The Fight against Poverty: A Highlight of the Role of Roman Catholic Church in Nigeria

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Abstract

Poverty, as a social malaise and economic scourge, is a phenomenon that cannot be denied in Nigeria as a nation. However, as poverty continues to unleash that ravaging scourge on a greater percentage of people in Nigeria, the question that arises is that, what contribution has Christianity made towards alleviating poverty in Nigeria? This situation calls for a scholarly study. Hence, our responsibility is to pry into how Christianity has impacted or can impinge on the issue of poverty alleviation in contemporary Nigeria; using the Roman Catholic Church in Nigeria as a case study. In this context, the Roman Catholic Church (RCC) classifies poverty as an act against human dignity as a result of an unjust social order; hence, her solidarity with the poor through Justice, Development and Peace/caritas Commission (JDPC) activities. The objectives of this paper are aimed at assessing Christianity and social commitment to poverty alleviation, through the RCC in Nigeria; highlighting different ways in which the RCC has contributed in the fight against poverty in Nigeria. The research methods used were historical, textual interpretative and phenomenological. The major findings in this work included the following; the Roman Catholic Church in Nigeria has poverty alleviation mechanism put in place for empowerment in context, for example the provision of scheme using the instrumentality of papal encyclicals that engages programmes of action aimed at providing palliative measures through the distribution of relief materials as it was done in established Relief Centres in all the States in Nigeria.

Keywords: poverty, alleviation, fight, roman Catholic church, socioeconomic

Introduction

The social problems of the continent of Africa in general and by extension, Nigeria are enormous. Clare Short, a one-time UK secretary of State for International Development during the period under review noted that;

> One in five of the world's population – 1.2 billion people-live in extreme poverty, on less than a dollar per day. Two thirds of them are women. About 10 million children under the age of five died in 1999, most of them from preventable diseases... more than 113 million children do not attend school. In this world of growing material plenty, these cases are not only morally wrong, but are also unsustainable.[1]

What this portends is that, if we do not all work together to alleviate poverty, we definitely face a future of conflict, disease and environmental degradation. Unfortunately, this is what is already prevailing in Nigeria. Conflict, environmental problems, kidnapping, banditry and attendant challenges have taken hold of some parts of the country.

In this paper, poverty will be acknowledged as a condition of life characterized by malnutrition, lack of things relevant to life; e.g. inadequate shelter, clothing, poor sanitation and lack of money. This is the form in which poverty is understood in Ethical discourse of poverty.[2] Briefly before going further, a discussion of what results into poverty

will not be out of place. According to Fawenu, "malnutrition, illiteracy, disease, squalid surroundings, high infant mortality, and low life expectancy are indicators of absolute poverty.[3] Therefore, to live in poverty is to experience a condition of life characterised by the aforementioned indicators in a manner that is beneath any reasonable human decency.[4] The aggregate number mentioned above by Clare Short is striking but cannot describe what it is like to live in poverty. Consultations with poor people emphasise the multi-dimensional and dynamic nature of poverty.[5] People in rural areas are primarily concerned about availability of food and work, whereas in urban areas poor people place emphasis on the quality of work opportunities, unsanitary housing, and lack of access to portable water.

The lack of access to a particular material asset, most often good quality land for agriculture and housing, is central to many descriptions of what it is like to be poor.[6] Poor people perceive that unemployment, underemployment and vulnerable occupations are often linked to an absence of basic infrastructure and services to support their livelihood. Good physical health is vital to obtain work and generate income, while education generates options for future generations.[7] These are the challenges that are on the ground to face in the course of the twenty-first century.

In Nigeria, poverty is as defined and acknowledged above as the conditions of the masses are characterized by malnutrition, disease, hunger and a host of other forms of lack. These have been compounded by joblessness and unemployment. Christianity, as an institution, that can comfort is the pointer to this study which requires some research to determine what the Church is doing in solving this problem in Nigeria. There is the understanding that, some activities in the Roman Catholic Church concerning poverty alleviation is of different forms. We shall highlight the forms as we progress in this work.

One of the cardinal missions and commitments of the Roman Catholic Church in Nigeria is raising observations on the state of the nation and offer modules for human development in Nigeria in order to empower the poor to be fully human and to keep the hope alive for a better life for a better Nigeria. This commitment has been taken seriously by the Roman Catholic Church as we shall articulate in this work; and the commitment that we have in this study is to see how far, what ways and the infrastructures put in place by this mission in the commitment to alleviate poverty in Nigeria.

