

Catholic Social Teaching and Poverty Alleviation: The Nigerian Perspective

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Abstract

The pervasiveness of poverty in Nigeria is an undisputable reality. Poverty can be said to be a social, economic and environmental situation where people live below the minimum standards of living. It is a state whereby people cannot afford the necessities of life, that is, food, shelter and clothing. To address the poverty issue, different regimes of the government, through the history of the country, have developed various programmes and strategies towards poverty alleviation in the country. Laudable as they may appear, these programmes and policies have failed due mainly to corruption and poor management. It is against this backdrop that this paper discusses the role of the Catholic Church in Nigeria in alleviating poverty in the country according to the Catholic Social Teaching, which provides a framework of principles and values that help in addressing social issues. The present paper concludes that the Church in Nigeria, by her moral and spiritual mandate, has a mission not only to the spiritual but also in the temporal welfare of the people, most notably the poor and the vulnerable in the society. To bring about economic and sustainable development in the country, the paper recommends among others, human empowerment, a mutual partnership between the government and the Church, and education of the people on their rights and responsibilities.

Keywords: Catholic Social Teaching, Church, Development, Empowerment, Poverty, Poverty Alleviation.

1. Introduction

One of the distinct features of the development experience particularly during the last decades is that poverty in the developing world remains pervasive. Human conditions in most African countries, Nigeria inclusive, have significantly deteriorated. Many people continue to live in absolute poverty, unable to meet their most basic needs, and surviving on less than a dollar a day (World Bank List of Economies, 2011). The poverty situation in Nigeria is a paradox because the country is endowed with abundant human and natural

resources which could be harnessed and developed towards economic growth and reduction of poverty in the land. It is nothing to boast about that amidst plenty, many citizens of the country are dying of hunger and starvation, and many cannot boast of their daily meals. Of course, evidence shows that in Nigeria, the number of those living in poverty has continued to increase and the majority of Nigerians still live below the average standard of living. Her poverty profile in statistical figures according to World Bank and United Nations Development Programme (2010) indicates that Nigerian people live in one of the twenty-five poorest countries in the world, with seventy per cent of Nigerians living on less than \$1.25 a day (Aidelunuoghene, 2014).

In Nigeria, some of the crimes being committed, such as human trafficking, kidnapping, armed robbery, and various insurgencies, may be linked to poverty (Ayegba, 2015). These crimes have been hampering peace and sustainable development in the country. It is unfortunate that many Nigerians have lost confidence in the government and its activities. Driven by economic desperation and unemployment, a substantial proportion of able-bodied young men and women in Africa generally and Nigeria in particular, are almost on a daily basis, migrating to the Western countries and other rich countries to make ends meet. This migration is what Naujoks (2013) regards as “suicide missions in search of a greener pasture” (p. 135). While only a small fraction eventually reaches their destinations where they face disappointment and frustration, the majority of them after their failed efforts to cross to Europe tragically ended up in the Mediterranean Sea.

It is instructive to point out that various interventions have been made towards alleviating poverty in the past in Nigeria by successive governments through multiple programmes, among which are: the Directorate of Food, Roads and Rural Infrastructure (DFFRI); Directorate of Employment (NDE); Better Life Programme (BLP); Family Economic Advancement Programme (FEAP); Self-reliance Economic Advancement Programme (SEAP); Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP); National Poverty Eradication Programme (NAPEP); Subsidy Reinvestment and Empowerment Programme (SUREP) (Onah, Okwuosa and Uroko, 2018). However, experience has shown that many of these programmes failed as a result of corruption and mismanagement – unfortunately, these interventions, instead of alleviating poverty, aggravated poverty.

Nevertheless, the effort to alleviate poverty in Nigeria cannot be the sole responsibility of the government; it requires joint action of various segments of the society, particularly the Church. Hence, the Church in Nigeria, following the example of Jesus Christ, has a significant role to play in this struggle. Through the instrumentality of the Catholic Social Teaching, the Church is

charged with the obligation to be concerned with both the spiritual and temporal affairs of the people, since the good of the human person is the centre of that teaching. This gives the Church the task to be more proactive in alleviating poverty in the society. There is, therefore, an urgent call on the Church in Nigeria to rise and face the challenges of this menace that threatens the good of the human person.

