

A Liturgico-Theological Approach to Poverty in Africa

Emmanuel Chinedu Anagwo

Abstract

This paper evaluates the liturgico-theological response to poverty associated especially with Africa. Although, from time immemorial, poverty is degrading to humanity, since the affected individuals barely access the basic necessities for use on daily basis. Also poverty robs people opportunity to fully participate in the liturgical life of the Church since a hungry man/woman is an angry man/woman. This also leads to anti-social behaviour which is against one of the characteristics of liturgy as a communitarian participation. The biblical insights and writings of Patristic Era revolve around the understanding that those who are poor and defenceless have nobody to turn to but God who has a special place for them. The implication is that the basic duty on earth to the poor emerges for the faithful since God created everything good for everybody, rich and poor alike (Gen 1:31). In this way, a redistribution of wealth will improve the standard of living. Through descriptive and analytical methods, this paper addresses liturgico-theological response which will arm the worshippers to alleviate and reduce poverty in their various communities. Option for the poor commits one to justice and to take up the cause of the poor in our midst. This is in imitation of Jesus Christ who fulfilled the biblical injunction to be in solidarity with the poor, the needy and the hungry, including the oppressed (Luke 4:18-19).

Keywords: Poverty, Theology, Liturgy, Alleviation

Introduction

The question of liturgico-theological evaluation guiding poverty reduction in Catholic worship is a germane one. This is because one of the faces of African continent is being negatively depicted with the high rate of poverty. In fact, the poverty level has been on the rise over the past few decades. In his essay, "Foreign Aid for Africa's Development and the Real Hope it Portends: A Philosophical Consideration", Akaninyene Pius Ekpe observes that: "Africa remains neck-deep in poverty" (2019, p.37). The continent continues to host some of the world's poorest countries. Situations based on case studies of Angola, Cameroon, Chad, Equatorial Guinea, Democratic

Republic of the Congo and Nigeria speak volumes of the negative impact of the spiteful face of poverty (For a detailed study, see Kalu 2010, pp.1-21). Despite more than fifty years of many states in Africa being Independent, there is still compelling proof that many African states are still weighed down by the central problem of poverty, insecurity and shortage of food, warranted by callousness, insensitivity and indifference of the people. It is certainly correct to agree that poverty has been identified as one of the major obstacles to the realization of active, conscious and full participation in the liturgy. At the moment, Christianity (Catholicism) in Africa is more than ever surrounded by the poor, the needy and the hungry, including the oppressed. God formulated special laws to enable His people to care for the poor. Consequently, Charles Fensham notes that: "A compassionate and caring attitude to the poor was regarded as the will of God, the virtue of kings, and the duty of the common people" (1962, p.137). In his seminal book, *Option for the Poor*, Donal Dorr remarks that most people who are currently living in poverty did not bargain for it. While some may accept it as the will of God for them, others see it as a curse that must be eradicated at all cost (1992, p.7). Combination of several factors places them in such deplorable situation, where they lack basic necessities of life. More often than not, these situations constrain many people to lose faith in God and humanity. For instance, we have subverted Christian values by giving people of questionable character titles and accolades, in order to raise funds for strategic church's projects such as building of Churches, Cathedrals, seminaries, religious houses, retreat centres, secretariat, maintenance of clerics, religious men and women, catechists and even lay faithful (Anagwo, "Ethics of Fundraising..." 2019, pp.19-33). We have overstretched the poor. Our churches have become places where the rich are praised and the poor are relegated to the background and made to regret why they were ever born.

This paper, "A Liturgico-Theological Approach to Poverty in Africa", intends to use liturgico-theological lenses to call for attitudinal change towards the poor. It seeks to illuminate the denigrating descriptions of the phenomenon of poverty as it is concretely lived in Africa. To achieve this, the investigative understanding of poverty is very important to be known first, and then the causes, faces, effects, experience in Africa and proposals shall be marshalled out as the bedrock for this clarion call for change. This will help in the quest for liturgical catechesis and renewal as recommended by the reformed liturgy of the Second Vatican Council in *Sacrosanctum Concilium* (SC 14).

Poverty: preliminary consideration

By poverty we mean a condition characterised by severe deprivation of basic human needs, including food, safe drinking water, sanitation facilities, health, shelter, education and information (Ojo 2019, p.56). It is a state of lacking adequate food or money and living from “hand-to-mouth.” Therefore, the state of being poor is a state of powerlessness, insecurity and uncertainties. The World Bank identifies “extreme poverty” as being people who live on less than \$1 a day and “poverty” as less than \$2 a day (UNDP, Progress Against Poverty: a report on activities since Copenhagen – UNDP Progress Report). From time immemorial, poverty has been degrading to humanity, since the affected individuals barely access the basic necessities for use on daily basis. According to *The Chambers Dictionary*, poverty is a multidimensional concept reflecting clusters of disadvantages affecting people and making them vulnerable and powerless (2005, p.1286). It embraces the total absence of opportunities, accompanied by hunger, high levels of undernourishment, lack of education, illiteracy, physical and mental ailment, social and emotional instability, sorrow and hopelessness for the future.