Indeed, it is to be noted that in the Roman Catholic Church, human development and empowerment viz-a-viz poverty alleviation programmes have been recognized as an important aspect of evangelization. The mission of the Roman Catholic Church is no longer considered only as a matter of the salvation of souls but also as concerned with people's physical needs; that is, that mission work is both for spiritual and material needs.[8]

This work is justified on the ground that poverty is a national challenge in Nigeria and in this malaise, people's situations are getting worse every day. The Nigerian people are becoming poorer and it seems yesterday can be said to be better than today as

government upon government keep changing policies that are having adverse effect on the socioeconomic life of the masses. And the major reason for this lacuna is because of lack of continuity in governance in Nigeria's political space. This challenge is a task that all need to confront. The Roman Catholic Church has remained an important institution in Nigeria, and what the Church is doing for the alleviation of poverty in Nigeria should be studied and well-articulated.

Critical Evaluation of Discourse

Many scholars, like Nancy Dziedzic,[9] Louis-Marie,[10] to mention two, have written on the issue of poverty especially as it relates to Christianity. Scholars of varying backgrounds have contributed to the discourse on poverty. All of their views, however, cannot be exhausted here, but we shall refer to some of them which focus and have relevance to Christianity and poverty, and to what the Roman Catholic Church is doing on alleviating or reducing poverty in Nigeria.

According to Richard Sandbrook, poverty is a major world problem which needs close attention.[11] As far as he is concerned, the issue of poverty should be solved from the perspective of basic needs approaches. He further contends that "increases in national income, essential as they are will not benefit the poor to any significant degree in most developing countries…"[12] The import of this statement is that, Sandbrook believes that there is no way the increase in national income could reach the poor appropriately. Increases in the past have not in any way be of benefit to the poor, hence, unless there is a means the poor masses get their basic needs directly, the poor stands the chance of losing out from this benefit.

From his argument, Sandbrook made distinctions between different approaches i.e. conservative and radical approaches to poverty problem.[13] He gives a suitable approach to the eradication of poverty from the society. He submits that the distinction between conservative and radical approaches, in his words;

> will obviously rest upon the depth of change envisaged: a conservative antipoverty programme would propose piecemeal reforms within the existing national and international economic orders, whereas a radical one would prescribe a mutually reinforcing set of policies entailing structural change at the national and international levels. In as much as this book adopts an "underdevelopment" perspective in explaining poverty, I take the position that only a radical approach could plausibly eradicate poverty. Only radical antipoverty programmes constitute genuine assaults on poverty.[14]

It seems Sandbrook forgot that many Governments especially in the sub-saharan Africa are not stable until recently that democratic governance is thriving. In Nigeria for instance, there has not been a government that took over power that did not embark on one reform agenda or the other or pursue one policy or another. Also, at the Church level, most of the ministers of the gospel though not permanent in one church insist in principle that the duties involved in the understanding of the Commission's mandate are spiritual attainment, and disposition to social change.

Despite all the advances made in science and technology e.g.in telecommunications and information technology, Sandbrook is of the view that these helped to make the world smaller. In his words:

> While an increasing proportion of the earth's finite resources are consumed by an af-

> fluent minority, over one billion of the World's poor eke out a living on appallingly low levels of nutrition, polluted water sources, illiteracy, inadequate shelter, lack of health care and income levels dangerously close to providing only for the biological minimum.[15]

Mullen's words attest to the fact that little is being done in the area of poverty alleviation. He however laments that poverty levels are also organically linked to a series of phenomena which reinforce and exacerbate deprivation.16 He argues that these phenomena are the major causes of rejection and deprivation of humanity which make people live a dejected life and which is responsible for our retrogressive society. These among others are:

> Ethnic strife and genocidal movements; gender bias, high population growth rates; religious extremism; communicable diseases such as cholera..., and vulnerability to climatic extremes including drought or floods. Exogenous factors, such as a hostile policy environment, indebtedness and deteriorating terms of trade act as an albatross on growth and restrict investment in poverty reducing social expenditures.[17] All these social vices are evident in Nigeria. For instance, under the regime of democratic government of President Olusegun Obasanjo (1999-2007), different types of reform agenda were pursued. However, these reforms were not much for pro-people welfare. In fact, towards the end of his (Obasanjo's) government in 2007, power supply dropped, the militancy in the Niger Delta region was on the increase. The end result of his tenure was that, many would-be investors could not find a viable environment to invest. All these corroborate the position of Mullen. However, the Roman Catholic Church has never relented in rising up to the challenge by developing ways of alleviating these lacunae.[18]