2. The concept of poverty

A concise and universally accepted definition of poverty is elusive mainly because it affects many aspects of the human conditions, including physical, moral and psychological (Olowa, 2012). Based on this fact, many scholars have defined it in various ways. However, most analyses follow the conventional view of poverty as a result of insufficient income for securing essential goods and services. Most commonly, poverty is defined as “state of being in which we are unable to meet our needs” (Watt, 2000, p. 15). Verhey (1995) defines poverty as: “lack of means of subsistence (food, clothing, shelter and so on). Besides privations of this kind, poverty also connotes helplessness when faced with the demands of life: ignorance, weakness, bondage, isolation, defencelessness against injustice” (p. 126).

Further, (Ighadalo, 2012) sees poverty as “a deficiency and degraded human material conditions that inhibit the optimal realisation of basic needs such as food, health, education, shelter, and clothing” (p. 52). Similarly, the UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (1998), cited in Gordon (2005) gives a more comprehensive definition of poverty as:

A denial of choices and opportunities, a violation of human dignity. It means lack of essential capacity to participate effectively in society. It means not having enough to feed and clothe a family, not having a school or clinic to go to, not having the land on which to grow one's food or a job to earn one's living, not having access to credit. It means insecurity, powerlessness and exclusion of individuals, households and communities. It means susceptibility to violence, and it often implies living in marginal or fragile environments, without access to clean water or sanitation (p. 4).

Not infrequently, the distinction is made between “absolute” and “relative” poverty. Absolute poverty, on the one hand, according to Webster (1993) is a situation in which people are barely existing, where the next meal may literally be a matter of life or death as the cumulative effects of malnutrition and starvation enfeeble all, particularly children, whose weakness gives them the tragic distinction of having the highest mortality rate for any group anywhere in the world. Thus in these circumstances, poverty takes on an “absolute”

status since there is nothing beyond it except death. Relative poverty, on the other hand, according to Green (2013) is the condition in which people lack the minimum amount of income needed in order to maintain the average standard of living in the society in which they live. This is a situation whereby people are said to be impoverished if they cannot keep up with the standard of living as determined by society. Using the concept of relative deprivation, Ighadalo (2012) writes:

Individual, families and groups in the population can be said to be in poverty when they lack the resources to obtain the types of diet, participate in the activities and have the living conditions and amenities which are customary, or at least widely encouraged or approved, in the societies in which they belong. Their resources are so seriously below those commanded by the average individual or family that they are in effect, excluded from ordinary living patterns, customs and activities (p. 53).

Relative poverty is considered the easiest way to measure the level of poverty in an individual country.

It is evident from these definitions that what is considered as poverty has everything to do with the poor one's inability to meet their basic needs. The poor are those who have insufficient income and inadequate food intake, lack primary health care, potable water, nutrition, electricity, education and skills, are ignorant of fundamental human rights and lack access to information (Barnes, 2010). This paper sees poverty as a social, economic and environmental situation where people lack material goods that permit daily subsistence. It involves the inability to live a decent life, lack of access to quality education, lack of basic amenities - potable water, electricity, good road, sanitation, shelter - and lack of access to proper medical services. From this, it is clear that poverty is an outrage against humanity. It robs people of dignity, freedom, hope, and power over their own lives.

3. The reality of poverty in Nigeria

Poverty is a striking reality in Nigeria. It is a reality that is obvious in lack of food, clothes, quality education and other basic amenities. Nigeria has in the last two decades witnessed an unprecedented level of infrastructural decay in the form of sparse networks of impassable roads, epileptic power and water supply and inadequate refuse disposal system (Biyi & Ogwumike, 2003). Being endowed with abundant human and economic resources, Nigerians are like people in the middle of the ocean but so much in need of water to wash their hands. The glaring experience of poverty generates the most visible evidence of an acute economic crisis in the country. There is little doubt that the magnitude

of the economic crisis in Nigeria brought much agony to the citizens and perhaps the suitable indicator is the high rate of poverty. While some are living in affluence, many are living in abject poverty (Biyi & Ogwumike, 2003).