According to UNDP, poverty is the lack of productive resources income and capacities which contributes to individual and/or group isolation, vulnerability, powerlessness, economic, political and social discrimination and participation in unsustainable livelihoods. Poverty has various manifestations, including hunger and malnutrition, ill health and limited or no access to education, health care and safe residential and occupational environments (UNDP, Progress Against Poverty: a report on activities since Copenhagen–UNDP Progress Report). For WorldIQ.com, poverty describes a wide range of circumstances associated with need, hardship and lack of resources. For some, poverty is a subjective and comparative term; for others, it is moral and evaluative; for others see it as scientifically established. Poverty can be said to be used in relative terms just as an individual man or woman can be said to be poor so also can a people/country be said to be poor.

In this paper, the writer adopts the World Poverty Copenhagen Declaration that describes absolute poverty as those who are destitute of wealth and material goods, lacking in even the basic necessities of life: “a condition characterised by severe deprivation of basic human needs, including food, safe drinking water, sanitation facilities, health, shelter, education and information” (UNDP, Progress Against Poverty: a report on activities since Copenhagen – UNDP Progress Report). The World Bank identifies

“extreme poverty” as being people who live on less than \$1 a day and “poverty” as less than \$2 a day (World Bank Report 2001).

New Testament and the fathers of the Church on poverty

From the Holy Bible and the writings of the Fathers of the Church, there are allusions, references and injunctions that inform discussion on poverty. In the New Testament (NT), which is the starting point of Christian liturgy, the understanding of poverty is clearly formulated and expressed. For instance, Christ Himself was projected as one of the poor. This is because He emptied Himself in order to partake of our humanity (Phil 2:7). He was incarnated and became a native of a Jewish nation from a despised village (John 1:46). He was even known as a carpenter's son (Matt 13:55). He resisted the temptation to carry out His public ministry through the use of glory and power as demonstrated during His temptation in the wilderness (Matt 4:5-10). Christ manifested His poverty when He said: “the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head” (Matt 8:20). Undoubtedly, the rich people may also turn to God in as much as they do not remain attached to wealth and on their own power. This is because it is almost impossible for them to be poor in spirit and enter God's abode (Matt 19:24). Again, Jesus Christ demonstrated how to be in solidarity with the poor, the needy and the hungry, including the oppressed. Luke 4:18-19 reads:

The spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has chosen me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind; to set free the oppressed and announce that the time has come when the Lord will save his people.

After the Ascension of Christ, the early Church in Jerusalem dealt decisively and took care of the poor in their midst by harnessing all their resources and sharing same according to their respective needs (Acts 2:44-45). In the Acts of the Apostles, the early Christian communities had the practice of supporting the Church, the poor and their ministers. The community of believers was noted to be of one heart and mind, and no one claimed that any possession was his own, but they had everything in common. There was no needy person among them, for those who owned property or houses would sell them, bring the proceeds of the sale, and put them at the feet of the apostles, and they were distributed to each according to need (Acts 2:44-45; 4:32-37).

Remarkably, the earliest Christian communities showed great concern for their sister churches and took up collections for believers in need living in

other communities (Acts 11:27-30; Rom 15:26-27). There is reason to believe that such assistance helped the needs of the beneficiary local churches and is a form of evangelization. In the Jerusalem community, needs were taken care of from the common purse into which those who had possessions sold them and donated the proceeds (Acts 2:43-47; 4:32-5:1-11). Later on, it became quite customary for collections to be taken by more affluent churches and sent as aid to relieve poorer churches (Acts 11:27-30; 24:17, 1 Cor 16:1-4). In his epistles, Paul addressed the church spread beyond Jerusalem about collections. Christ became poor that we might be rich. Paul made it clear in 2 Cor 8:9: "You are well aware of the generosity which our Lord Jesus Christ had, that, although He was rich, He became poor for your sake, so that you should become rich through His poverty." Again, Paul urged them to remember the poor (Rom 12:13) and James also condemned the unfair treatment of the poor (James 2:1-6).

What was practised in the NT always had its typology in the Old Testament (OT). The OT makes ample allusions to the poor especially those groups of people who are economically deprived, who have no social status, who are treated unjustly by foreign rulers or by the authorities of their land. Such categories include widows, orphans, strangers, or resident aliens, etc. In particular, they have nobody to defend them against exploitation. One of such scriptural passages in the Old Testament leaves no one in doubt that God has a special care for the poor. Prior to the exilic period, God assured Israelites of prosperity if they are obedient to Him: "There should no poor among you, for in the land the Lord your God is giving you to possess as your inheritance, He will richly bless you, if only fully obey the Lord your God and are careful to follow all these commands I am giving you today" (Deut 15:4-5). In Exodus 22:21-24, the oppression of the Israelites in Egypt moved God to save them. Again and again, in order to proclaim God's care for the poor and oppressed, God sent the prophets to protect them against injustice.

