

## ECONOMIC DIMENSION OF THE POOR IN THE OLD TESTAMENT AND ITS IMPLICATION FOR THE AFRICAN CHURCH

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### **Abstract**

*The positive religious attitude to poverty distinguishes the Old Testament from its environment in the Ancient Near East. According to the worldview held in antiquity, poverty was simply a given fact. In the ancient ideology of kingship for example, concern for the poor counted as one of the king's special duties; but this concern was designed to preserve the world order; not to change it. The Old Testament view is very different. Prophecy condemns the oppression of the poor in the strongest terms and proclaims Yahweh's comprehensive judgment on their oppressors. Everything thrusts towards change and fundamental remedy. At the same time, the poor (Anawim) count as Yahweh's people in a special sense. Hence the question of poverty stands clear in the Old Testament. The major net responsible for poverty is largely corruption designed by structural manipulation. Poverty eradication is the divine option for self-reliance of the poor. The Old Testament portrays YHWH as the greatest reverser of the misfortune of the poor, the initiator of poverty eradication (Sam 2:6-8). This shows that God does not stigmatize any group or class of people to be perpetually poor. There is a natural inclination to conceive poverty solely in relation to the economic poor is widespread perception. From the biblical perspective, poverty refers mainly to the inadequacy of life without honour, with consequent social and personal inability to participate in the activities of the community, the inability to maintain self-respect as defined by community social standards. In other words, the word poverty is a broad representation than economic poverty. Poverty includes sickness, ignorance, marginalization, discrimination, oppression, etc. The "creators" and "perpetuators" of poverty are human beings themselves. What God has created is enough for all. In His abundance, God wills the happiness and the integral well-being of His creatures. Nothing militates against this absolute will of God than poverty, be it of material, intellectual or spiritual type. This study employs analytic method.*

## Introduction

One of the most striking features of both the Jewish and the Christian faith is the positive religious attitude to poverty. 'Blessed are you poor, for yours is the kingdom of God' (Luke 6:20). For Jews and Christians, poverty is held to be a sign of nearness to God. Nevertheless, poverty with its concomitant effects of alienation, marginalization and dependency poses a serious challenge to the people in Sub-Saharan Africa. A poor person or a victim of such alienation is, therefore, one who lacks access to life essentials thereby living below the subsistence level. The situation is rather one of callousness or hopelessness in the face of such widespread and deep problems. What is even more likely is ignorance on the part of the rich of the causes of poverty, and in particular of the interrelation of western affluence and third world deprivation and coupled with this an ignorance as to what Christian attitudes and action should be in the face of such a sea of human suffering. This study will explore the biblical understanding of the economically poor using specifically the book of Deuteronomy as its yardstick. The method is the social analysis which aids the researcher to examine the situations of the poor in the context of African experience.

## The Foundation of Old Testament Understanding of Economic Poverty

Poverty is a familiar phenomenon in the Hebrew Bible. The word "poverty" or "poor" occurs more than sixty times in the Old Testament and it denotes a lack of economic resources and material goods and political and legal powerlessness and oppression (Pleins 403). Leslie Hoppe denotes that a number of different words are used to describe the poor. The LXX Greek Old Testament uses the Greek term *ptochos* (poor) to translate six different Hebrew words in the Hebrew Old Testament. The most common of these is (*ani* '(plural, *aniyyim*) the root of which means "afflicted, economic oppressed, poor, unjust treatment in legal decisions. Primarily it refers to a person suffering from some kind of disability or distress (14). According to Kunhiyop Samuel, a person who occupies a lowly position is denoted as "*ani*" for afflicted, oppressed, wretched; or "*dal*" in Hebrew meaning low, weak, downtrodden. Other words such as "*dalal*" meaning to be thin, weary and sickly refers to physical or material poverty. In Proverbs, this term connotes poverty that results from laziness and one that also arises from disordered living. All these have their root in human poverty in every age. *Ebyon* means one

who begs, as a result of severe economic deprivation and the word *rush* means the needy who is having an expectation and request (Ex. 23:6-11) (108). Most of these words carry a sense of suffering and social or economic exploitation. The usual contexts for the mention of the poor are in the catalogues of the sins of Israel, in admonitions to the rich, or in hymns of praise for God's care and concern. One is given to understand that the poor suffers often at the hands of the wealthy and the unscrupulous. Generally, they are wrongfully dispossessed of their rights. Since God is the author of these rights, to deprive a person of them is to act against God who is the ultimate owner of the earth's resources.