To show the intensity of poverty in Nigeria, the standard of \$1 a day measured in international prices and adjusted to local currency using Purchasing Power Parity (PPP) conversion factors was used to calculate the depth of poverty as well as its prevalence in Nigeria. The Central Bank of Nigeria on "Exchange Rates" (2012) points out that: "the most common poverty lines for international comparisons are US\$1 a day for low-income countries, US\$2 for middle income, and US\$4 for transition economies" (p.10). Poverty gap at \$1 a day and \$ 2 a day are, therefore, calculated as the mean shortfall below the poverty line. The exchange rate was put at ₦305 to be equivalent to \$1 in the "Exchange Rates" (2019). The World Bank in its 'Nigeria Economic Report' (2013) specifically reveals that 7% of the 1.2 billion people living below the poverty line in the world are Nigerians. The report states thus: "The fact is that two-thirds of the world's extreme poor are concentrated in just five countries: India (33%), China (13%), Nigeria (7%), Bangladesh (6%), and DRC (5%)" (5). Nevertheless, the World Poverty Clock, a web tool produced by World Data Lab in its report of June 2018 reveals that Nigeria had overtaken India as the nation with the highest number of people living in extreme poverty across the world, with an estimated 90.8 million people, constituting a staggering 46.4% of its estimated 195.6 million total population, measured to be living on less than \$1 (N305.00) a day. This is despite the fact that the estimated 643.5 million people living in extreme poverty all over the world has dropped to 592.7 million, in the same period more Nigerians continue to slip into it (World Poverty Clock, 2018). This is why the report refers to Nigeria as "the poverty capital of the world" (p.13).

Although, the country, according to the report of National Bureau of Statistics on Nigerian Gross Domestic Product (2018), Nigeria has a Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of \$397.270 billion (over N33 trillion), and as such the largest economy in Africa and the 27th largest economy in the world, this does not have any positive impact on the poverty level of the country. Hence, the words of Kale (2012) is relevant here when he writes: "For a country with massive wealth and a huge population to support commerce, the level of poverty remains unacceptable" (p. 36). Even though the Nigerian economy is paradoxically growing, the proportion of Nigerians living in poverty is increasing every year (Kale, 2012).

The severity of poverty in Nigeria is equally glaring when other indicators of services and development are considered. The World Bank Reports have demonstrated how low Nigerians rank in terms of access to education, electricity, safe drinking water, adequate housing, sufficient calorie intake, etc. The Vision 2020 Committee Report shows that the country allocated 7.04% of its

total annual expenditure to educational sector and 3.95% to health sector. Generally, the infrastructure spending has declined to 0.5% of GDP as at the third quarter of 2018. Despite holding the world's seventh largest gas reserves, which could be used to generate power, Nigeria only produces enough electricity to power a medium-sized European city (Vision 2020 Committee Report, 2018).

Poverty in Nigeria is especially severe in rural areas characterised by massive underdevelopment. According to International Fund for Agricultural Development (2016), up to 80% of the population lives below the poverty line, and social services and infrastructure are limited. Rural infrastructure in Nigeria has long been neglected. Investments in health, education and water supply have been mainly focused on the cities. As a result, the rural population has minimal access to services such as good schools and health centres, and about half of the population lacks access to safe drinking water. Rural poverty has persisted where policies paid insufficient attention to improving agricultural productivity and rural infrastructure and failed to provide rural communities with access to social services and social protection or facilitate the development of rural producer and consumer organisations. Failing to improve access for disadvantaged groups, and particularly women, to productive resources and social services further perpetuates rural poverty. Helping them to improve farm productivity through better access to resources, technologies, markets and organisations will be critical for both poverty alleviation and food security. Reducing poverty requires ecological and resource sustainability. Increased food production will exacerbate land degradation unless production methods and consumption patterns become more sustainable. Small-holder farmers will need affordable access to technologies and infrastructure to transform food systems sustainably (Ojo, 2014).

The above shows clearly that a high percentage of Nigerians are indeed poor. The story is still the same in the country today. The United Nations Development Programme estimated the proportion of Nigerians living in absolute poverty as at 2017 to be 62.6% of its population, while Human Index was put at 0.514 and ranked 152 out of 188 countries (National Institute for Policy and Strategic Studies, 2018). Statistics no matter how comprehensive and accurate cannot adequately capture poverty because of the present high poverty rate. It is pertinent therefore to examine the factors responsible for the high poverty rate in Nigeria.

