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The Cry of the Vulnerable within African Communities: Criticality of Solidarity in Catholic Social Teaching

¹Chingozha MP, ^{*2}Chingozha Y, ³Nhembo G, ⁴Zhou A and ⁵Matwaya Y

¹Student, Department of Development Studies, Great Zimbabwe University, Masvingo, Zimbabwe.

^{*2}Student, Department of Law, University of Zimbabwe, Harare, Zimbabwe.

³Lecturer, Department of Theology, Living Waters Theological Seminary, Harare, Zimbabwe.

^{4,5}Lecturer, Department of Theology, Catholic University in Africa, Harare, Zimbabwe.

Abstract

Solidarity has become a central concept in Christian ethics. It entails fundamental unity as one human family obligating humanity to common good, acts of justice and standing with the marginalized at all times. It is deep seated in the shared humanity and God's love, requiring concrete efforts to combat poverty, inequality and injustice. The basis of this facet is the principle of being a brother's keeper which embraces the values that the vulnerable ought to be remembered and assisted to have a decent life. Although solidarity can be found in other Christian traditions, the Catholic tradition has developed the concept to portray a robust and useful understanding of individual communities, institutions and nations. The mandate of the church as derived from the teaching of Christ is that it has to be a serious contender or actor in peace building, promoting justice and sustainable development. The church should never close its doors to the vulnerable within communities particularly the children. It is thus this approach that is undeniably rightly placed to preach peace, love, reconciliation and repentance. Which are tenets that every society cherishes. Without these tenets societies cannot be stable and neither can they progress. This can best be illustrated through the challenges of the Industrial Revolution in Europe that promoted the writing of the encyclical themed *Rerum Novarum* by Pope Leo XIII. This writing articulated the Catholic notion on peaceful coexistence for humanity grounded on scriptures and human rights.

Keywords: Vulnerable, African community, Catholic Social Teaching.

Introduction

In his book *Peace on Earth*, Pope John XXIII contends that it is the position of the Catholic Church that peace on earth can be established firmly if the order laid down by God at creation can be observed dutifully (John XXIII, 1964). These views were shared by the Pope in response to the aftermath of the Second World War and the lasting effects on the global political landscape, economy and social structure that the war had.

In the spirit of sustaining a peaceful environment and development the church is constantly being involved in engagements meant to promote peace within communities. The church has actually and continues to present itself as the vanguard for the development of peace, stability and progress within communities. Resultantly, the Catholic Relief Services (CRS) and the Catholic Justice and Peace Commission (CJPC) have been seen as instrumental players in the quest for peace within many societies across the world.

The works of John Paul II in peace building is highly acclaimed as having assumed a critical role to challenge and ultimately bring down communist regimes in Europe. The

Communist regimes in Europe had profound and lasting effects, impacting political systems, economies, social structures and individual lives. While communism aimed for equality and social progress it often resulted in authoritarian rule, economic hardships and restrictions on personal freedoms as defined by those opposed to its tenets.

Notwithstanding a number of peace building efforts to advance justice and sustainable development, the Catholic Church is criticized and blamed for conflicts in Latin America and the 1994 genocide in Rwanda which saw many people killed. It is also accused of widespread accusations of sexual abuse of minors spanning decades.

In this regard Lusambili *et al* (2016) talks of the binaries between the Christian principles as taught by Christ and the activities of his followers in relation to peace building. The events in Rwanda and election violence in Kenya in 2007 found the church at crossroads yet it is regarded as the conscience of the society. During the political violence in Kenya congregants within the same parish could attack each other. They were divided on ethnic lines yet the Catholic Social Teaching looks at humanity as one being. According to

the social teaching tribes are not supposed to have any prominence but the faith in Christ, who died for all humanity at Calvary. What was apparent in all this fighting and killing was the suffering of the vulnerable children. They would be denied of experiencing a peaceful environment as the adults clashed. Some of them would die, lose their legal guardians or lose their livelihood in the height of these unjustified clashes. The world should learn to love, reconcile and forgive (Lusambili *et al*, 2016). Once the world is devoid of these virtues' clashes, wars and every other ill behavior which disturbs the peace of the world will be experienced. The world should never find reason to attack, abuse or even kill the other because the social teaching emphasizes that all humanity is created in the image of God (Imago Dei). Every brother should feel for the other at all times.