The poor as a significant social group appear after the Exodus when the Promised Land is occupied, and some people begin to have more than others. The rulers and those who profit from the status quo try to hide the presence and problems of the poor. The prophets, however, speak to make the poor visible. The poor within the biblical tradition are challenge in that they remind us of the responsibility people of faith have for one another. They are special challenge to those who are leaders among the people- today's judges and kings. The poor are also revelation (Casey 681). It is in this sense that this paper will examine the plight of the poor in the African situation.

The significance of the OT concept of poverty however is diverse. This would be examined in three ways; that poverty was not meant to be, humanity brought and design poverty to life by sin including sin of laziness and that situations beyond human control such as death or natural occurrences such as famine and drought can bring poverty to a life.

It is deduced that from creation, humanity was not meant to be poor. The land was to produce in abundance and not to yield thorns and thistles until after The Fall. The people of God are not to experience poverty because God always makes provisions for the patriarchs during droughts and famines. This means among God's chosen people, there should be no poor. This is evident in the followings passage: "For in the land the Lord your God is giving you to possess as your inheritance, he will richly bless you, if only you fully obey the Lord your God and are careful to follow all these commands I am giving you today" (Deut. 15:45). Thus, rebellion and disobedience against God became the link to poverty. The book states in theory there should be no economic poverty in the Israelite community.

Hoppe underscores this demand that in more realistic vein, the book attempts to move people of means to aid the poor whose numbers never seem to diminish (15).<sup>1</sup>

### **The Poor in the Book of Deuteronomy**

The book of Deuteronomy presents itself as the “constitution” governing ancient Israel’s life in the land which was its inheritance from (31:12-13). One of the book’s goals is to convince its readers that Israel’s future depends solely on the quality of its loyalty to God (30:15-20). The book of Deuteronomy chapter 15 provides us the concern of Yahweh about the economic situation of the poor. This book has a humanitarian attitude toward the poor and needy. Although Deuteronomy 15 “holds out the ideal of a land without poverty (Deut. 15:4), it recognizes that it is the ongoing existence of the poor which causes the law to be given.” The text (15:4) argues that there shall be no poor people among the Israelites. If Israel obeys the Torah, then the poor would not exist because community members would care for the needy. By modern standards, this ancient Israelite vision seems idealistic, but, nevertheless, it would have reduced or eliminated poverty among the Israelites, had it been implemented. In a sense, unfaithfulness to care for the mother earth causes poverty in the world richly blessed.

In a study by Robert Wafawanaka, he has this to say:

Deuteronomy 15 also discusses the poor in the context of the year of release popularly known as shemittah. This release is viewed as a remission of debts every seventh year. There is also a parallel release from slavery in Deuteronomy 15:12-18. According to Deuteronomy 31:9-13, the law is to be read aloud publicly every seven years, so that all the population would know they were to be freed from bondage. The shemittah law states that there should be no one in need among the Israelites because Yahweh will bless them all. If Israel obeys the entire commandment, Yahweh will continue to bless it (vv 1-6). However, should there be any poor people among them, Israel is to give ungrudgingly in order to continue receiving God’s blessings (vv. 7-10). The poor continue to receive interest-free loans even as the shemittah year approaches (112).