Arising from these familiar descriptions of human difficulties and predicaments in Nigeria, Akanmidu classifies poverty into dimensions or features. Without mincing words, he described the first classification of poverty "as the state of being extremely poor and lacking the means to exist adequately."[19] Furthermore, giving an apparent picture of what poverty looks like, in Nigeria, Akanmidu opines that, it is a crisis that is habitual and conveys the message of hardship difficult to deny because it speaks publicly on grounds of visible misery, persisting destitution, endemic hunger or starvation and visible malnutrition. All these boils down to the fact that, the activities of poverty are not hidden. The state of poverty is shameful, dehumanizing and degrading. The figures are alarming, the situation is debilitating and that is why it is imperative to surge against it.

According to Akanmidu, "an estimated number of destitute in the early seventies stood at 700 million in the third world countries. Whereas, in the late nineties, an estimated figure is put at about 800 million."[20] Since the year 2000 to this present period, international news reports are putting it at one billion plus. From this summation, almost 40% of the people in the Third World countries are surviving-but only barely surviving-with incomes judged insufficient to secure the basic necessities of life. Arising from this, it is clear that mass poverty remains overwhelmingly an affliction and it is this that seems harshly intractable. In view of a multi-dimensional angle of poverty, Akanmidu again articulates the second classification of poverty from the Socioeconomic and the material dimensions. These classifications stand because of the hopelessness, alienation and passivity being experienced and that is inherent among those living in poverty.[21]

To this end, he identifies two forms of poverty in Nigeria. These are absolute and relative poverty. According to him, absolute poverty is a condition of life characterized by inability to meet basic needs of life; e.g. food, health and shelter needs. Those who fall into this category are the people who are hungry and they know it but cannot provide for their food needs. Such people know they are sick but cannot provide the resources for treatment, live on dung hills and in squalid environments.[22] On the other hand relative poverty is the ability to meet the demands of basic needs of life but insufficient e.g. getting some food but without demanding for balanced diet. The watchword of the relatively poor is "eat to swell the stomach". They provide shelter of some kind not quite decent. These two features are glaring in the Nigerian Society. Sadly, they continue to patch up with life with little or no hope of been rescued. From this point of view, Akanmidu further confirms that,

> Nigeria as a nation shares from this experience and there is no intention to deny this since poverty can easily be affirmed and cannot be denied. Poverty in the Nigerian experience is paradigmatic of absolute want which is a parallel of living of life at the very margin of existence. However, since there is a noticeable divide between the rich and the poor, this divide shows that seven of every ten Nigerians are impoverished. This divide cannot be attributed to episodic disasters but more a product of failed developmental strategies.[23]

However, from the aforementioned it is apparent that, from the political, ethical and moral point of views, there is the need to take a religious look at poverty. This connotes that the period of leaving poverty issues to the government and NGOs only is over, the time has come for Christian faith to take up the challenge of poverty alleviation. Evidences are emerging, that all vigorous effort at clamping down poverty is from the political and Socioeconomic perspectives on the part of the government. In fact, as Akanmidu puts it, "policies to remedy poverty are from the ethical and political dimensions.[24] He further says that, the ethical dimension is a legitimate instrument to solve the problem of poverty while the political represents responses of the developed nations in the political allocation of foreign aid.

This interventionist approach i.e. from the ethical and political dimensions, over the years, have been quite involving moving from the symbiotic to outward looking development policy creating a framework of development theory that has no practical link with realities.[25] This is where the church comes in. Can we really say that all the teachings, preaching and activities of the church have practical linkage with the realities of life that people have to undergo in their everyday living?