When individuals within church attack each other as what happened in Kenya and Rwanda. One wonders whether the church is still pursuing the mission of Christ, which is the mission of peace, love and care. With this extent of disregard to the rights of the other it then cannot be surprising when the children have no one to look after them yet all children, the world over are in need of protection from the whims and vagaries of their communities.

In the 1960s, the expression, 'the preferential option for the poor' emerged little by little as a message from numerous Christians from Latin America who were struggling to be in solidarity with those in great need. While this expression was rooted in Christian faith and praxis, because of its humanistic dimension it also appealed to others who shared similar social, although not always theological convictions.

The phrase 'preferential option for the poor' was clearly articulated at the Medellin Conference in 1968. During this conference the preference for the poorest and most needy sectors was articulated, though the actual phrase was not explicitly worded as such until the Puebla Conference in 1979. The views to advance the preferential option for the poor was further emphasized at the Second Vatican Council, which was a monumental event in the Roman Catholic Church, and in the world at large. During this council one of the major themes was the idea that the church must become more open to the modern world and play its own particular role in ameliorating the suffering of humankind. This new look church would now dialogue with the world in order to seek solutions toward how human beings could live life more abundantly. While the Church would always see its mission as primarily a spiritual one, it realized that it needed to become more involved in the issues surrounding humanity's material wellbeing. That there was a critical connection between spiritual and material needs needed to be acknowledged. The church had to be immersed in the people's lives and problems so as to be more relevant to the worldly realities that characterize the life of humankind. This attitude is clearly presented in the *Gaudium et Spes* which says,

The joys and hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of men(sic)

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

McKinney (2018) argues that the preferential option for the poor serves as a spiritual calling to redefine our humanity based not on our individual possessions but on serving people who struggle to attain basic material and spiritual possessions.

He goes further to suggest that it is an essential component of Christian discipleship and a fundamental tenet of Catholic Schooling.

According to Pope Francis, priests and bishops should be shepherds that '*smell the sheep*' This was not a break from tradition but a return to its roots. Resultantly, the work related to the preferential option for the poor was chronicled from Christ's embrace of lepers to the barefoot preaching of Saint Francis of Assisi, as well as from Oscar Romero's martyrdom in El Salvador to Mother Teresa's care for the dying in Kolkata. The Church deriving its mission from Christ has always been at its best when it lives close to the ground which was the hallmark of the mission of Christ.

In view of this thinking many scholars believe that the dignity of the Church is thus the measure of its credibility. A Church that overlooks the poor fails its mission no matter how grand its cathedrals or well-spoken its theology is. The poor are actually at the heart of the Gospel hence all those who decide to be followers of Christ ought to remember that the Church exists for the poor which agrees with the thinking of Mondo Paulino (Fr) who said 'For the Church today, solidarity with the poor means to take their side. 'Bryan also adds his voice to the discourse by saying, 'The Church would not be faithful to the Gospel if she were not close to the poor and if she did not defend their rights.'

Methodology

The research explored various sources of literature addressing vulnerability and the catholic social teaching principles. Interviews and questionnaires were also used in the study to collect data from the individuals chosen to make up the sample for the study. The sample was chosen using the qualitative approach. The behaviors of the respondents were also observed as they conducted their daily businesses.

Findings and Discussions

According to various sources of the Catholic Social Teaching accessed the preferential option for the poor is a phenomena now critical in the life of the church. The church is viewed by the people as a pillar in the survival of all communities. This has been seen as the major weapon in addressing the physical and spiritual needs of the people in difficult circumstances.

Asked on what activities the Catholic Church is undertaking, the Catholic nun (NUN 04) responsible for projects advised that the efforts by the church are guided by the teaching of Jesus Christ who was never segregatory in his entire mission. The church therefore targets all those that are vulnerable, which includes the children among several other groups.

The desire to have the passion for the poor within communities, started in 1891 through the work of Pope Leo XIII, then continued to develop over time. The Church has never looked back in addressing the needs of vulnerable people within communities. The preferential option for the poor is thus deeply rooted in the church tradition which explains why Pope Francis believed that, 'the priests and bishops should be shepherds that smell the sheep' This implies that the church should stay very close to the people particularly the poor and vulnerable.