Apparently, such lofty gifts of Yahweh are not adhered to. Verse 11, commonly misunderstood because it is not read in full or in context, states

that because the poor will never cease from the land, Israel is to give generously to the poor in its midst. The thrust of this verse is that the poor do not cease from the land because Israel has disobeyed its divine mandate. Cited in the New Testament (Matt 26:11; Mark 14:7; John 12:8), V. 11 is often understood to mean that “the poor will always be there.” Rather, this verse explains why the poor are always there when they are not supposed to be. As Miller argues, this is “exactly the opposite of what this text says.”<sup>2</sup> Read correctly and in its proper context, Deuteronomy 15:11 urges community members to care for those in need. In addition to calling for benevolence toward the poor, Deuteronomy also calls for a regular cancellation of debt to ensure equity. In light of the slave release law of Deuteronomy 15:12-18, whose structure is similar to that of Deuteronomy 15:1-11. The poor only exist when this command is disobeyed.

In other parts of the OT, poverty is portrayed as result of being lazy. In Proverbs, the lazy man is admonished to prevent poverty by learning the wisdom and diligence of the ants. For instance, the poor is enjoined in Proverbs to “Go to the ant you sluggard consider its ways and be wise! How long will you lie there, you sluggard? When will you get up from your sleep? and poverty will come on you like a bandit” (Pv. 6:6-11). Similarly, it is stated that “Lazy hands make a man poor, but diligent hands bring wealth” (Pv. 10:4) and He who works his land will have abundant food, but the one who chases fantasies will have his fill of poverty” (Pv.28:19). This implies that poverty is preventable through wisdom and diligence, for “He who loves pleasure will become poor, whoever loves wine and oil will never be rich” (Pv.21:17). The Bible also says; “for drunkards and gluttons become poor, and drowsiness clothes them in rags” (Pv. 23: 21). The ethical implications of these texts are to encourage people to work and develop serious approach to life to avoid been poor.

Other references to the poor in the Old Testament observes Ezekiel A. Adejuwon include those which consider the plight and take sides with the dependent within the community such as the orphans, widows, strangers or aliens. These groups of people come to be categorized as poor because they would lack adequate income to support minimum standard of decent living at certain periods due to reasons beyond their control. Dependents often constitute a cluster even in generally poor communities. Such poverty in this category results from exploitations and oppressions

of the weak by the strong. The oppressed could be the poorest among the poor (169). Yet, God makes provisions for them as exemplified in the passage below. "Do not mistreat an alien or oppress him, for you were aliens in Egypt. Do not take advantage of a widow or an orphan. If you do and they cry out to me, I will certainly hear their cry. My anger will be aroused, and I will kill you with the sword; your wives will become widows and your children fatherless". (Ex. 22:21-24; NIV). It is similarly declared in Malachi, "So I will come near to you for judgment. I will be quick to testify against those who oppress the widows and the fatherless, and deprive aliens of justice, but do not fear me, says the LORD Almighty". (3:5; NIV) God's love to the poor is evident in the general instructions to the people for the poor to be treated fairly. Beginning from the post exodus experience, Yahweh made provisions for the poor among the people within the frame of the Laws thus; "there will always be poor people in the land. Therefore, I command you to be openhanded toward your brothers and toward the poor and needy in your land" (Deut. 15:11). Every act of injustice to the poor meted gross punishment including retaliatory poverty upon the oppressor and the oppressor's family. (Ex 23:2,6, and 7). About the oppressed and toward those who oppress them, a Psalmist states, "let his children continually be vagabond, and beg. Let them seek their bread also from their desolate places, let the creditor seize all that he has, and let strangers plunder his labor. Let there be none to extend mercy to him, nor let there be any to favor his fatherless children" (109:10-12).

The law regarding gleaning also favors the poor. Some of the harvests are to be left on purpose for the poor. "When you reap the harvest of your land, do not reap to the very edges of your field or gather the gleanings of your harvest. Do not go over your vineyard a second time or pick up the grapes that have fallen. Leave them for the poor and the alien. I am the Lord your God. (Leviticus 19:9-10). The "rich" farmers among the people may allow certain poor people to glean directly if such poor people have received special favor with the rich ones. This is the case with Boaz and Naomi or Ruth. Other laws in favor of the poor are the laws regarding the Sabbath and Jubilee year stated in verse 3, "For six years you are to sow your fields and harvest the crops, but during the seventh year let the land lie unplowed and unused. Then the poor among your people may get food from it," (Ex.23:10).