The Fathers of the Church followed the example of Jesus Christ, the apostles and the early Christians on the need to be at the service of the needy members of the community. Justin the martyr (100-165 AD) is a good example. He mentions that fraternal communion follows immediately after his description of the Sunday Assembly: "Those of us who have any resources come to the aid of all who are in need, and we are always assisting one another" (Deiss 1979, p.93). They assisted the orphans, widows, strangers and those who, through sickness or any other cause needed assistance. In the same vein, Hippolytus, speaking on the implication of

Christian initiation, advises the initiate to be at the service of others with zeal. If you miss making your contributions to the widow or sick during service today, you bring your own the next day and adding something of your own because the bread of the poor has stayed in your possession (Deiss 1979, p.93). *Didascalia Apostolorum*, in describing places to be assigned in the liturgical assembly, ascribes special place to the poor: "If a poor man or woman comes, whether they are from your own parish or another, especially if they are advanced in years, and there should be no room for them, then make a place for them, O bishop, with all your heart, even if you yourself have to sit on the ground. You must not make any distinction between persons, if you wish your ministry to be pleasing to God" (Deiss 1979, p.176). Such gifts shared to them included the grape, fig, pomegranate, olive, pear, apple, blackberry, peach, cherry, almond and even flowers. This is the import of sharing in the communion, to be in solidarity with one another. St. Augustine properly captures this message: "If you receive well, you are what you receive", and "since you are the body of Christ, and His members, it is your mystery that is placed on the Lord's Table; it is your mystery that you receive..." (Echema 1998, p.31).

These enduring teachings rightly sum up the words of Leo the Great as well as John Chrysostom who saw Christ present in the Eucharist and among His people especially the needy members: "Do you wish to honour the Body of Christ? Then don't neglect the one who is naked" (Lyonnet 1967, p.383). John Chrysostom, true to his name as the golden mouth, said love of the poor is a liturgy whose altar is more venerable than the one on which the Eucharist was celebrated, "the latter being precious by reason of the body of Christ which is received (from it), the other because it is the Body of Christ" (Echema 1998, p.31). From the foregoing therefore, one can understand that the practice of assisting the poor is an ancient practice both from the sacred Scriptures and the time of the Church Fathers. Most of the offerings and collections that were made were made for the immediate liturgical needs of the Church, for the poor, the widow and the needy and for the maintenance of the ministers of the Church.

Causes, faces and effects of poverty

Generally, poverty manifests itself in the form either by choice or by design. Jesus Christ made it clear that there is no time the world will be devoid of poor people when He states: "You will have the poor with you always" (Matt 26:11). Yet, poverty may be man-made or natural, remote or proximate. Within this totality, we are to a large extent immune from poverty that results from natural causes. One can surmise a major challenge

today that results from immediate human factors. These can totally be eliminated, but due to the depravity of human nature the chances of eradicating them are very limited.

Furthermore, poverty has many faces: it may be spiritual or material, absolute or relative, situational or generational, institutional or individual. In his Pastoral Letter, "The Poor in our Midst", Stephen Ezeanya identifies three groups of poor people: those who are lacking basic needs in varying degrees the 'rich-poor' and the poor in spirit. As already indicated in this paper, we are primarily concerned with the first category of the poor. This group according to him are:

...those who are lacking the basic needs of life in various degrees and are unable to cater for themselves. They include those who lack adequate food, shelter, clothing, medical attention, education because of lack of money to provide those need, and those girls who, on account of hardship take to prostitution. They also include those who are deprived of personal liberty, the refugees turned beggars over-night, the destitute, the beggars on our streets, the disabled, the insane roaming our streets with nobody to take care of them (1994, p.189).

Nonetheless, the poverty is all-encompassing. It is almost impossible to discuss one dimension without touching on the other spheres of life. It is characterized by lack of participation in decision making and in civil, social and cultural life. The above-mentioned indices occur in many African countries and as pockets of poverty in the midst of wealth in developed countries. Poverty can be caused by an "economic recession" which leads to loss of livelihood or by disaster or by disease. There is the perpetual poverty of workers caused by low wages, and the dire poverty of people living "outside the family support systems", social institutions and safety nets.

Granted we have causes, faces and effects of poverty that are inter-related, intertwine and interwoven, there is a reciprocal *quid pro quo*. Each flows into the other. However, one can still isolate some wide-ranging devastating effects of poverty which may be social, political, economic, cultural, etc. Other effects include: hunger, poor sanitation, high rate of mortality, diseases, drug dependence, educational deprivation, exploitation, lack of opportunities, psychological problems, lack of basic faculties, increase in crime, prostitution, child abuse, debt pressures, crisis, insecurity, etc. (Ezeanya, 2011, p.64). Having highlighted the causes, faces and effects of poverty, let us now discuss the African context.