Asked on whether the effort of the church in preferential option for the poor does not interfere with the efforts to the State, the majority of responses indicated that the church is there to compliment the efforts by the State. These respondents, went further to suggest that the budget of the State is always choked hence the effort by the Church helps to reach out to those hard to reach areas the State would have

failed to adequately access and service. The respondents unanimously converged on the position that the effort by the Church is never to challenge the State but compliment it. This view is premised on the position that the poor are the heart of the Gospel and the church must always remember that they exist for the poor. (Pope, 1993)

The majority of respondents also agreed that the poor will always be there within communities, but the Church needs to consider their plight at all times. The poor should not be ignored because the Bible says God has a special place for the poor in his heart. Those that wish to serve Christ faithfully therefore cannot ignore the vulnerable within their spaces particularly the children.

The Church should commit that the growth of the children in vulnerable societies needs to be considered. The vulnerable children need to have equal opportunities as those who come from privileged societies. The less privileged children should have access to the goods and services that will help them develop into adulthood. The respondents agreed that the children in such spaces need to be supported at all times and seasons. The proper role of the Church is to look beyond what States provide. They need to reach out to the marginalized societies, which immensely borrows from the Bible (Matthew 25:40).

The Church should not be a political player or viewed as such. They need to rise above politics so that they serve all disadvantaged people in equally the same manner. Once the Church is involved in the group politics they will be misunderstood in their quest to service the vulnerable. Adding his voice to this thinking one Catholic priest said,

The church should never be viewed as such because once this happens it will be finished. The government needs to have the confidence and the assurance that the Church mean no harm to government processes and programs when they undertake interventions in support of the vulnerable within communities.

In an interview a respondent from the Hatfield Parish in Harare acknowledged that,

Catholic Social Teaching is indeed built on a commitment to the poor who are available within all communities. If the Church ignores the plight of the poor then they will have neglected a fundamental aspect of the mission of the Church resulting in the loss of the spiritual authority, witness and credibility. In essence this is what is known as dead faith and signifies a violation of the royal law to love one's neighbour.

Following up on the response it was established that the Catechism of the Catholic Church says,

To receive in truth the Body and Blood of Christ given up for us we must recognize, Christ in the poorest of his brethren '(no 1397) (from the USCCB document Catholic Social Teaching Challenges) Ignoring the poor is ignoring Christ himself and borrows from the book of Proverbs (21:13 which states that, "Whoever shuts their ears to the cry of the poor will also cry out and not be answered.' This aptly suggests that a Church that fails to show mercy on the poor will also not receive it in own time of need.

Respondent CT 010 weighed in and said,

Positive Catholics should not only be concerned about themselves since when a Church focuses on its own internal problems, buildings or comfort rather than the needy, it becomes a stumbling block rather than a refuge. They should also reflect on the lives of those not as privilege as ourselves, whenever we can we should seek to help and protect the vulnerable around our communities.

In support of these sentiments CT 015 said,

We should not only be in solidarity with the poor but also to act on their behalf and with them to address the reasons for their poverty and promote radical transformation with society.

This view is actually buttressed by Pope John XXIII who contends that it is the position of the Catholic Church that peace on earth can be established firmly if the order laid down by God at creation can be observed dutifully. Pope Francis agrees with these views and says, 'The dignity of the church is the measure of the church's credibility. A church that overlooks the poor fails its mission no matter how grand its cathedrals or well-spoken its theology.'

Adding his view to the extent of the need for the church in Epworth, respondent CT 012 said,

'There is so much that the church needs to do in Epworth, and indeed other areas. Many children in less privileged background are dropping from school, some end up engaging in substance abuse, premarital sex which exposes them to STI, unwanted pregnancies gambling and drug abuse.

These sentiments are actually parallel to the view of the church that the Apostles and early church fathers had in mind from the first century when church was established. The Church and its entire membership are supposed to be the salt of the earth. (Matthew 5:13). When Church elects to ignore the plight of the vulnerable or marginalized groups within their communities the purpose of the Church will have been violated severely.