## **Breaking the Cycle of Poverty**

In the texts which mentioned poor explicitly, Deuteronomy seeks to eliminate the exploitation of those who are rendered vulnerable to abuse because of their precarious economic situation. The book however, takes additional steps to prevent such conditions from developing which could serve only to breed poverty. Deuteronomy is convinced that poverty is not something inevitable but the result of human decisions to live contrary to the expressed will of God. Therefore, if only Israel were obedient, poverty simply would not exist in their community (15:4). Despite belief in this ideal, Deuteronomy is realistic enough to foresee the need for being as specific as possible in opposing the kind of social, economic and political patterns of behavior that breed poverty as inescapable component of the social system (Hoppe 23). This suggests however, that impoverishment in our society goes beyond a social problem, it is a theological problem. Miniva concludes that there are “three ways of dealing with poverty: poverty reduction, poverty eradication and poverty alleviation. By virtue of being in the image of God, no human being should experience any form of impoverishment” (255).

## **The Biblical Mandate of the Theology Concerning Poverty**

The problem of the persistence of poverty according to Deuteronomy 15 seems to stem from a fundamental disobedience to the Torah. Read in its proper context, Deuteronomy 15 argues that the poor ought not to exist in Israelite society. From the biblical mandate, it is an obligation to care for the poor, and the book of Deuteronomy demonstrates specifically how Israel was to do this. This biblical mandate is evident throughout the biblical period as it was in surrounding cultures. Gerhard von Rad correctly argues with regard to Deuteronomy 15 that “this sermon is a summons to meet foe poor at all times with an open hand and an open heart. It is just foe appeal to foe heart which is characteristic.” For us, the duty to care for the poor falls on human governments and community members who can ameliorate the situation of the poor. These ancient concerns are still relevant in our modern societies, if not more. In light of the ancient concern for the welfare of the poor, the scriptures generally display a violation of this basic biblical mandate. The Torah views it as an improper distribution of resources; prophetic literature regards it as exploitation and oppression of the poor and powerless, and wisdom

literature sees it as a matter of individual responsibility or a poor work ethic.

### **Theological Basis for the Mission of the Church to the Poor**

The mission of the church today is still the mission of the church yesterday. It is the same mission of Jesus for which He came physically here on earth. The context in which mission of the church is done would continually be in the light of contemporary situations. The church is called upon to a definite mission and ministry in the midst of the challenges facing humanity today. The statement of Jesus Christ, the Lord of the church that "The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor...." (Lk. 4:18), is the mission commissioned to the Church. The Church is sent by Christ into the world to serve, to heal and to preach. In other words, the Church is to continue with the purpose for which Christ came into the world; to destroy sinful works of rebellion and disobedience which also lead to poverty.

The Christians have been called by God to fulfill a mission in the world; obedience to this call means full participation in the life of the world. The church and individual Christian must make great influence in responding to the poor. The liberating act of God and Christ's redemption work require the Church to insist on rural mission. Poverty caused by sin, laziness, uncontrollable situations on the part of the poor such as deprivations, oppressions or other forms of injustices and ignorance are part of the reasons for the Gospel of Christ or the mission of the Church. The more situations constituting a negation of true fellowship among human continues, the more the urgency for mission as clearly expressed in biblical tradition. The seriousness of the church in getting involved in mission would enable development and life improvement to the rural people. There are certain tasks left for human beings by God to do on behalf of the lowly, ensuring that justice and love prevail. The call of God for development in Genesis 1:28b; "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth" is a call to develop the earth. Although God has given human this work, God is not eased out of the picture. If humanity has failed God, the Church cannot and must not fail because the Church has got all it takes to do God's bidding. God depends on the Church people to utilize their claim as co-creator with God. The church finds her bearing in development and mission work because her engagement in the life and struggle of the victims of social-economic and politically inclined poverty are rooted in Christ and are prophetic.