Mission Efforts in the Fight Against Poverty

The survey of what the missionaries and the church had done so far in combating poverty in Nigeria is our focus in this section. We shall give a general overview of the activities of missionaries and various missions' effort towards self-reliance in their early days. According to J.F.A. Ajayi, the gate of modern civilization in Nigeria was thrown opened by the missions at the initial stage, through the instrumentality of language, which he called linguistic studies by translating the Bible into various local languages for easy accessibility and for reading.[26]

Ajayi observed that; nothing shows the ardour of the pioneering missionaries bet-

ter than the effort devoted, within the limited resources of the missions and the ability of the missionaries, to the study of the principal Nigerian languages reducing them to writing, in most cases for the first time.[27] Furthermore, Ajayi pointed out that the study began in Sierra Leone where several of the languages were represented among the liberated Africans. He says, as early as 1830-32, Rev. J.T. Raban of the C.M.S., observed that the 'Akus' were fast becoming a majority in the colony, began a study of Yoruba with a view to facilitating evangelization within the colony.[28]

He also noted that, when arrangements were made for the Niger expedition and a mission was projected for the model farm at Lokoja, Rev. J.F. Schon was charged with the duty of training interpreters and himself acquiring the languages he considered most essential. The languages he chose were Hausa and Ibo. For the same purpose Samuel Crowther intensified his study of his own language, Yoruba. The results of these studies were published in 1843.[29]

Omotoye also commended the works of the missionaries in terms of their contributions to the use of Yoruba language by introducing the Printing Press. According to him, they were able and successfully reduced the Yoruba language into writing. In 1848, he went further, the first Yoruba primer was published for use in the mission schools. Samuel Ajayi Crowther had earlier published Grammar and vocabulary of the Yoruba language in 1853. Henry Townsend began the publication of the first newspaper in Nigeria in 1859, Iwe Iroyin, a Yoruba publication with some articles in English.[30] Omotoye also observed that 3000 Yoruba people were able to read in their own language. The Yoruba primer 'ABD' was used by the Christian agents to teach the new converts, especially the adults how to read and write in Yoruba language. He concludes that many people were persuaded and appealed to release their children to be taught how to read and write, in which few reluctantly released their children for this enterprise and rare privilege. Many of them later became important personalities in their various communities. The teaching of "ABD" in Yoruba language, eventually laid the foundation for Western education in Yorubaland, which can be said to be the bench mark for self-reliance, to which we shall now turn.[31]

As pointed out earlier, research has shown that in the mid 1900's, the tremendous and sporadic economic development witnessed in the Southern part of Nigeria was as a result of the mission activities and involvement in almost every part of human endeavour. This is the position of Ayandele in his work, The Missionary Impact on Modern Nigeria. Ayandele singled out education as the supreme aim and purpose of the missionaries in their early days in Nigeria. In his words, "the supreme importance of Christian missions in the evolution of modern Nigeria lies in the fact that it was upon them almost entirely that the social and moral development of the Nigerian peoples fell in the period ending in 1914."[32] Ayandele supports this notion in a statement he quoted from African Times of 1st April, 1878 that:

> On them (Christian missions) the future of Africa mainly depends. British occupation and British mercantile operations have not of themselves done much, nor can they of themselves do much, for even moral and social progress.[33]

It is interesting to note that, as at that time, the British government has no laid down framework for the education of the future generation. It was the sole responsibility of

the missions in the areas of moral and social progress of the populace, even though the main object of education was basically religious instruction.[34] Nonetheless, education was seen as the only way out from backwardness, into modernity and civilization. To this extent, Ayandele opines that, the educated Africans looked upon Western education as the only agency that could bring about the social revolution they envisaged for Nigeria—that in which literacy would prevail and a host of clerks, technocrats, doctors, lawyers, ministers of religion and educated traders would flourish.[35]

This assertion showed that, the involving pioneering works of the missionaries also include giving to the people what can make them stand on their own and be self-reliant. By this, it is hoped that they will be able to fend for themselves and create a brighter future for the next generation. These pioneering works of the missions show that, their missions had already begun a process on how to save the future and the lives of the people from poverty. But then, it is essential to establish a Biblical basis for the church to fight poverty head-on. This we shall now turn.