Poverty: the African experience

In the sub-Sahara Africa, from Tanzania, Kenya, Cameroon to Congo, Liberia, Nigeria, to mention but a few, the incidence of poverty has been on the higher scale. African society suffers from a bundle of classism where cut-throat competition, mistrust, poverty and such denigrating situations for the human person exist. There is a relationship between unemployment and poverty. Both produce lack of access to regular means of livelihood. They are plagues afflicting people all over the world. Unemployment contributes substantially to poverty in Africa, as poverty remains a major cause of underdevelopment. Take Nigeria as an example. In 2014, Nigeria was acclaimed as the largest economy in Africa and the 26th largest economy in the world (British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) News) due to its rising Gross Domestic Product (GDP) which was regarded as the best economy in Africa. That same year the World Bank assessment appraised Nigeria as the country with the world's highest economic growth rates with an average of 7.4% (World Bank, 2014). Ironically, in spite of this, so to speak wonderful credential, the poverty in Nigeria is embarrassing. The orchestrated rise in the GDP rate did not translate into any tangible socio-economic gains concerning employment opportunity or financial empowerment for the teeming population of youth. It did not reflect reduction in poverty reduction in Nigeria, and neither was there an improvement in also reflect in the general living conditions of the citizens and which has continued to exacerbate.

Undoubtedly, an overwhelming proportion of Nigerians are living in poverty. Available statistics show that poverty is prevalent in Nigeria and has continued to be on the increase since the 1980s (CBN, 2005). The National Bureau of Statistics (NBS, 2006) reveals that relative poverty measurement in Nigeria stood at 54.4% in 2004 and increased to 69% in 2010. In the same vein, absolute poverty level stood at 54.7% in 2004 and rose to 93.9 in 2010. The report also shows that the percentage of those living on less than \$1 (USA) per day standing at 51.6% in 2004 rose to 61.2% in 2010. Admittedly, it is estimated that about 112 million Nigerians (about 67.1 percent of the country's total population of estimated 170 million are living below poverty level, according to statistics from NBS in 2014.

Furthermore, the report shows that the percentage of those living in extreme poverty in Nigeria increased from 51.6% in 2004 to 61.2% in 2010. The World Bank in its 'May 2013 *Nigeria Economic Report*' said the number of Nigerians living in poverty was increasing too rapidly. Its 2013 annual Report places Nigeria among the world's five 'extremely poor' countries. Again, a report

from the World Bank in April 2014, listed Nigeria among the five (5) poorest countries in the world, with the largest number of people living on less than \$1.25 (USA) a day (Vanguardng.com, 2014). The Oxford Poverty and Human Development Initiative (OPHI) 2014 report puts the percentage of Nigerians living in poverty at 43.3 percent. Similarly, Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI, 2014) in its Country Briefing, released on its website, asserts that 19.3 percent of the Nigerian population is vulnerable to poverty while 25.3 percent of Nigerians live in severe poverty. It also notes that 84.5 percent of the Nigerian population lives below \$1.25 (USA) per day.

Yet, continent of Africa is endowed heavily with natural and human resources. The continent has huge mineral deposits, amazing agricultural potential, generally good weather, increasing number of educated and innovative youths, several rivers and streams, and a very rich biodiversity. African continent proudly celebrates today the presence of erudite scholars whose works have shed light on various areas of human endeavour. This understanding gives us hope to thread the path of their worship to see what it can contribute to ameliorate the level of poverty. For instance, the Iranian revolution raised questions about how religion can provide an idiom for the articulation and mobilisation of public and popular resentment against injustice and poverty. Similarly, in the Philippines experience, the Catholic Church used pastoral letter as a means of denouncing injustice and poverty (Kukah 1996, pp.8-9). In Apartheid regime in South Africa then, "it was the churches that gave people their voices" (Kukah 1996, p.7). The above is just a tip of the iceberg of what religion and worship have been effectively and integrally employed to "resolve the crisis of failed statecraft expressed in gross violation of human right." (Kukah 1996, p.10). Hence, the way poverty is presented in the African context presents some challenges to Christian faith and worship. Kunhiyop pinpointedly avers:

Most other African countries can sing the same song. From the tip of the horn of Africa to Namibia, poverty is pervasive. Television viewers are bombarded with pictures of weak, hungry and emaciated human beings all over the continent. Beggars roam the streets of most of our cities, laying siege to car owners and begging for coins in order to feed their families and their stomachs (2008, p.138).

But first, a quick overview of the liturgico-theological response on the worship-life expressed in the liturgy is necessary.

A liturgico-theological response

One of the commonest understandings of theology discloses it as discourse or talk about God or even God-talk. In this direction, the discourse can be both interpretative and directive in nature. It is the task of theology to give meaning to history and point the direction of what God-human dialogical relationship like liturgy should evolve to appreciate the issue under study. Theologically, poverty in worship is predicated on the understanding of the old Latin maxim in the tradition of the Church, namely, *lex orandi, lex credendi*. It means that the law of prayer (the way we worship) is the law of belief (what we believe); the law of praying is the law of believing. Sometimes, it is expanded as: *lex credendi, lex celebrandi, lex vivendi* (what the Church believes, she celebrates and she lives out) [Quoted by Chibuko 2008, p.64]. It follows that how we believe reflects how we celebrate/ worship and determines how we will live. As we worship, so we will believe and so we will live (Anagwo "The Influence of Prosperity..." 2019, p.103). And the official public worship of the (Catholic) Church is designated as liturgy. Hence, liturgy, which is the celebration of the Paschal Mystery of the Passion, Death, Resurrection and Ascension of Christ into glory, remains the inestimable treasure of the Church.