The church must nurture faith and strengthen the faith that acts; such action faith comes from care and concern not minding putting one's life on the line. If God has demonstrated this faith in Christ, the church must see to inculcate same faith that is not only restricted to the hereafter but also included in the here. This faith must be a combination of commitment and discernment, a faith that is not isolated from struggle of life, more so in the struggle of the people for a better life. The church is called to an extraordinary courageous witness for the sake of the Gospel and for the sake of the least of God's children, the poor in the rural areas inclusive.

### **The Major Root-Causes of Poverty in the Midst of Economic Opportunities in Africa**

Although Israel worldview presents poverty as a result of disobedience to Yahweh commands, in Africa poverty is not only viewed from religious context. Hence this mismatch between poverty and economic growth in Africa can be attributed to a number factors. This causes highlighted below are by no means exhaustive.

*i. Plunder by the West:* Between 1950s and 1970s, Africa became the center stage of political and economic game of the West. Many African nations became independent of their former colonial masters from Europe and America. Since that period, Africa has never remained the same both for better and for worse, but mainly for worse. Slavery and colonialism have greatly contributed to the poverty of Africa. In his book, *The Atlantic Slave Trade: A Census*, Curtin asserts that the former took away over fifty million able-bodied people to develop other continents (14) while the latter exploited Africans depriving them of the raw materials and denying them their human rights. Even today, neo-colonialism makes policies and rules which dictate the wishes of the Western powers over the poor African countries. Another side of this western influence affirms Miniva Chibuye is debt trap. Foreign debt has been suffocating many African countries for a long time now. As a result of this debt, social sectors suffered with adverse impacts on the poor (253).

*ii. Political Instability within the Countries:* Countries like Ethiopia, Eritrea, Angola, Mozambique, Sudan, Liberia, Burundi, Rwanda, Congo, etc. are involved in protracted civil wars stemming from the intolerance of different political ideologies among the leaders. Dictatorial governments

have suppressed individual opinion among the people and devastated the economies of their respective countries. This has brought poverty and suffering to the nations concerned. Military leaders have also contributed to the state of institutionalized political tension and corruption that is characteristic of the continent.

*iii. Human-Created Conditions of Poverty:* Much of the poverty and human suffering in many parts of Africa can be avoided, especially in situations where the people's laziness, negligence, ignorance, corruption, lack of work-ethics, greed, jealousy, selfishness, cheap politics, immorality and a life where God's laws are disregarded are to blame. This type of life style is likely to lead to material and spiritual poverty. In this case, it is as if the people have opted for poverty because they are unwilling to change their life style and learn better ways of farming which will improve their economy. Instead, they waste their time in wishful thinking and wait for free donations and handouts. It is such miserable human conditions that Harrison refers to in his book, "The Western Power and Poverty in the Third World" when he writes, "it is often too late to alleviate such poverty since it has already become order of the day" (276).<sup>3</sup>

*iv. Structural Imbalance:* Asante in Martey notes that resources come into a given social framework that determines the allocation and the use of the resources. The social framework is an unjust one, because "the use of more resources will only increase inequality and exploitation of the weak. Ironically, while no government wants poverty, many government policies contribute to it - other policies throw away what they give in anti-poverty programs. The poor are always the loser in the equation" (21). The structural imbalance is also seen in urban overexpansion drawing people away from the rural area where they could have contributed more meaningfully to the economic growth of the nation. Today in Nigeria and indeed in most Africa countries corruption has become a structural sin so contagious that it hardly leaves scene of investigation of any developed country (Odey, Crusade 42).

*v. Demographic Factors:* It is common knowledge that there is accelerated population growth in Africa. In fact, studies show that Africa is the fastest growing continent in the world. This is a long-term contributory factor to poverty in Nigeria in particular, and Africa in general. The income of the poor continues to decline, and mortality rates are falling, thereby resulting in the population swelling up. The effect of increase in population is that since the rate at which the available resources are increasing is lower than

that of the population, it is unbalanced or lopsided distribution of resources that obtains. Yet the poor are mostly always at the receiving end (Martey 15).

*vi. Environmental Factors:* The role of environment in the economic development of Africa is a vital one. Many Africans depend on land for sources of income, but erosion has become a serious problem because the poor are lacking capital and are unable to invest in traditional methods to conserve soil and water. "Lacking in sufficient land," Asante opined, "the poor are forced to shorten traditional fallow periods putting further strain on the resource base" (11). This is a serious cause of poverty in Africa today. Moreover, the issue of land in economic development is not alien to developed countries like Latin America. This is what Roy May, Jr. expressed in a heart-thrilling discussion on the matter. He stated that:

The unjust distribution of land and the rapacious assaults by the powerful on the lands of the poor are fundamental causes of poverty and misery in Latin America...Even urban problems are integrally connected to land. Not only are the millions of migrants pouring into Latin America cities those who have been expelled from the countryside, but upon arrival in the city there is no space available to establish a home. So, they live in the streets or build cardboard and tin shacks on precarious hillsides and over polluted rivers, one on top of the other. Control of land means power, and that power is used without pity against the poor (xi).

The same view is expressed from an African perspective when poverty is viewed as resulting in urban drift and crowding the creation of ghettos and shanty towns, poor sanitation, with their attendant moral problems. In other words, lack of enough land for commercial and residential purposes is a strong causative factor of poverty.

### **The Implications of Poverty in Africa**

Africa is well-known for its poverty. All over towns and villages are faces of malnourished people, squalid living conditions, disease with scanty medical facilities, roadside beggars, street children, etc. the Fathers of the African Synod of 1994 are of the opinion that:

one common situation, without any doubt is that Africa is full of problems. In all most all the nations, there is abject, tragic mismanagement of available scarce resources, political instability

and social disorientation. The results stare us in the face: misery, wars, despair. In a world controlled by rich and powerful nations, Africa has practically become an irrelevant appendix, often forgotten and neglected (EA no. 42).

In its 1990 Human Development Report, the United Nation's Development Program (UNDP) pointed to the concentration of poverty in Africa. It is estimated that more than 80% of the African population fall within the category of the poor, those who by virtue of their meager income, live below or barely at the level of subsistence in very dehumanizing conditions (Ukpong 362).

Local currency devaluation, inflation, the debt crisis and the general economic recession in Africa over the past few years have led to retrenchment and loss of jobs. Consequently, industrialization has slowed down as many industries have either closed down or are operating below installed capacity. Job opportunities have, therefore, thinned out thus bringing untold hardships to urban dwellers. This has produced different categories of the urban poor who include the school drop-outs migrating to the towns in search of jobs. They turn out to be "odd-job-people": the truck pushers, the load carriers, the cutters of grass, sweepers of floors, etc. For their livelihood, they depend on the chance of getting some casual job each day. But hardly are they able to satisfy their basic needs with what they learn, neither are they able to make savings for any emergencies like medical expenses. If they get a place to squat with a friend or relative in one of the slums, they count themselves lucky. The unfortunate ones sleep in uncompleted or dilapidated and abandoned buildings, or under the cities' fly-overs. One meal a day is a blessing for them and to go without meals for days is normal.

There are also school-leaver-job-seekers who roam the streets in search of meaningful employment. They stay with friends and relatives, always unsure of the next meal. If they eat once a day, they are lucky. Formerly, only secondary school leavers made up this group but in recent years, in Nigeria for example, university graduates have also joined them. The lucky ones may get jobs after two or three years of searching. The not-so-lucky may have to wait for up to five years or end up taking to unviable self-employment. Another group of the poor are those who have lost their jobs for one reason or another. Unfortunately, these have dependents to look after. They live in misery, unsure of the next meal for themselves and their dependents. Even those who have jobs but belong to the low-income

groups also live miserably as their salaries are not enough to make ends meet with the biting inflation. Even among the middle class there are people who today have been highly marginalized and can hardly feed themselves and their dependents adequately with their salaries owing to high inflation and unfavorable environment. This situation is not the plan of God as noted by the Hebrew text of the OT, and even when it does exist, God wants us to alleviate the situations.

The poor in Africa today are not only materially deprived but are psychologically alienated and socially marginalized. Although there were poor people in the traditional society, they did not experience the kind of psychological trauma that today's poor have to contend with. This was because, there was a very narrow gap between the haves and have-nots as well as the integrative and communal spirit of the society which provided for the assimilation of the poor into the society.<sup>4</sup> But in modern Africa the poor suffer great alienation and degradation. Such situations are theological evil. Everything about Nigeria defies logic notes Simon Kolawole in *Efaturi Ojakaminor* in his work *Nigeria's Nascent Democracy* "there are dynamics and undercurrents that define as a people which can hardly be taught in a classroom. When you look at the leadership all one sees is absurdity walking on four legs. If one visits the masses, you see helplessness staring at you with such intensity that you can only be scared and confused. Listen to her leaders and you will hear stupidity of the worst kind. Talk with the so-called elite and you will see men and women brimming with ideas but none practicable to achieve these ideas. What a paradox?"<sup>5</sup>

### **The Situation of the Poor in African in the light of the Scripture and Christian Tradition**

In the Old Testament, the prophets exhorted the Israelites to care for the poor as part of their Covenant with Yahweh. They had to treat one another justly and meet the needs of the poorest among them such as the widows and orphans. Material poverty was looked upon as a misfortune and a cause of sadness. Consequently, the Book of Proverbs demanded that the poor be cared for and protected and that when they are exploited, God hears their cries. The prophetic call to assist the poor formed the backbone of Jesus' public ministry. By word and deed, He reminded the people of their obligations to God and to one another. When defining His own mission in the Synagogue at Nazara, Jesus quoted Isaiah by saying,

"The Spirit of the Lord is on me, for he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor". In His Sermon on the Mount, Jesus announced to His listeners, "Blessed are you who are poor for yours is the kingdom of God". Unfortunately, observes Majawa Clement, "some people have misinterpreted this Beatitude to mean an approval of poverty although Jesus is not praising the condition of poverty and suffering, but calling for openness to God and detachment from material goods" (267). Jesus came to bring Good News to the poor and warn His disciples against the dangers of riches. In the Parable of the Wealthy Farmer (Lk. 12:16-21) He cautioned against hoarding possessions because abundance can breed arrogance, self-centeredness, avarice and a disregard for the needs of others. He further emphasized the need to respect the human dignity in the poor by pointing out the criteria to be used at the Last Judgment (Mt 25:31-46). Consequently, our treatment for the least (the poorest of the society) will determine our final destination in the next life. Today, Africa is like a house on fire. Our most immediate problem is notes John Odey is bad leadership and the hopeless socio-economic and political situation which they initiate, nurture and allow to spread like a deadly epidemic all over the continent. Hence like the Old Testament prophets, the church must have the courage to cry wolf because there are many wolves in the African manger that make it impossible for the poor, the weak and the powerless to reach their potentials (84).

Pope John Paul II used the Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus (Lk. 16:19-31) to portray the relationship between the developing nations and the developed ones; a situation that the Church should challenge. However, right from its early beginnings, the Church has a Tradition of concern for the poor (the almsgiving of the first Christians). The philosophical writings of the middle ages and the modern Social Teaching Documents of the Church like, *On the Condition of Workers* (1891) by Pope Leo XIII also emphasize the same value. Based on this, therefore, all Christians have a social obligation to care for the poor and to contribute to the common good through their productive capabilities. Although, the Church has a reputable history of charitable service to the poor, time has come for new approaches to serving the poor. Today, service to the poor requires more than just alleviating poverty and misery. It demands genuine love for people so as to challenge the evil social structures that cause suffering to them as the OT priestly tradition did. This will provoke a response that may lead to a remedy. The current common term, Preferential option for the poor, is neither a condemnation of the affluent

nor an attempt to glorify the poor, but a special commitment to enable the poor to become active participants in the society in order to share and contribute to the common good. Option for the poor should not, therefore, be an adversarial slogan that pits one group or class against another, but rather, a realization that the deprivation and powerlessness among the poor wounds the whole community. Poverty in Africa need not just be the concern of the Africans, but of the universal Church because we are all brothers and sisters. United as God's family, we ought to stand and fight against poverty because it is an evil force. In his response to the poor on the 100th Anniversary of the encyclical, *Rerum Novarum*, Pope John Paul II observe:

Love for others, and in the first place love for the poor, in whom the Church sees Jesus Christ Himself, is made concrete in the promotion of justice. Justice will never be fully attained unless people see in the poor person, who is asking for help in order to survive, not an annoyance or a burden, but an opportunity for showing kindness and chance for greater enrichment (34).

This is a call to all to be interested in the poor, to love them and to see them as an essential part of the whole human family. The Church's and the governments' efforts to assist the poor in Africa must go beyond simple charitable giving keeping in mind the Chinese proverb, you give a poor man fish and you make him poorer. Teach him how to fish and you make him more human". It is not merely a matter of giving from one's surplus, but of helping entire peoples, presently excluded or marginalized, to enter into the general stream of economic and human development. For this to happen, it is not enough to draw on the surplus goods which modern society produces abundantly. It requires change of: life styles, an African work-ethic, models of production and consumption and the present established structures of power which govern society. One of the most important contributions of economic justice for all is that it calls, not only for new measures to deal with poverty, but for a new way of looking at poverty and the poor. Since poverty is not just lack of goods, it cannot be solved by merely rearranging wealth. To realize their full potential, people need to participate even in those programs or projects that are designed to help them rise out of poverty. The main challenge to the Church is to encourage solutions that will enable the poor to help themselves through empowerment initiatives. Paternalistic programs which do too much for and too little with the poor have to be avoided because, unfortunately, they make some poor people want to be fed and

clothed without work. Let the poor especially young people be the vanguard to their liberation process.

### **Addressing Economic Poverty in Africa**

As the bible outlines steps to deal with the poverty in Israel, so Africans must seek ways to solve their poverty-stricken conditions. Although the Church believes that governments have a role to play in addressing the social problem of poverty, it opposes all static and totalitarian approaches to poverty. As Pope John Paul II pointed out in Washington, D.C. in 1987, "Social life is richer than governmental power can encompass" (9). Therefore, it is not right for any government to take advantage of the situation of the poor to impose dictatorial rule on them. But to protect basic justice, governments should undertake only those initiatives and programs which exceed the capacity of individuals or private groups acting independently. Christians are, however, cautioned not to base their efforts to empower the poor on some secular criterion of success because poverty and economic injustice will not be completely wiped out from Africa. Perhaps that is what Jesus meant when He said, "You always have the poor with you" (Mt 26:11). Human efforts might not produce sudden or sweeping changes but, they are bound to create awareness in people of good will and generate love and hard work which will lead to progress in the fight against poverty. As a result, a more human society will emerge.

Speaking prophetically on behalf of the poor, the Church is not asking too much when it insists that Christians be actively involved in the struggle against poverty in Africa. According to Pope John Paul II, every individual is called upon to play his or her part in a campaign, conducted by peaceful means, to promote development in peace to safeguard nature and the world around us (9). No one person can save the whole of Africa from poverty, but each one is expected to play their part. The Church reminds all that each person is endowed with talents which only, not enhance personal standards of living, but can also build the human community that has nurtured the individuals and given them the opportunity to advance.

Christians need to be united in their fight against ignorance, poverty and disease in Africa through Small Christian Communities. As co-creators with God, they should realize that works of poverty alleviation are their responsibility in establishing God's Kingdom on earth. They must be on the fore-front and set an example of a good work ethic. Poverty all



eviation, is the responsibility of the State and Church which, together have to facilitate the peoples' efforts. Promotion of integral development, liberation and poverty alleviation is the vocation of every Christian and a means of participating in building God's Kingdom in the world challenge of being a Christian today.

## Conclusion

Attempting a synthesis of what the biblical tradition says about the poor is risky and almost foolhardy. What is essential is that believers recognize that poverty results from unjust decisions that people make. Poverty just does not happen; it happens because people make it happen. The perfect world is not achievable, at least not without the direct intervention of God, but that is no excuse for Christians not to do whatever they can to improve it, as they seek to follow the example of their Lord as prophet, priest and King. This is submission of this reflection paper.

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