Biblical Stance in Addressing Poverty Issues

Richard Yordy takes a biblical dimension in addressing the issue of poverty in his article, "Mutual Aid: An Expression of Basic Christian Experiences". He addresses 'mutual aid' as an expression of normal Christian day to day experience and as an expression of the believers Church. He says with conviction that, "Mutual aid is an Integral expression of Christianity."[36]

According to Yordy, the Church must know that they have a duty to perform, especially to the members. Realizing that, the Church is the physical representation of Jesus on earth; hence just like Jesus who gave His all, the Church too must be ready and should be able to give their all. From the book of Romans chapter five, Yordy expressed this view further, that Jesus was willing to give His life when we were at enmity with Him. Since He was willing to give His life for us when we were sinners, the church too must not count the cost of uplifting her members out of penury.[37] The test of our expression of love Yordy observes, is further punctuated in 1 John 3:17 and 18.

> But if anyone has the world's goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God's love abide in him? Little children, let us not love in word or speech but indeed and in truth.

To this extent, it is apparent, that one of the ways we express love for our brethren is in our willingness to help meet their human needs. This is the only way that the church can clearly demonstrate its concern and love for the people. Yordy notes further, that, one of the evidences of the reality of our relationship with God and of our experience in Christ is a new concern for brother, for his loneliness, his temptations, his anxieties, and his financial needs.[38] The Church in Nigeria should not just be interested in members coming to the church only, and giving their tithes and offerings, the church should go further to express physical love especially in the area of poverty alleviation. The Church should accept responsibilities for her members because God first accepted this same kind of responsibility. The church should move her confession of love from the realm of the theoretical to the realm of the practical.

Furthermore, in expressing mutual aid as an act of the Believers church Yordy gives his analysis from the book of Acts 2:38, 41, 42.

> And Peter said to them "Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.... So those who received his word were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls. And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.

Four ideas are noted in this passage. These four ideas are the things that the life of the Church consists of. The first is a teaching ministry following the apostles teaching. The things that Jesus taught the twelve; the new understanding of God's way of dealing with men and man's response to God; the meaning of the cross; the meaning of discipleship and commitment. The second thing that they experienced was fellowship. The third thing here was the breaking of bread; and last of all, it says "and the prayer."[39]

From the aforementioned, it can be noticed, that these are the things regular worship services ought to include. The idea of breaking of bread in today's church is only in Holy Communion. How has the church fellowship with the members doing in order to identify their needs and find ways of solving them? The early church showed a true commitment to each other as can be further seen in Acts 2:43-47. This commitment was so great that they could go farther in self-giving. They experienced the first four aspects of church life deeply enough to enable the experience of a fifth one which was having all things in common; and selling their possessions and goods and distributing them to all, as any had need.[40]

This experience was so real in the early church that further in Acts 4:37, there was not a needy person among them, for as many as were possessors of lands or houses sold them, and brought the proceeds of what was sold and laid it at the apostles' feet; and distribution was made to each as any had need.[41] Can it be said of the church in Nigeria today, that there are no needy persons among them? In what way is the church finding solution to the poverty stricken of her membership? Can the Church venture into a programme of distribution to each member according to his or her needs? This assessment of what they have done and what to do is what we shall articulate in the next section of this paper.

The Roman Catholic Mission and the Needy

The role played by the Roman Catholic Mission on the needs of the public is summarized by Ayandele. A close study by him revealed that the missions including the Roman Catholic Mission, made some efforts in providing industrial education, but that the prospect of such education flourishing in the circumstances of Nigeria was very remote indeed. This is because, indigenous handicraft had very little hope of survival in the face of superior imported foreign articles like chairs, tables, drawers, plates, umbrellas and printed cloths, which people generally preferred to indigenous articles. Consequently, the various missions had to resulted into teaching their converts superior European craftsmanship in brick-making, cabinet making, tailoring, coopering, boat repairing and masonry.[42]

These of course subsequently resulted into the importance of tools which are in themselves very expensive. These factors militating against development of locally

made goods and items and the preference of the people to cheaper and superior foreign articles dealt a terrible blow to the success of some of these industrial training education. On the other hand, there was another problem of less respect for technical workers than for clerks, lawyers, minister of religion and medical practitioners.[43]

While it is true that there have been several criticisms against the educational policies and practices of early Christian missions as being biased in their educational activities, the point to note is that while not exonerating early missions, the legacy of Western education and the development of the Nigerian elite which modern Nigeria boasts of in contemporary times, owe its emergence to the work of Christian mission. Ayandele concludes that, for a long time to come, education remained virtually in the hands of the missions. And whatever the defects of their education Nigeria owes them an incalculable debt of gratitude for preparing her peoples to adjust themselves to the new environment created by pax Britannica.[44]