It was St. Prosper of Aquitaine, one of the Fathers of the Church who gave us this maxim. St. Prosper treats the Church's prayer as an authoritative source for theology. This underlines the interaction between our worship, our belief and our life as Christians. What we believe mirrors our celebration and directs our life. They are so intertwined that you cannot separate them. This is why when we talk of the worship of the Church vis-à-vis the lifestyle of her members. It is therefore proper that our expression of faith in worship should be concretized in Christian living. It is our duty to ensure that the Christian understanding is expressed and contained with the purview of Christian theology and spirituality. In this context, to make an option for the poor is simply to commit oneself to justice and to take up the cause of the poor in our midst. This is in imitation of the life and teaching of Jesus Christ who was in solidarity with the poor, the needy and the hungry, including the oppressed (Luke 4:18-19).

In fact, liturgy is a celebration for the way of life. Liturgical calendar is dotted with euchological texts (prayer or liturgical texts), exhortations, feast days, offertory collections, gestures, postures, icons and homilies, to show that liturgy does not end in the Church, chapel or place of celebration. It transcends the liturgical environment. For instance, offertory collection, as the normal Sunday and weekday collections taken during Mass, is part of

what is used to alleviate poverty. This is because liturgically, money and other gifts (cash and kind) brought in procession, during presentation of the gifts at Eucharistic celebration, are used to help the poor, for the maintenance of the priest and liturgical needs of the Church (Anagwo, 2015, pp.62-63). For the poor, the Church has the duty to lift their conditions. No matter how little it may look; the Church uses part of the money from the offering to help the needy members of her community.

In the euchological texts, provisions are also made in the Eucharistic liturgy through the *“Masses and Prayers for Various Needs and Occasions”* for divine intervention on the dire needs of the faithful. For instance, in the Mass for those *“In Any Needy”*, the Prayer after Communion (*Post Communionem*) reads: *“We pray, O Lord, that in receiving your Sacrament we may experience help in mind and body, so that, kept safe in both, we may glory in the fullness of heavenly healing. Through Christ our Lord.”* Even in *“Time of Famine or For those Suffering Hunger”*, the Opening Prayer and Prayer after Communion have similar invitations to extend a helping hand to the needy members. The Opening Prayer (*Collecta*) reads: *“O God, who, being both good and almighty, provide for all creatures, give us, we pray, an effective love for our brothers and sisters who suffer hunger, so that famine may be banished and that they may have strength to serve you with free and untroubled hearts. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever”* (*The Roman Missal*, 2011, p.1133). Beyond having the five basic structural elements of an opening prayer, namely, invocation, relative pronoun, intention, finality and long Trinitarian doxology, the content of the prayer recognises the paternity of God as Lord. It prays Him to grant us the love (compassion) for our brothers and sisters who suffer hunger, in order to banish famine in the world. In this way, they will wholly serve God better. The theology is that the prayer expresses petition.

Reiterating this salient point, an alternative Opening Prayer states: *“O God, who did not create death, and who provide food for all living things, drive out, in your compassion, the hunger of your servants, that our hearts may serve you with greater readiness and joy. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever”* (*The Roman Missal*, 2011, p. 1119). While the Prayer after Communion goes thus: *“O God, almighty Father, we humbly ask you that the living Bread, which has come down from heaven, may give us strength to relieve our brothers and sisters in their need. Through Christ our Lord”* (*The Roman Missal*, 2011, p.1118-1119). Very significantly, the last

intention of the solemn intercession on Good Friday states: "Let us pray, dearly beloved, to God the Father almighty, that he may cleanse the world of all errors, banish disease, drive out hunger, unlock prisons, loosen fetters, granting to travellers safety, to pilgrims return, health to the sick, and salvation to the dying" (*The Roman Missal*, 2011, p.308). In these euchological texts, God is depicted as the compassionate God whom we pray to give us the strength to relieve the burden and stress of our brothers and sisters.

