing civil wars (e.g. Somalia) and conflicts between countries (e.g. Ethiopia and Eritrea border wars since the latter's independence from the former), Sudan and South

Sudan; the Boko Haram impasse in Nigeria, etc. Africa is full of refugees who are often deliberately displaced by military forces during a conflict, rather than just having fled from war torn areas.

The most important goal of any meaningful development strategy is to reduce poverty. However, this goal is far from being attained in sub-Saharan Africa because of slow economic growth, rapid population growth and management of resources. A recent World Bank Report indicates that Africa has the highest poverty level. It has, therefore, been suggested that tackling poverty would result in increase in GDP per capita growth, securing the right kind of growth and investing in social services that will enhance the capabilities of the poor.¹²

4. Pope Francis on Poverty Alleviation: Lessons from the Prayer of St. Francis of Assisi

The prayer that St Francis¹³ wrote came from his contemplation of a crucifix at the dilapidated church of San Damiano. Francis heard Jesus asking him to “repair my church”. He began to do this literally – or symbolically – by rebuilding San Damiano with his own hands. The 6ft crucifix, painted in a Byzantine idiom, depicts Jesus as wounded but

¹² Presidential Advisory Commission. *Nigeria in the Transition Years, 1993-1999*. Abuja: The Presidency, 2000, p213.

¹³ St. Francis was born in Assisi in 1182. After being an affluent care-free youth, he turned his back on inherited wealth and committed himself to God. He lived a very simple life of poverty, and in so doing, gained a reputation of being the friend of animals. He established the Congregation of St Francis, which exists today as the Order of St. Francis, or the Franciscans. He died in 1226, aged 44.

not suffering. This prayer ascribed to St. Francis was quoted in full by Pope Francis on the day before Easter. The Pope applied this prayer of St Francis to his own theme of the Shroud of Turin, regarded as an 'icon'. He said: "This disfigured face resembles all those faces of men and women marred by a life which does not respect their dignity, by war and violence which afflict the weakest." Yet "the face on the Shroud conveys a great peace" he thought, "as if to say: have faith, do not lose hope; the power of the love of God, the power of the Risen One overcomes all." Below is the famous prayer of St. Francis of Assisi.¹⁴

Lord make me an instrument of your peace;
Where there is hatred, let me sow love;
Where there is injury, pardon; Where there is doubt,
faith;
Where there is despair, hope; Where there is
darkness, light;
And where there is sadness, joy.
O divine master, grant that I may not so much seek
to be consoled as to console; To be understood as to
understand;
To be loved as to love; for it is in giving that we
receive;
it is in pardoning that we are pardoned;
And it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.¹⁵

At various instances and places, Pope Francis has called on relevant world agencies to do their parts to aid the poor by

¹⁴ Howse, Christopher. "The real prayer of Francis of Assisi".
http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=Dpwz-Biehag. Retrieved 28-10-14.

¹⁵ The Peace Prayer: <http://www.shrinesf.org/franciscan-prayer.html>. Retrieved 28-10-14.

redistributing wealth in a spirit of generosity. Recently Pope Francis called on the United Nations to perform what he termed a “worldwide ethical mobilization” that would address the plight of the poor. Pope Francis has frequently criticized the capitalist ideology where a greedy few view other human beings as made for the market instead of the market being made for them. In the spirit of several previous popes, Pope Francis criticized capitalist economies where wealth flourishes, but tends to pool amongst a privileged few. He describes the role governments should play in reducing poverty and hunger in their different countries by employing the word “redistribution”. Here, Pope Francis was speaking of a fair redistribution where the wealthy recognize that they enjoy wealth produced by the labour of the poor, and those who labour and those in need should enjoy a reasonable share of that wealth.

The Pope has always highlighted the necessity of addressing the very roots of poverty and hunger which includes caring for the environment and respecting labor and the dignity of the human person. In his own words, the Pope says: “specifically, this involves challenging all forms of injustices and resisting the economy of exclusion, the throwaway culture and the culture of death which nowadays sadly risk becoming passively accepted.”¹⁶ The Pope contends that “to love God and neighbor is not something abstract, but profoundly concrete: it means seeing in every person the face of the Lord to be served, to serve him concretely. And you are, dear brothers and sisters, the face of Jesus.” The question that readily arises from this assertion of the Pope is, in whom do

¹⁶ Pope Francis renews Plea to help the World's Poor.
<http://www.catholic.org/news/hf/faith/story.php?id=55342>

you have a difficult time recognizing the face of Christ?¹⁷ This is because, the same Christ who came to serve, to save and to give his life as a ransom for many, commanded that service to neighbor should be a necessary hallmark of those who would be His disciples.

During one of his visits to a community at Varginha, the Pontiff revealed that “when we are generous in welcoming people and sharing something with them - some food, a place in our homes, our time, etc - not only do we no longer remain poor, but we are enriched. I am well aware that when someone needing food knocks at your door, you always find a way of sharing food. And you do so with love, demonstrating that true riches consist not in material things, but in the heart!”¹⁸ Here, the Pope does not only typify an article of the prayer of St. Francis of Assisi, but in a more practical way, the injunction of Jesus who said, “whatever you do to these least of mine, you do unto me”. In fact, Christ makes that the standard by which his followers would be judged on the last day.

In his speech to the Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO), the Pope said: “A way has to be found to enable everyone to benefit from the fruits of the earth, and not simply to close the gap between the affluent and those who must be satisfied with the crumbs falling from the table, but above all to satisfy the demands of justice, fairness and respect for

¹⁷ POPE FRANCIS, Address during Visit at the Homeless Shelter “Dona Di Maria,” 5/21/13).

¹⁸ POPE FRANCIS, Address during Visit to the Community at Varginha, 7/25/13.

every human being.”¹⁹ Here, the Pope enjoins individuals and groups to promote justice and equity in society. It is such justice that would smoothen out the yawning gap between the few rich and majority poor of the society. The parable of Lazarus and the rich man (Luke 16:19-31) readily comes to mind here. In today’s world, who is Lazarus? Who is the rich man? Where do you fit in? What can you do to change the situation? It is the conviction of Pope Francis, just like it was of his patron saint, that “among our tasks as witnesses to the love of Christ is that of giving a voice to the cry of the poor.”²⁰ In the Gospel, we read the parable of the Good Samaritan, that speaks of a man assaulted and left half dead at the side of the road. People pass by him and look at him. But they do not stop, they just continue on their journey, indifferent to him: it is none of their business! How often do we say: it’s not my problem? How often do we turn the other way and pretend not to see? Only a Samaritan, a stranger, sees him, stops, lifts him up, takes him by the hand, and cares for him (Luke 10:29-35).²¹ The questions that arise from here are basically: Who are today’s neighbours in need? How might God be calling you to respond? We must not remain indifferent to the plight of those agonized by acute poverty, suffering, disease and hunger. Rather, we must lift a finger to assist them in their down-troddenness and forlornness.

Finally, the Pope believes that the effort to alleviate poverty from contemporary society belongs to all and sundry. Thus,

¹⁹ POPE FRANCIS, Address to the Food and Agricultural Organization, 6/20/13.

²⁰ POPE FRANCIS, *Address to the Archbishop of Canterbury*, 6/14/13.

²¹ POPE FRANCIS, Address at St. Francis of Assisi of the Providence of God Hospital, 7/24/13.

he calls on all to be protectors of life rather than its destroyers. In his own words: "I would like to ask all those who have positions of responsibility in economic, political and social life, and all men and women of goodwill: let us be 'protectors' of creation, protectors of God's plan inscribed in nature, protectors of one another and of the environment."²² The Church has always maintained the position that man is the steward of creation, and thus has the mandate to nurture and protect it. The Pope, therefore, makes a clarion call on all and sundry to be more attentive to our collective responsibility as protectors of creation. It is this act of nurturing and protecting creation that would pave way for solidarity and subsidiarity in creation, thereby engendering an inclusive sharing formula of the burdens and benefits of the earth.

5. The Way Forward

Pope Francis suggests an all-encompassing panacea to the problem of poverty in contemporary society. Even though he lauded the Millennium Development Goals, he advises as follows: "Future Sustainable Development Goals must be formulated and carried out with generosity and courage, so that they can have a real impact on the structural causes of poverty and hunger, attain more substantial results in protecting the environment, ensure dignified and productive labor for all, and provide appropriate protection for the family, which is an essential element in sustainable human and social development". This is true because, most development goals have been carried out lopsidedly and without consideration of the wellbeing of the poorest of the poor. Even when few poor were touched, it was not sustained.

²² POPE FRANCIS, Homily at Inauguration, 3/19/13.

In addition, the Pope encouraged restitution. He drew the attention of various states' executive bodies to the Gospel story of Zacchaeus the tax collector, stating that it is never too late to correct injustice. Apart from restitution, the Pope called for justice and equity in the sharing of societies' resources. According to him, "today, in concrete terms, an awareness of the dignity of each of our brothers and sisters whose life is sacred and inviolable from conception to natural death must lead us to share with complete freedom the goods which God's providence has placed in our hands, material goods but also intellectual and spiritual ones, and to give back generously and lavishly whatever we may have earlier unjustly refused to others." This means that every man is a steward unto every man as far as the resources of the universe are concerned.²³

Furthermore, the Pope underlined the role of the Church in creating an egalitarian society. Shortly after his election, Pope Francis said to a gathering of some 5,000 journalists: "How I would like a Church that is poor and for the poor." Yes, indeed! For if a more humble, more simple-living Church does not stand firmly with the poor, then who will? If the Church which is the Body of Christ is not responsive to the plight of the suffering and needy, who else will?²⁴ The Church, thus, as salt of the earth and light of the world must speak against every form of injustice, inhumanity and structure that does not favour members of the society positively.

²³ Address to the Agencies, Funds and Programmes of the United Nations and specialized Organizations, Rome, 2014.

²⁴ Tony MAGLIANO, "Poverty, Inequality and Pope Francis" <http://ncronline.org/blogs/making-difference/poverty-inequality-and-pope-francis>. Retrieved 20-10-14.

As a basic appeal for solidarity, the Pope wants the voice of the poor to resound in all ears. He is convinced that solidarity with the poor and needy, both individuals and groups, is vital in social progress and development, and that the advancement of the poor constitutes a great opportunity for the moral, cultural and even economic growth of all humanity. In his conception, solidarity with the poor, expressed in form of simplicity of life, deep faith and unfeigned love for all, especially the poor and the outcast, is Gospel in action.

The Pope's quest for poverty alleviation demands that the conception of the poor, individually and collectively, as a burden or as irksome intruders who try to reap where and what they never sowed, be rejected; that the right of the poor to have a share of the material goods and utilize them be not over-looked; that those in need be not allowed to perish but that their basic human needs be satisfied; and that they be helped to develop effectively their capabilities and resources. To help us discover these poor ones among us and shake with them, in concrete terms, hands of solidarity, the Pope seems to reiterate the words of Pope John Paul II:

The poor too are in our midst: the homeless, beggars, the hungry, the despised, those who have been forgotten by their own families and by society, the degraded and humiliated, the victims of various crises. Many of these people even try to hide their human misery, but we must know how to recognize them.²⁵

²⁵ Samuel Kelechi UZOUKWU, *Peace through Dialogue and Solidarity: The Basis of True Humanism*. Enugu: Snaap Press, 2004, Pp224-225.

6. Conclusion

The reality of poverty in Africa as well as other parts of the world, in spite of the abundant human and material resources is a contradiction to the humanity of her people. That the majority of Africans are suffering chronic deprivations in all aspects of their lives is a gross depersonalization of their personhood. That fewer people are becoming stupendously 'wealthy' whereas a disproportionately large number of the population is wallowing in abject poverty is a crime against humanity. Poverty calls us to sow hope.... Poverty is the flesh of the poor Jesus, in that child who is hungry, in the one who is sick, in those unjust social structures.

It is perhaps the above consideration that has prompted Pope Francis to enjoin Christians and all people of good will that they are characteristically called to turn the world upside down; to bring the exact opposite of what we find in our secular world. St. Francis of Assisi's prayer is a bold step in this direction, asking for strength to give of ourselves to meet the needs of others. In this prayer, Francis of Assisi recognizes that it "is in giving that we receive", that as we give of ourselves, we receive the peace and blessing of our risen Lord Jesus. We cannot earn eternal life, except we are pardoned from the sins that block our claim on it. The prayer has many of the biblical truths of what it means to be a Christian - to seek to give, and in so doing, receive blessings; to forgive so as to be forgiven, as the Lord's Prayer asks God to forgive us as we forgive, and that the goal of eternal life can only result from our putting to death our old sinful lives.

The import of this prayer to our contemporary society cannot be overemphasized. No wonder, Mother Teresa of Calcutta

made it part of the morning prayers of the Roman Catholic religious institute she established, The Missionaries of Charity. She accorded importance to it when receiving the Nobel Peace Prize in Oslo in 1979 and asked that it be recited always. It was the same spirit that drove Margaret Thatcher, after winning the 1979 United Kingdom general election, to paraphrase the prayer on the doorstep of 10 Downing Street, surrounded by a throng of reporters. Nonetheless, the Archbishop Desmond Tutu, winner of the 1984 Nobel Peace Prize, declared that this prayer was “an integral part” of his daily devotions. And in October 1995, President Bill Clinton was to quote it in his welcoming speech to Pope John Paul II on his arrival in New York to address the United Nations.²⁶ Christians must, therefore, learn to accept this prayer not just as prayer but as a rule of conduct if the poverty and walls of injustice in contemporary society must be broken down.



²⁶ Albert HAASE, *Instruments of Christ, Reflections on the Peace Prayer of Saint Francis of Assisi*, St. Anthony Messenger Press, 2003.