The sentiments were equally buttressed by respondent CT 06 who said,

Epworth is known as a place which is not safe for children. Many of them from vulnerable families are struggling to have the basics in life. This position of lack motivates some of them into crime and community. This in my view is why Epworth has so much crime being perpetrated by young people.

Reviewed literature also showed that the preferential option for the poor is actually a biblical mandate, since it dovetails into the early proclamations of Jesus (Narin, 2007). The USCCB in 1986 explained that,

As followers of Christ we are challenged to make a fundamental option for the poor, to speak for the voiceless, to defend the defenseless, to assess lifestyle, policies and social institutions in terms of their impact on the poor.

When interviewed as a follow up to these views the police officer from Epworth Police Station advised that crimes by

young persons were on the increase. He also went further to acknowledge that many requests for community programs came through his office which confirmed the involvement of the church in responding to the community needs, particularly the vulnerable children. In his submissions the police officer indicated that the church groups seek for police clearance to engage in community projects hence this position allowed him to comment from an informed standpoint on the activities of the various groups that include the church within the Epworth community.

The majority of the church members and ordinary citizens interviewed agreed that there was so much poverty in Epworth. From their responses many children are dropping from school because their families cannot raise sufficient fees for them. Some of these children are actually seen in the alleyways engaging in uncelebrated behaviors. These behaviors range from smoking, gambling and consuming dangerous substances. Faced with this kind of situation Nduku (2024) states that the development of every person and the whole person especially of the poorest and most neglected in the community is at the heart of Evangelization which confirms that the church has a duty to take care of these children. The church that is following the footsteps and mission of Christ cannot watch without taking corrective action within their communities.

The priest who was interviewed on the same matter indicated that this might have been caused by loss of steady incomes for their legal guardians. For some though, this might have been mere delinquency but according to the teachings of the Bible the Church should be the salt of the earth. This means that church has an obligation to correct or improve whatever state or situation that the world finds itself in. Ignoring the needy would be reneging on the mission of Christ which is the reason why church was established.

Adding his voice to the same matter the police officer (PO 01) interviewed said, '... for some of these children their being out of school is a function of the environment in which they are being raised which does not have values'. Even in the face of these realities the Church should embrace such children and do the best it can for them. This is why it is on record that the church should not be devoid of love, reconciliation and forgiving ethos so that they promote peace among all people of the world regardless of their social standing. (Lusambili *et al*, 2016)

These children as confirmed by the records held at the police station have been seen to have the appetite for mischief. Resultantly, they end up being engaged in crime and criminality.

One of the interviewed catholic nuns (Nun 02) said, 'The church is doing a lot to assist these vulnerable but maybe more resources need to be mobilized so that more are assisted. Some of them have the potential to reform if alternative options are availed. The church should not tire to do the best they can so as to change this world. This is why Christ said those who are believers are the salt of the earth. The power to change the world thus lies in the willingness of the church to commit to the preferential option for the poor.

Some of these children have an unquenchable appetite to have an income so they drop from school to start engaging in informal trade. During this investigation many school going age were actually seen at business centres such as Solani, Domboramwari, Munyukwi, Overspill and Corner Store. When they fail to raise the expected income, they find themselves trapped in a vicious circle of poverty and will live from hand to mouth. The church should thus come in with

interventions that are meant to rehabilitate them (OMP 05) which explains why the Church is expected to be loving and embrace all the people who are God's creation.

Respondent OMP 08 weighed in and suggested the lack of family planning within some of the Epworth families. Resultantly, families end up with many children than they cannot afford to provide for. When this happens the next stop for these children will be the alleyways. She further suggested that this causes some of the vulnerabilities that the children end up facing in Epworth but the church still has to respond positively consistent with the mission of Christ. In her views which were also confirmed by Priest 02, the church should never judge. It should just apply itself to providing interventions that improve the children's lives which agrees with the biblical position that the church has to be the salt of the earth. They must commit to this position without any strings.

Adding his voice, Catholic Church member 005 said

The church as the vanguard of the mission of Christ should just mobilize resources so as to respond to all societal needs. While it is true that these youthful people have no role models within their communities the church has to stand firm in fighting for the rights of the children

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