Besides, one of the translations which supplement the juridical dismissal formula with missionary mandate *Ite Missa Est* (Go in peace, glorifying the Lord by your life) is the *vade tecum* from the Eucharistic celebration. Every Eucharistic liturgy calls to mind this command to love and serve the Lord in the neighbour with whom you have shared one cup and one body in Christ. The command "glorifying the Lord by life" means to live a life of witness for all the people. The Parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37). Through the liturgical year, feast of saints, like the memorial of Vincent de Paul (1581-1660) on 27th September every year, calls for compassion for the poor as well as the Lenten collections done at every week of the Stations of the Cross, during Lent, to provide funds to assist the indigent members of the community. The clarion call to show compassion to the poor and needy must be deeply rooted "in deed and truth" and not merely "in word or speech" (1 John 3:18). Hence, the command to practice spiritual and corporal works of mercy. Emphasizing this point, Jovian P. Lang listed the seven chief spiritual works of mercy as: to admonish the sinner, to instruct the ignorant, to counsel the doubtful, to comfort the sorrowful, to bear wrongs patiently, to forgive all injuries, and to pray for the living and the dead. The chief corporal works of mercy are seven: to feed the hungry, to give drink to the thirsty, to clothe the naked, to ransom the captive, to harbour the harbourless, to visit the sick and to bury the dead (1989, p.55).

In fact, both spiritual and corporal works of mercy are pre-requisite conditions to show the faith celebrated in the Eucharistic liturgy. Faith without good works is dead (Jam 2:17). It has always been the prayer of the Church that those who participate in the liturgy grow to love one another as symbolically expressed in the sharing of one cup and one body and as such participate in the enjoyment of eternal life. Interestingly, this care for poor and the needy transcends class, race and gender. The care of the poor and needy is an inclusive demand incorporating the care of the destitute and our enemy. Liturgy challenges participants to imitate our fore-bearers in faith in this direction like St. Vincent de Paul.

Little wonder, the opening statement of the Second Vatican Council states the signal that the Church is concerned about the distressed members and calls for love to alleviate their problems: "The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the men of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these too are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ. Indeed, nothing genuinely human fails to raise an echo in their hearts" (GS 26 & 29). In his Encyclical Letter, *Populorum Progressio* (On the Development of Peoples), Pope Paul VI also stresses that the development of people is a way to show this love of neighbour. Accordingly, he states that the Church has close attention: "of those who are trying to escape the ravages of hunger, poverty, endemic disease and ignorance; of those who are seeking a larger share in the benefits of civilization and a more active improvement of their human qualities; of those who are consciously striving for fuller growth" (1967, p.1).

Be that as it may; liturgically, poverty may rob an individual or community/people opportunity to fully participate in the liturgical life of the Church. An adage holds: "a hungry man/woman is an angry man/woman." Nobody can effectively preach the Gospel to a person with an empty stomach. Mahatma Gandhi captures this idea when he said, "To a people famishing and idle, the only acceptable form in which God can dare to appear is work and promise of food and wages" (Ezeanya 2011, p.64). Obviously, poverty leads to anti-social behaviour which is against one of the characteristics of liturgy as a communitarian participation. The theological insights revolve around the understanding that those who are poor and defenceless have nobody to turn to but God who has a special place for the victims of injustice and those who are poor. Consequently, they turn to God for divine care and protection. Ideally, Christians are to be the veritable agents to be used by God to console His people. However, today, what beholds the worshipping community are series of neglect, insensitivity and indifference for those who long for peace, justice, love and concern. It was Pope St. Paul VI who said that the Church opened her window to let fresh air; unfortunately, the smoke of Satan has filled the house, and it is choking everybody. It is high time we extinguished the smoke of Satan, and then let in only fresh air.

Proposals for the church in Africa

From the foregoing, it is clear that poverty cannot be eradicated if Christians wall themselves off from the community. Today, many worshippers always have the danger to misconstrue liturgical celebration as what begins and ends 'during' worship. The formation and information garnered in the

liturgy which should dovetail into the socio-communitarian living are easily side-tracked by them. Below are some proposals to rediscover the Christian Gospel to the poor.

quality liturgical catechesis on the gospel of poverty

Firstly, quality catechesis is one of the most potent tools in tackling poverty. Francis Bacon is credited with the statement: "Knowledge is power". Before him, Prophet Hosea states that: "My people perish for lack of knowledge" (Hos 4:6). The clergy have responsibility to ensure that quality catechesis should be available to the lay faithful. In the contemporary African society, the gap between poverty and wealth, rich nation and poor nation is more or less a factor of catechesis. The catechesis in this case should not be arbitrary. There should be a catechetical structure that addresses formation, information and leadership to the faithful. This will help them to see the opportunities that are at their disposals, thereby helping them to achieve significant improvement in various fields of human endeavour such as farming, trading, microcredit scheme, provision of basic necessities, revolving loans, etc.

Meanwhile, the bishop as the chief catechist of every diocese should champion this course. The priests and other pastoral and catechetical agents should follow suit. Parents should take up the responsibility of promoting poverty alleviation programmes. Worshipping communities should organize seminars and talks on the appropriate way for an optimal poverty alleviation programmes. The guiding principle should be 'build the people let them build the Church'.

need for increased poverty reduction driven homilies

Secondly, the Word of God in the Bible has a very powerful role to play in serving the poor in our midst. The pivotal place the homily plays in the liturgy makes it a veritable tool for human transformation. A dictum holds that what we hear can change our behaviours towards positive human relation. In this way, priests and other Ministers of the Word should always remember how far this aspect of liturgy could build up a fruitful Christian community. To realize this objective, theological educators should priests, seminarians (future priests) and pastoral agents the need to increase poverty reduction driven homilies where that is taking place already. In parishes where they are not in place, efforts should be expended in this direction.