4. Causes of poverty in Nigeria

Poverty in Nigeria is as a result of many factors that could sometimes be interrelated and complex. These include and not limited to the following:

corruption, poor governance, and inadequate commitment to programmes implementation, lack of necessary infrastructure, weak educational system and unemployment.

Corruption: The biggest challenge in Nigeria remains that of corruption and the lack of political will to develop the country. There is an incredibly high rate of corruption in Nigeria, which has equally made Transparency International (TI) rank her very poorly in the global corruption index (Transparency International, 2014). There is no gainsaying that many programmes put up to eradicate poverty in Nigeria do not succeed in achieving their aims because those that are to implement them embezzle the funds allocated for these programmes. The exploitation of the nation's oil resources, and the management of oil windfalls, most notably by the leaders, have dominated the progress and decline of Nigeria's economy over the past two decades, and have significantly influenced evolution and perception of poverty (Oke & Nemedi, 2002).

Unemployment: One of the principal causes of poverty in the country is unemployment resulting from joblessness especially among the youth sector. In fact, the reports of the labour force sample survey conducted by the National Bureau of Statistics show that the overall unemployment rate in Nigeria increased from 16.2% in Q2 2017 to 18.8% in Q3 2017, and this amount to a total of 33.9 million people who were either unemployed or underemployed in the labour force. This also increased from 18.8% in the third quarter of 2017 to 23.1% in the third quarter of 2018 (National Bureau Statistics, 2018). This has not only affected the economy but is, no doubt, boosting the crime, violence and insecurity across the nation. Most unemployed youths resort to crimes such as armed robbery, kidnapping for ransom, internet fraud and other forms of fraudulent activities.

Poor governance: The persistence and pervasiveness of poverty in Nigeria have been linked to poor governance. In the more specific case of Nigeria, there is no point denying that the country's protracted inability to develop along democratic contours for years are in part related to factors that are themselves related to poverty or indirectly (Edo, 2003). This has led to, among other things, poor accountability, lack of transparency in resource allocations, weak programme implementations and monitoring, and resources wasted.

Lack of necessary infrastructures: Low levels of access to basic facilities are a direct result of the nature of income distribution, which is heavily weighted against the majority in the country. There is a glaringly uneven distribution of productive resources and facilities, such as health institutions, housing and educational facilities and infrastructure, including roads, electricity and water.

More of these facilities are located in urban areas, thus depriving the poor who are mainly in the rural areas (Biyi and Ogwumike, 2003).

5. Catholic Social Teaching on poverty alleviation

A theological approach to the issue of poverty, specifically through the Catholic Social Teaching (CST), contained in the magisterial documents, such as the encyclicals, Pastoral Letters of the Popes and ecumenical councils, etc., stand as the strong pillar and sources of encouragement in alleviating poverty. This would assist more in the understanding of poverty and the call of the Church in Nigeria to be more pro-active in the effort to reduce poverty in the country. CST is a central and essential element of the Catholic faith. We can as well find its roots in the prophets who announced God's special love for the poor and called God's people to a covenant of love and justice. It is a teaching that has its basis from the life and words of Jesus Christ, who came "to bring glad tidings to the poor . . . liberty to captives . . . recovery of sight to the blind" (Lk 4:18-19), and who identified himself with the hungry and the strangers (cf. Mt 25:45). This shows that the good of the human person, most especially the poor, lies at the heart of the CST. This is explicitly stated in *Gaudium et Spes* 1 that: "The joys and hopes, the grief and anguish of the men and women of this age, especially of those that are poor or afflicted in any way are the joys and hopes, the grief and anguish of the followers of Christ". CST is built on a commitment to the common welfare of the poor. To understand well the operational ways and channels of the CST, it is only appropriate to know what it is through a simple definition.

By way of definition, "Catholic Social Teaching is the body of doctrine developed by the Catholic Church on matters of social justice, involving issues such as poverty, wealth, economics, social organisation and the role of the state with regards to humanity" (Curan & Alinsky, 1985, p. 159). CST offers an ethical framework for analysing and evaluating the Church's involvement in poverty alleviation. Pope Leo XIII's encyclical *Rerum Novarum* (On the Condition of Labour) written in 1891 marked the beginning of a recognisable and formidable body of social teaching in the Catholic Church. It is the first to discuss the concerns of the Church with regards to the social condition of the people. It deals with persons, systems and structures, the three coordinates of the current promotion of justice and peace, now established as integral to the Church's mission. Leo XIII emphasises in this document the Church's desire that the poor should rise above poverty and wretchedness (no. 23).

One fundamental principle of CST in favour of poverty alleviation is the preferential option for the poor which suggests that economic reform programmes must be measured primarily by the impact on the most vulnerable part of the society, the poor, especially women and children. The Church's

option for the poor is part of its vocation in the world. In the words of Oborji (2012): “The Church's care for the poor is not a mere social service which others would as well do, but it is rooted in the very nature of the Church in continuing the redeeming work of Christ, bringing integral salvation to men and women. It is founded on the divine command of love of neighbour” (p. 169). The Church takes its leap on the option for the poor in a belief in the fundamental dignity of the human person which is inalienable. Made in the image and likeness of God, every man and woman has fundamental rights and corresponding duties. The belief in the essential dignity of every human person requires not only that people be treated in ways that reflect and respect their inherent dignity, but also that every policy, every programme, and every priority be measured and evaluated by whether it enhances or diminishes human life and dignity.

It is linking poverty reduction to respect and promotion of the dignity of the human person, that John XXIII in *Pacem in Terris*, explains that every human being has inviolable and inalienable rights and duties that directly come from his/her nature as a person. Therefore, “the human person has the right to life, right to bodily integrity and the means necessary for the proper development of life: especially food, clothing, housing, medical care and other essential social services for his/her livelihood” (1990, p. 257). In the same vein, Pope Francis writes: “We are not simply talking about ensuring nourishment or a “dignified sustenance” for all people, but also their “general temporal welfare and prosperity... This means education, access to health care, and above all, employment, for it is through free, creative, participatory and mutually supportive labour that human beings express and enhance the dignity of their lives” (*Evangelii Gaudium*, 2013, no. 58).

In loving the poor, the Church affirms that the human person is worth more for what he/she is than for what he/she has. She bears witness to the fact that this dignity of the human person cannot be destroyed, whatever the situation of poverty, scorn, rejection or powerlessness to which a human being has been reduced (*Libertatis Conscientia*, p. 68). Option for the poor should mean restoring human dignity to the poor, the oppressed men and women. This principle of CST serves as an entry point that all else follow in the issue of poverty alleviation.

John Paul II in *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, (no. 42) brings out the Christological aspect of poverty alleviation when he points out that promoting option for the poor is a way of imitating Christ in his relation to the poor. Referring to the poor, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* specifically calls them “the Lord's poor” (no. 43). This shows that Jesus Christ is the one to be encountered in the poor. Hence, it is a moral obligation for all Christians to be committed to this duty. On this Dorr (1992) points out that option for the poor shows the commitment of the

individual Christian and the Christian community at every level to engage actively in the struggle to overcome the social injustice in the society (which mar our world). For him, to be genuine, it must come from a real experience of solidarity with the victims of our society. This means that one aspect of an option for the poor has to do with sharing in some degree in the lives, sorrows, joys, hopes, and fears of those who are on the margins of the society. With this Christ is encountered and more just society is created.

Another principle of CST in the discussion of poverty alleviation is “the principle of the common good.” The principle of the common good requires that the elements of the reform programmes should benefit everyone in society, not simply the rich and the powerful. The benefits must be directed towards all. It also shows that people have right and duty to participate in the decisions that affect them and the society in which they live, seeking together the common good and well-being of all, especially the poor and vulnerable. Hence, Ambrose of Milan (337-397), quoted in Cort (2000), teaches that God wishes this earth to be the common possession of all men and women and its products to supply the needs of all. Hence “When you give to the poor you are not giving him what is yours; rather you are paying back what is his ... The earth belongs to all, and not only to the rich; you are paying back, therefore your debt; you are not giving gratuitously what you do not owe” (p. 203). Giving to the poor is merely restoring to them what is theirs (cf. 1 John 3:17).