Even to this day the great majority of Nigeria's leaders in politics, in medicine, in law, in the civil service and in the field of education itself owe their beginnings and their positions in Nigerian society to their education in a mission school. In this respect, Ayandele comments that, the observation made in the Lagos press in 1894 about missionary enterprise-"of all the agencies, which have contributed to the regeneration and development of our country, missionary effort has been the most potent" is an axiom.[45]

On the contrary, S.A. Awolola prodded into the fact that what was lacking in mission education was "Functional Literacy/Education."[46] Functional which means 'practical and useful' implies that mission/colonial education was not practical and useful to the people but only to the Europeans. The Europeans needed to communicate and set up an administrative system, hence the education given to their converts was to teach them how to read and write. Awolola defines functional Education as a process of training and instruction of the individual for his practical and useful living, self-actualization and one's advancement of the society in which he lives through his co-existence.[47] From the above statement by Awolola, we can articulate vividly, that the inability of the people to acquire this type of education has contributed greatly to 'rat-race' competition in the society. This is a case in which poverty is been passed from one generation to another.

Furthermore, in the social development work of the Catholic Church, the poor and the under-privileged in the society were given priority attention. The church also believes according to Makozi. That:

> Social reform and development can come through Social education having as its primary aim, human personal development.[48]

The church was able to identify the social needs of the immediate environment and concludes that social reform is a panacea to human development. Consequently, the Roman Catholic Mission concentrated on social works that will have direct impact on the society especially the poor and the underprivileged. Hence, Makozi avers,

> Hospitals, health centers and preventive clinics, social development training centers, rural development schemes and adult education programmes have remained, during the seventies the core of the church's development plan.[49]

From all indications, it is obvious, that, the pursuant of a social policy that affects the society positively has been a major concern of the Roman Catholic Church since the seventies till present day. Because of this thrust in human personal development, the Social Welfare Department was renamed Social Development Department.[50]

Conversely, the development of Agriculture through the provision of farming implements is vital to the contributions of the Roman Catholic missions to Nigerian society. As a point of reference, the Topo experimental farm by the Catholic mission cannot be over quantified. According to Macloughlin, it was in 1875, fourteen years after the arrival of Fr. Borghero in Ouidah and seven years after the founding of a residential station in Lagos, that plans were formulated to establish an agricultural project in Topo.[51] Macloughlin observes that:

> The Superior General (Fr. Plaque) had been influenced by the experiments of the Jesuits in Paraguay. Sir James Marshall, Supreme Judge in Lagos and Ghana at the time, favoured the project and encouraged the mission to apply to the government for land. The project would ensure a type of education not merely literary, but combined with practical work. The usual school subjects would be taught together with practical agriculture.[52]

The idea behind this was to allow people to acquire Western education and at the same time to be self-reliance, consequently, Topo was the first foundation in the vicariate outside of Lagos. A school was opened, a shed was constructed for the reverend fathers and farm work commenced in 1879. By 1885, there were fifty-four families working on the land. Most of them were non-Christians.[53] In 1892, a convent was established and the Rev. sisters commenced the training of girls. The mission felt that such a project would be in the interests of the country. It was not sufficient to train people whose only occupation would be to work in government offices or in commercial houses. Many of those who were trained in Topo later held posts of responsibility in later years.[54] Ajayi opines that, the life that was established at Topo was not a part of normal education for children, but partly for profit, partly as reformatory training, and especially at the beginning, essentially as the only industry around which pagan families could be collected in the attempt of the Fathers to found a 'Christian village.[55] Apparently, from the out-set, the Roman Catholic Mission has shown great concern towards the need of the public i.e.; the society it finds herself. The Catholic Church often identifies the needs of the environment they find themselves and address accordingly. These they have done resiliently till date; many of which fall short of the scope of this work.[56]

Highlights of Papal Encyclicals Guiding Roman Catholic Church Principles on Poverty and Human Person

The human person is a creature of God, made in His image and elevated to a supernatural destiny transcending earthly life. Man therefore as an intelligent and free being subject of rights and of duties, "is the primary principle and, one can say, the heart and soul of the social teaching of the Church" (Vatican II, G.S.n.17).[57] It is this driving principle that precipitates giving and caring for the poor in the Roman Catholic Church worldwide and by extension in Nigeria. The church has never been tired of fighting for social justice and the dignity of human person based on the principle of Human person. In sum, the Christian Church in Nigeria and Africa at large has social responsibilities to-

ward the society which the Roman Catholic Church in Nigeria is playing a pivotal role and in order to entrench socioeconomic development, the need to enshrine poverty alleviation programmes as part of the salvific role of the Church is unequivocal.

Leo XIII's Rerum Novarum

The teaching of the Catholic Church on human development in the modern period dated from 1891, when Leo XIII issued his epoch-making encyclical titled "The condition of labour." Here he described in a powerful and compassionate language what was wrong in the industrialized world of that time and sets out the principles which have inspired the church's social teaching since then.[58] Apparently, the industrial capital of the 19th century in Europe and America that led to terrible exploitation and poverty of the working classes precipitated the publication of 'Rerum Novarum' (Encyclical letter of Pope Leo XIII, May 15, 1891).

This encyclical contained the formulation of other principles like: Care for the Poor, Rights of Workers, Duties of Workers and employers; Role of Public authority and the Church, were, among other issues highlighted by the Pope.[59] In this Encyclical: Rerum Novarum (The Workers Charter), known as "the Magna Carta for a humane economic and social order," the Pope defended the rights of the workers against the exploitative tendencies of the employers at the dawn of modern industrialization.[60] The Encyclical therefore encourages the promotion of a better standard of living. The church wants expressly to see the un-propertied workers emerge from their great poverty and better their condition. This is because the church believes and has regard for the common good.[61]

Pius XI's Quadragesimo Anno

The Encyclicals documents published in 1891 is so central to the Roman Catholic Church social teachings that the 40th anniversary of the publication was celebrated by Pope Pius XI in 1931. The Pope issued a social Encyclical on the Reconstruction of the Social Order. On this occasion, Pope Pius reaffirmed the teaching of Leo XIII of 1891 on the relative rights and mutual duties of the rich and the poor, and of capital and labour. He declared that neither capital nor labour can claim exclusive right to the fruit of production. On the contrary, he said, "wealth must be distributed in such a way as to satisfy the needs of all.[62] He urges therefore that social and economic activities be imbued with Christian principles of justice and love.

Paul VI's Populorum Progressio 1967

This is the first Encyclical, according to Cyril Ibe, on human development to be given such a precise name: On the Development of Peoples. It is also the first encyclical devoted entirely to the question of international development. The document is renowned for its emphasis on integral development. The Pope highlighted the economic source of war, and stressed that economic justice is the basis of peace.[63] He warned that if the present disparity of wealth continues, there is the danger that the poor may resort to violence, a situation that should be forestalled by urgent structural reforms. According to the pontiff, avarice is the most obvious form of moral underdevelopment.[64]

Paul VI is not just calling for alleviation of poverty and other social wretched conditions, but aiming at building a community where people can love and value human life.

He maintained that no one is justified in keeping for his exclusive use what he does not need when others lack the necessities of life.[65]

However, having looked at the principles of giving as it is embedded in the Catholic Social Teachings; it is apparent that the values inherent in the dignity of the human person when lived show the sure path not only to personal perfection but also for putting a true humanism and a new social existence into practice. Obiora a catholic priest and scholar, articulates these values which include:

> Truth, freedom, justice, solidarity, peace and charity, which we call Christian love, extending to friends and enemies alike and seeing entire humanity as a global unity of brothers and sisters.[66]

These values which must be extended to the needy is called to create an avenue that will bring succour to humanity and the poor in particular. The life of Christ here on earth clearly showed that everything is created for a purpose. Consequently, it is obvious that there is enough wealth for everybody. It is the distribution that stumbles on unquantifiable greed, ignorance and egotism.[67]

Conclusion

The Roman Catholic Church in Nigeria is no doubt have contributed immensely in the fight against some other social malaise and especially their unrelenting efforts in alleviating poverty. The Catholic Church viewed giving and care of the poor as very intrinsic to her teaching. As God has cared for us in our need, so are being called to care for others in their needs. As highlighted in chapter three, Christians are called to love all humanity by taking care of the poor in their poverty; yet the poor, hungry and dispossessed constitute a special claim upon faith active in love because they are most urgently and immediately in need. In this context, these principles of the church are envisioned into the broad scope of the church's conception of giving to the poor.[68]

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