There is no gainsaying the fact that liturgical homilies may be tagged useless if they cannot direct or guide the faithful to give them something to eat. Homilies should not likened to be plastic and void. Ideal homilies should be

well-prepared and should reflect the relationship of every human being. The current unequal distribution of resources, over population, reckless living, etc are practical tools in this respect. The Scripture (especially the readings of the day) also serves as the foundation of such homilies and there are many scriptural passages that focus on the status of those who are poor such the Rich man and Lazarus, the Good Samaritan, etc. As a result of well-prepared homilies, worshippers should leave the Church with more determination to use available opportunities to advance the course of the poor after the example of Our Lord Jesus Christ.

restoring the dignity of the human person at worship

Thirdly, the restoration of the dignity of the human person at worship is appropriate because of the misconceptions and misdirections, tending towards unsavoury and inadmissible attitude to the poor not only in Africa but the world over. It swings between culpable ignorance condemned by Prophet Hosea (4:6) and the obstinate refusal by some to live authentic human life. By the very nature of Christian liturgy, *The General Instruction of the Roman Missal* (GIRM) states that it is rightly fashioned to be a participatory worship. And in a sense all Christians, as priests, are to participate according to their office, rank and degree (GIRM 91).

Irrespective of whether they are rich or poor, the contemporary resonance for pastoral ministry follows that baptismal grace confers on all the faithful equal rights and privileges of God's children. All the baptized, therefore, whether male or female, rich or poor, healthy or sick, are expected to exercise those rights and privileges. At liturgy, Christians define themselves by what they do. The reformed liturgy of the Second Vatican Council rightly states it this way: "The liturgy is the means whereby we express and manifest to others the mystery of Christ and the real nature of the true Church" (SC 2). Simply put, liturgy expresses the assembly as they are really, a people who take time out from all the pressures of earthly life to identify in God's sublime nearness to His people. Ultimately liturgical spirit ensures that every service is rendered towards the common good and restoration of every human person.

A return to Christ's model

Fourthly, the Christ's event remains an irreplaceable hallmark towards understanding poverty. Expectedly, Christians are called followers of Christ. Baptism empowers the right and duty of Christians to join "a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people" (1 Pet 2:9a), *ipso facto* (by the very fact), they become *alter Christi* (another Christ). Christ

remains the model, prototype and shining example in their lifestyle. He exemplified the yardstick to measure out the standard of living. During his public ministry, He began His mission with the proclamation of the service of hope (Matt 4:23-25; Luke 4:16ff) and ended with the proclamation of the service of love in the Event of the Calvary. It presupposes the imitation of Jesus Christ who was born of a poor stock and the head of the poor. We could sum up our proposition with teaching of Peter to the household of Cornelius: "Jesus went around doing good and healing all who were under the power of the devil, because God was with them" (Acts 10:38).

Conclusion

Our survey of the New Testament times and Fathers of the Church illuminates the fact that God has a special place for the poor as He cares for them. Proverb 14:31 captures this understanding that: "He who oppresses the poor shows contempt for their Maker, but whoever is kind to the needy honours God". The Old Testament provides the foundation for the Christian tradition of caring for the poor, the needy and the destitute. While in the New Testament, for anyone to disregard and denigrate the poor, it is designated as a sin which is detestable and effrontery before God (Kunhiyop 2008, p.147). The Church in time of the Fathers of the Church had material needs and collections to care for the poor and destitute churches. Admittedly, the demand to care for the poor is one of the *conditio-sine-qua non* to inherit eternal salvation. This is because, not only that "charity covers many sins" (1 Pet 4:8), our care and support for the poor constitute, as Christ stated, is one of the basic criteria for the last judgement (Matt 25:31-46). All our religion, worship and academic and non-academic learning are meant to dispose humanity to serve the poor more perfectly (Ezeanya 2011, p.70).

These brief points from the Sacred Scripture and Fathers of the Church go some way towards showing direction for taking care of the poor. It shows the consistent testimony to God's compassion and care for the poor and to His command for everybody. However, it would mean that some special care or preference for people or groups who are marginalised in human society. The griefs and anxieties of the poor must inevitably dictate the intervention of Christ's faithful. Indeed, the Catholic Social Teachings recognise conscientious objection as a legitimate means of poverty reduction. Interestingly, the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Nigeria has in a communique issued in 1995 recognized this role. The communiqué followed this up with a pledge of commitment to a "type of education that will promote people's freedom, empowerment and integral human development" (Ehusani 1995, p.100). Pope Francis reminds us, "We are

called to draw near to the poor, to encounter them, to meet their gaze, to embrace them and to let them feel the warmth of love that breaks through their solitude. Their outstretched hand is also an invitation to step out of our certainties and comforts, and to acknowledge the value of poverty" (19th November, 2017).