In favour of common good for the well-being of the poor, Henriot (2001) remarks that the burdens of economic transition toward a more open market, such as down-sized budgets, retrenched workforces and market-driven increase in the cost of living, should not fall only on those who already are suffering from economic hardships, leaving relatively unscathed the already advantaged sectors of society. The common good requires a sharing of burdens as well as blessings. Concern for both the common good and the option for the poor can be summed up in the oft-cited principle that 'the economy exists for the person, and not the person for the economy'. The words of John Paul II in his encyclical *Laborem Exercens* (On Human Work) becomes relevant when he reiterates the Church's concern for the poor, the evil of unemployment, dehumanising social structures and just wage. For him, work and just wage are crucial in human life and in maintaining social balance (no. 3). This states clearly the primacy of human dignity and rights as the foundation for all economic activity.

Paul VI in *Populorum Progressio* (no.20) explores the nature of development and sketches a Christian vision of development in the care for the poor. Here, he brings together the principles of option for the poor and common good when he links poverty alleviation with integral development of the human person. Paul

VI explains that the Church's care for the poor should not be limited to her charitable organisations and educational institutions concerned with feeding the poor and serving the needy of the society in various dimensions. It should be integral. He advocates respect for the different social, economic, interpersonal, intellectual and religious conditions for personal development. To be genuine, growth must be holistic, it must provide for the progress of each and the whole man/woman. Hence, Paul VI states that "Development is the movement from less human conditions to more human conditions" (no. 14).

Also, the vision of CST for poverty alleviation is expressed in the principle of solidarity. The principle of solidarity is the recognition of the interconnectedness; ethical as well as empirical, of personal and institutional activities that make up the social fabric of human existence. In CST, solidarity is promoted in conscious acts that build community. Henriot (2001) points out that when economic activity undercuts community, e.g., creating significant gaps between rich and poor, then solidarity is destroyed. Poverty alleviation programmes and efforts towards economic growth build up real solidarity. Solidarity among humans is not vague compassion for the less privileged but active structuring of a society of mutual sharing. The outcome for a poverty eradication programme would be a society where great gaps between rich and poor do not exist, at national as well as global levels (p. 10).

From this, it is clear that a theological approach to the issue of poverty is not earthly bound but geared towards the genuine relationship which Christians have between themselves, God and the material necessities of life. From this theological point of view, overcoming poverty is seen as a "mission towards happiness of life here and beyond" (Achunonu, 2012, p. 108). That is clear in the teaching of *Populorum Progressio* that the only formidable remedy to poverty is the correct development of the human person in its integral manner, that which considers the whole man/woman and all people (no. 14). The entire tradition of Catholic Social Teaching can be interpreted as a unified effort on the part of the Church leaders to advocate for a more humane society where the most vulnerable members are better protected from harm and injustice.

6. Catholic Church in Nigeria and poverty alleviation

There is no gainsaying that the Catholic Church in Nigeria, *ab initio*, is known for her concern for the poor people in the society. In the early days of Christianity in Nigeria the Church was at the forefront of society's development - building schools, hospitals, vocational skills acquisition centres, farms, orphanages, and creating small-scale income-generating projects all aimed at alleviating poverty as they evangelise. The Church offered scholarships, gave free books and teaching aids, and gave food, clothing and shelter to those deprived of these necessities. In her mission of spreading the good news of

Christ, the Church does so by deepening its roots in the hearts of the people and witnessing to it in their lives by making it relevant to the daily concern of their existence. This is the only way the gospel is meaningful to the people. This is clear in the words of Ehusani (1996) that "... only incarnate doctrines, incarnate dogmas, that is, embodiments of faith that light up and speak to the specific socio-political and economic circumstances in which they live would make meaning to hungry and distressed people" (p. 48). Hence, the Church cannot be complacent amid gross corruption, economic crimes and sabotage that impoverish the vast majority of the masses.

In modern times, the Church continues to play a prominent role in society, especially about poverty and poor people. Like Jesus Christ who identified and cared for the poor, the Church strives to free all humans from hunger, misery, oppression, ignorance, institutionalised injustice and hatred which are rooted in humans' selfishness (Achunike, 2004). In Nigeria, the Church operates at community and national levels to provide health, education, and community development programs, with particular attention to the poorest and most vulnerable groups. The Church often plays a significant role in administering social services and development programmes. The success of this is due to the vast network of parishes and dioceses. One of the fundamental ways the Church in Nigeria has tried to assist the poor is through her educational system, especially at the basic levels. The Church is aware that literacy is a formidable means to personal enrichment and social integration; hence she has built many schools and provided scholarship schemes to make quality education accessible to the people. However, it is essential to note that in Nigeria, most schools are located in urban areas and not affordable to the poor because of the high cost. Therefore there is need for more concentration of schools in the rural areas and also make the school fees affordable, since "lack of education is as serious as lack of food" (*Populorum Progressio*, 35).

Most importantly, the Church in Nigeria, through an integral development commission, Justice, Development and Peace Commission (JDPC), a unit of the Department of Church and Society in the Catholic Secretariat, and guided by the social teachings of the Church, helps Catholic Dioceses in Nigeria in policy-making specifically in areas of social development. The work of JDPC is to gather, synthesise, and evaluate studies related to the development of peoples, peace justice, and human rights (Achunike 2004). Established in almost all the Catholic Dioceses in Nigeria and with branches in the parishes and zonal levels (small Christian communities), JDPC coordinates all programmes relating to social welfare, rural, urban and water development, animating integral development, etc. It sinks boreholes for potable water to communities, promotes good governance in many ways and partners with government to monitor elections, grants small-scale loans to farmers and traders, provides

housing, builds hospitals, constructs and equips schools, advocates for widows, women, unjustly imprisoned, etc. (Odumosu, 2009). Through this organ, many women have been empowered, many disadvantaged and physically challenged have been taken away from the streets, rehabilitated, and employed, and through its agricultural department, farm produce is shared with the poor.

In addition to the efforts of JDPC, there exist many other sodalities in the Church that work assiduously to alleviate poverty. These include St. Vincent de Paul Association, Caritas, Legion of Mary, etc. These make available food items, clothing, shelter, and money where necessary to the poor. The Catholic Church in Nigeria has been able to extend her developmental programmes to different parts of the country, and as a result of her pastoral role, she has earned the trust and confidence of ordinary people, especially the poor.

7. Conclusion

Poverty has assumed pandemic proportions in Nigeria and has become a significant concern for all. It is a paradox that dehumanises the human person in the Nigerian society despite her rich natural, human and material endowment. This paper has looked critically at the high rate of poverty in Nigeria, the causes and the effects. To fight the scourge of poverty in Nigeria, there is an urgent need for the Church, by her moral and spiritual obligations, to be more proactive in her efforts in alleviating poverty in the land. The Church is called upon to become more of the Church of both the rich and the poor; Church which serves, instead of being served. It is only by immersing herself in the daily struggle of the wretched of the earth that the Church can become a sacrament of salvation for them.

8. Recommendations

Even though the Catholic Church in Nigeria is acknowledged for her considerable contributions in alleviating poverty in Nigeria, there is still much to be done considering the pervasive poverty in the land. Hence, to continue to fight against the menace of poverty in Nigeria, the following recommendations are made:

- There is need for both the government and Church to concentrate efforts on the rural sector/areas, upgrading formal community-based education to mitigate the embedded practices that foster chronic poverty at the local level.
- The Justice Development and Peace Commission and Caritas should extend their social services to the people mostly at the grass-roots level. Poverty alleviation programmes should not only be provided in social

sector development, e.g., health and education services but also productive sector opportunities, e.g., support for small farmers, youth employment generation schemes, micro-credit facilities for women, etc.

- The Church and the government should concentrate more on youth empowerment by giving them the required education and not just a 'meal ticket'. It is imperative not only to lift people out of extreme poverty; it is also essential to make sure that, in the long run, they do not get stuck just above the absolute poverty line due to a lack of opportunities that might impede progress toward better livelihoods (Kale, 2013). Hence, there should be a full implementation of vocational education and social learning for them to be self-employed and self-reliant.
- For the Catholic Church in Nigeria to have the moral authority to address the actions of the government and the ills in the society that aggravate poverty in the nation, she must not only appear to respect the worth of the human person, but the church must also practically uphold justice and equity.
- The Catholic Church in Nigeria should be more open to collaborating with other charity agencies, such as Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs), in promoting the common good, in effectively reaching out to the poor, and in advocacy and activism for just social order.
- Although the Church is not to be involved in partisan politics, she must form consciences in political life and stimulate greater insight into the authentic requirements of justice as well as greater readiness to act accordingly. The Church while remaining neutral has the responsibility to conscientiously educate her members to be able to raise their voices whenever and wherever malpractices ensue.

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