In conclusion, the submission of the paper is that African Christianity is losing its vitality and identity by the terrible virus of the neglect of the poor. There is an urgent need to redefine Christian values. The Church in Africa must rediscover the lifestyle of Jesus Christ, the great theologian and imitate Him as the Way, the Truth and Life (John 14:6); yet, the Christian liturgy is not where we pray for the members to be poor and wretched. For the theology of the liturgy to optimally thrive, the worship centres must properly educate the people on how to avoid extremes, how to provide employment in the midst of unemployment, how to provide enough food for consumption as well as raw materials for manufacturing activities, how to create wealth and be responsible stewards towards the sustainable development of the African region and beyond. They need to uphold the sense of the dignity of human beings captured in the very essence of Christian (Catholic) worship and sacramental symbols. The Church in Africa needs to bring the fruits of Christ's Paschal Mystery, celebrated at the Eucharistic liturgy, to the benefits of all in concrete ways by showing concern, fraternity, mutual support, peace and love.

REFERENCES

- Anagwo, Emmanuel C. (2015). "Fund Raising in Worship: Implications for the Church in Nigeria" in *African Christian Studies*, Vol. 31, No. 3, September 2015, Publisher: Nairobi Catholic University of Eastern Africa, Kenya, 61-73.
- Anagwo, Emmanuel C. (2019). "Ethics of Fundraising in Catholic Worship" in *Abuja Journal of Philosophy and Theology (APT)*, Vol. 9, 19-33.
- Anagwo, Emmanuel C. (2019). "The Influence of Prosperity Gospel on the 21st Century African Youth" in *Ephrem's Theological Journal*, Vol. 23, No. 1, Published by St. Ephrem's Theological College, Satna, M.P. India, 96-107.
- British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) News, 10th August, 2014.
- Chibuko, Patrick C., (2008). "The New Millennium Roman Missal and the General Instruction" in *Liturgical Symposium 2008*. Nimo: Rex Charles & Patrick.
- Deiss, Lucien (1978). *Springtime of the Liturgy*, trans. by M.J. O'Connell. Collegeville: The Liturgical Press.
- Dorr, Donal. (1992). *Option for the Poor: A Hundred Years of Vatican Social Teaching*. Ireland: Gill and Macmillan.
- Echema, Austin (July-December 1998). "Liturgy and Social Justice in Contemporary Church Life" in *Bigard Theological Studies*, Vol. 18, No. 2) 28-47.
- Ehusani, George (1995). "Theology at the Service of the People" in *BETH 7:1-2*, 100-121.
- Ekpe, Akaninyene Pius (2019). "Foreign Aid for Africa's development and the Real Hope it Portends: A Philosophical Consideration" in *Abuja Journal of Philosophy and Theology (APT)*, Vol. 9, 35-44.
- Ezeanya, Stephen (1994). *Following Christ More Closely*. Onitsha: Trinitas Publications.
- Ezeanya, Victor A. (2011). "The Priest and the Poor in our Midst" in Ikenga K.E. Oraegbunam & Okechukwu M. Izunwa (eds.) *The Priest of our Time*. Onitsha: Goodmark Prints Production Inc., 2011, 63-78.
- Fensham, Charles (1962). "Widow, Orphan and the Poor in Ancient Near Eastern Legal and Wisdom Literature" in *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 21.

- Flannery, A. ed. (1987). *Vatican Council II*. Dublin: Dominican Publications, 1987.
- Kalu, Kenneth (2010) *Foreign Aid and the Future of Africa*. Cham: Springer.
- Kukah, Matthew Hassan (1996). *Religion and the Politics of Justice*. Lagos: CRP.
- Kunhiyop, Samuel Waje (2008). *African Christian Ethics*. Nairobi: WordAlive Publishers.
- Lang, Jovian P. (1989). *Dictionary of the Liturgy*. New York: Catholic Books Publishing Co.
- Lyonnet, S. (1967). "La nature du culte dans le Nouveau Testament".
- Ojo, Anthonia, B. (2019). "Catholic Social Teaching and Poverty Alleviation: The Nigerian Experience" in *Nigerian Journal of Religion and Society*, Vol. 9, 51-67.
- Paul VI (1967). *Populorum Progressio* (On the Development of People). Vaticana: Libreria Editrice.
- Pope Francis, Message for the World Day of the Poor, 33rd Sunday in Ordinary Time, 19th November, 2017, No.3, in__ accessed on 15th March, 2020.
- The Chambers Dictionary* (2005). New Delhi: Allied Chambers.
- The General Instruction of the Roman Missal*. (2003). Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa. UNDP, Progress Against Poverty (1996) - UNDP Progress Report New York: Copenhagen.
- The Roman Missal Renewed by Decree of the Most Holy Second Ecumenical Council of the Vatican, Promulgated by Authority of Pope Paul VI and Revised at the Direction of Pope John Paul II, English Translation According to the Third Typical Edition*. 2011. Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa.