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## The Dynamics of Dealing with Environmental Volatilities: Role of Church in Promoting Justice and Sustainable Development

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### Abstract

The effectiveness of the Church as a vehicle for promoting peace, stability, progress, justice and sustainable development is a contested field. [Marava, 2024; Asante, 2012; Mahiya & Murisi, 2022] There are mixed views and sentiments on the subject among preachers, social and political commentators. Within many pockets of Africa, the Church has been identified more with colonization than peace and justice. [Jean & Comasroff, 1997; Desmond Tutu,] According to Smith, Christianity in Sub Saharan Africa has increased yet the increase in Christianization in the eyes of many has not translated to peace and stability. During the last four decades for instance, politically instigated and ethically motivated conflicts or clashes have witnessed an upward trend. In the majority of cases these resulted in the damage of a lot of property and loss of lives of vulnerable people that included children.

The heightened level of Evangelization from the lens of many social commentators has regrettably not translated into more peace and harmony which is exactly what Christ teaches and the sole reason why church was born. Instead, conflicts and their ravaging effects have been witnessed across Africa and beyond. In some instances, the clergy have been involved. This position is at cross purposes with the teaching of the Church and one wonders how the Church finds itself entwined or implicated in such circles. When the Church fails to promote peace, stability and progress within communities there are views that it would have lost its value. The church and its entire membership are supposed to be the *salt of the earth* (Matthew 5:13). Once the behaviors not consistent with the scriptural teachings start happening the Church would have lost its *saltness*. Ultimately it loses its distinctiveness, influence and effectiveness as a moral champion or moral preservative making it invalid to stand as a spiritual link for humanity.

**Keywords:** Environmental volatilities, dynamics, Justice, Sustainable development.

### Introduction

The Church leaders the world over should not be led by self-interests or greedy. They should be motivated to serve faithfully, consistently as opposed to being served by the follower ship. When leaders allow themselves to be motivated by self-interests, their morals will decay. A society with decayed morals is open to all sorts of evils or antics. Progressive communities should ensure that they avoid falling into this trap. The effects of falling into the trap can be severe hence the compelling need to avoid it before it happens. Adding his voice to this discourse Bryan says, '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.' The poor are thus the reason why Christ came. To confirm this standpoint He identified himself more with them during his mission on earth. The Church membership should never be silent when they experience or witness any weevils within their rank and file.

This has the effect of causing everyone to be painted by the same black brush. The *bad apple* as presented in the *bad apple theory*, however asserts that the problem is always within the person and not the organization. The import of this understanding is that it is not the Church with problems but certain individuals or groups within the Church as an institution. The individuals or groups spoil the good work that the Church does. Their bad activities thus ought to be treated separately from the good activities of the Church. The Church should never be silent when some of its members behave in a manner that is not acceptable to society as well as its teaching and principles. According to Lusambili *et al* (2006) the clergy should not preach *water and take wine*.

The views among some faithful believers according to Lusambili are that 'the church today is out to be helped than helping the people ...' The view contends that the church is now in accumulative mode. This is to say they are busy

amassing wealth from the poor congregants instead of serving the poor who in the majority of cases live from hand to mouth. They work so hard to get a meal on the table. For some they cannot afford to get the three standard meals per day but just one or at most two. These sentiments from the corridors of life aptly confirm the Latin idiom which says, *In vino veritas* which means *in wine there is some truth*. The people as they talk about issues around their lives they will always have some grain of truth about what they say.

Pope Leo XIII was however of the view that *'the mission of the church was to sustain the faith of her members, through the work of priests and religious sisters.'* The Church also has the pastoral care of the people. To this end the Popes in the 19<sup>th</sup> century raised concern on forced migration. They denounced it as evil to society and human flourishing. Pope Pius XII went further to say that in order for families to flourish, they need to have access to property, a living space to attend to their needs. This is the reason why wars and conflicts arise when others feel a deprivation of what they deem is an entitlement within their spaces.

The understanding of the Church is that every human being deserves respect, care and protection not because of their stature, race, religion or nationality but solely because of their sharing in human nature. In this vein, Curnow agrees with Guterrez that, "the ultimate reason for commitment to the poor and oppressed does not lie in social analysis that we employ, or in our human compassion but strikes its roots deep in the gratuity of God's love and is demanded by that love." (Benjamin Lujan, 2015)

The Catholic teaching has been known to contribute to vulnerable communities throughout the world. This is archived through its core principles particularly the preferential option for the poor and vulnerable. The principle mandates a moral priority for their needs. The needs are many and varied. The Church must emphasize that through this option for the poor all followers of Christ should not only share their material goods with poor, but also that they take up their cause in order to discover the roots of their poverty and suffering.

The Catholic Church has been seen to undertake numerous charitable works, advocacy for social justice and the operation of global social service networks. The Catholic teaching seems to be largely motivated by the teaching of Christ. In the Gospel of Matthew (23:31-46) Jesus describes the last judgement saying that people will be judged based on how they treat the poorest and most vulnerable members of society. Throughout the Scriptures, there is evidence that Jesus would spend time with the sick and outcast which was confirmation of his love for people in need. The works by the Catholics and indeed other well-meaning churches really show a commitment to follow and imitate Christ's love for the poor. They do these works to create a society where the needs of the vulnerable are considered as well since by being poor one is not less human. The Catholic family through the CST embraces that all people are created in the image of God (*imago dei*).

It thus needs no debate that the preferential option for the poor is a fundamental principle in the Catholic Social Teaching. The teaching emphasizes the moral priority of addressing the needs of all the poor, marginalized within virtually all communities which heavily borrows from the Bible. In the New Testament, Jesus summarized the core of his mission on earth in terms of bringing good news and hope to the poor. The Bible says, "The spirit of the Lord is upon me, for he has anointed me to bring the good news to the

afflicted..." The teaching equally implores all progressive societies to give special consideration to the poor and vulnerable not as an act of charity but as a matter of justice. The teaching fully acknowledged that the dignity of the poor and their rights cannot be overlooked within a progressive society which ought to be a balanced ecosystem.

### Key Aspects of the Preferential Option for the Poor in Catholic Social Teaching

- **Priority for the poor and vulnerable**
  - **Moral Obligation:** The Church teaches that the well-being of the poor must take precedence in decisions concerning social and economic justice. The priority is however not predicated on charity or compassion alone but ingrained on justice, as the poor within communities are often denied their basic human rights and dignity due to structural inequalities that characterize and define many societies.
  - **Justice Over Charity:** the view that charitable activities are important cannot be disputed, but the preferential option for the poor and vulnerable demands long term structural or system over haul to address the root causes of poverty and inequality. The principles also put on the spotlight the commitment towards the transformation of systems with a view to reduce poverty as opposed temporary relieve.
- **A Response to the Gospel**
  - **Jesus's Teachings:** The preferential option for the young is rooted on the teachings of Jesus Christ, who in his entire Ministry demonstrated a deep concern for the poor and marginalized. In the Gospels, Jesus identifies with the poor. He actually says 'Blessed are the poor in spirit' (Matthew 5:3) and "whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me (Matthew 25:40). For the Catholics this is where the teaching is premised.
  - **The Prophetic Tradition:** Throughout the Old and New Testament, prophets and Jesus himself condemns all forms of injustice perpetrated on the vulnerable, and call for the unconditional liberation of the oppressed. The preferential option for the poor aligns with the prophetic tradition, urging the faithful to advocate justice for the poor, rather than simply feeling sympathy for them.
- **Structural and Systematic Change**
  - **Addressing Root Causes of Poverty:** The preferential option of the poor involves not only providing aid to the poor but also addressing the structural and systemic factors that contribute to the poverty. This includes tackling economic inequality, promoting for wages, improving access to education, healthcare and housing and ensuring that public policies and social systems do not disproportionately harm the poor.
  - **Economic and Social Justice:** The church calls for economic systems that respect the dignity of all people, particularly the poor and that promote the common good. The preferential option for the poor involves working to transform policies, institutions and economic structures that disproportionately disadvantage the poor.

- **Solidarity with the Poor**
  - **Mutual Responsibility:** The preferential option for the poor calls for solidarity with those who suffer from poverty, marginalization and injustice. Solidarity means recognizing that the fate of the poor is intimately connected with the fate of society as a whole. It aptly requires working together to build a more just and inclusive society.
  - **Empowerment of the Poor:** The principle does not just call for helping the poor but indeed to empower them to take an active role in shaping their own lives and communities. It promotes policies that foster self-sufficiency and dignity rather than creating dependency.
- **Holistic Approach to Poverty**
  - **Beyond Material Needs:** The preferential option for the poor goes beyond simply meeting material needs. It also involves addressing the social, psychological and spiritual dimensions of poverty. This means ensuring that the poor have access to education, healthcare, employment opportunities and a voice in society.
  - **Human Dignity:** It needs no debate that every human being, by virtue of being human including the poor has inherent dignity. The preferential option for the poor affirms that this dignity has to be respected by all and at all times. All societies must therefore ensure that the poor are not treated as less than others but ought to be given the same respect and opportunities.
- **Communities and Social Transformation**
  - **Inclusive Communities:** The principle of the preferential option for the poor calls for the creation of communities where everyone's dignity is respected and where the poor are included in decision making processes. It challenges society to build a community that is truly inclusive, where people of all economic backgrounds have equal opportunities to thrive.
  - **Advocacy and Action:** Catholics are called to advocate for policies that benefit the poor and to work for social justice in communities. This includes supporting measures to alleviate poverty, fight inequality and address issues like hunger, housing and employment.
- **Pope John Paul II and Later Papal Teachings**
  - **Sollicitudo Rei Socialis (1987):** In this encyclical, Pope John Paul II reiterated the importance of preferential option for the poor, emphasizing that justice requires a priority concern for the marginalized
  - **Centesimus Annus (1991):** This encyclical further developed the idea of the preferential option for the poor within the context of global economy and capitalist systems, stressing that the social and economic order must be reformed to prioritize the needs of the poor.
  - **Pope Francis:** In the encyclical *Evangelium Gaudium* (2013), Pope Francis calls for a church that is 'poor and for the poor' urging both individuals and governments to act in solidarity with the marginalized. He advocates for systemic change and

solidarity, particularly in the context of global economic inequality.

- **Theological Foundation**
  - **Creation and Redemption:** The preferential option for the poor is rooted in the belief that all people are in the image of God and are called to live in community with one another. The vulnerable people like all others are loved by God and are an essential part of the body of Christ. This understanding calls for a radical love and commitment to social justice.
  - **God's Preference for the Poor:** Throughout the Bible, God is presented elaborately as having a special concern for the vulnerable, who include the poor, oppressed and marginalized. The Church teaches that this divine preferential love for the poor should inspire human action to ensure their dignity and wellbeing.

According to CAFOD (2021), the Church has the largest aid network in the world. In many countries, it is the only way of reaching the people who need urgent support. (Graham Gurdin, Head of Policy at CAFOD). The role played by the Church is however normally ignored by the government and international agencies. The Church has been known to provide food and shelter to many across the globe. With this thinking Pope Francis once said 'to trample upon the dignity of another person is in fact to weaken one's own worth.'

#### Methodology

The paper adopted the qualitative approach so as to appeal to the deep seated meanings within the hearts and minds of the respondents. The sample used was small to improve on the effectiveness of the instruments used. Interviews were conducted on the priests, the catholic nun and members of the public. The questionnaire was used on the representative from the police and members from the Catholic church. The researchers also observed some of the individuals who constituted the sample as they conducted their personal business. Available literature on the preferential option for the poor and vulnerable was also reviewed so as to establish a nexus between what literature has and what was obtaining on the ground. The ethics were sufficiently observed so as to avoid violating any of the individuals participating in the research

#### Findings and Discussions

The understanding of the Church is that every human being deserves respect, care and protection not because of their race, religion or nationality but solely because of their sharing in human nature. (Immanuel Kant, Pope Benedict XVI). The Catholic Church's preferential option for the poor has thus undeniably witnessed phenomenal successes through their vast global networks of charitable organizations, educational institution and healthcare systems. These networks have been known to provide immediate and long term structural support to the vulnerable communities. This view was well collaborated by all the respondents who participated in this study. Catholic nun 02 actually said,

The world we all live in should be alive to the reality that all life comes from God. All people therefore deserve to have a good life, a secure environment and peaceful environment. No one is allowed therefore to ignore those in dire need, each one of us should be compassionate when those in need are known to us.

Organizations like Catholic Relief Services (CRS) and Caritas Internationals have known to provide massive scale emergency response and development projects to the marginalized communities. A member from the Domboramwari community weighed and confirmed that indeed the Catholic agencies are doing a lot within the Epworth community. She however decried that those benefiting are fewer than those who remain unassisted.

A review of available literature led to the realization that the 2010 Haiti earthquake whose effects were so devastating was a case that the Catholic agencies ably handled. In response to this call the CRS built over 10 600 transitional shelters and provided 10 million meals. They also employed more than 12 000 people in cash for work programs. The intervention significantly, mitigated the prominent poverty that the people were facing. The respondents from the Catholic Church provided some magazines that showed the Church in action during times of need

Catholic Charities USA is also known for having been instrumental in coordinating shelter and rebuilding assistance for over 100 000 families after Hurricane Katrina. Since the breakout of the War in Ukraine Caritas agencies have mobilized resources to assist in excess of 3, 5 million people in that country. The assistance was in the form of food and medical supplies.

In terms of health services across the globe the church is known to be the largest non-governmental provider of healthcare in the world. The Catholic hospitals and clinics have been known to treat several thousand people in need every year.

The Catholic Church has also been seen to provide education and vocational training to the marginalized communities. Available literature puts their school around 150 000 across the world. These schools help to equip the marginalized with skills that help them to face the challenges they face in their lives.

The church has also been seen engaging in advocacy and systemic changes interventions. This helps to challenge unjust structures thereby promoting societies in which all people are the same. Resultantly, everyone will have a voice to challenge happenings that do not promote peaceful coexistence. This thinking actually derives from the teachings of Christ whom the Bible says ‘...came to bring glad tidings to the poor, liberty to captives ... recovery of sights to the blind’ (Luke 4: 18-19) and who identified himself with the least of these, the hungry and stranger.

According to McKinsey (2023) by the late nineteenth century, many Catholic schools had been established in areas of poverty and deprivation and many are still located in these areas. These views also agree with the thinking of Pope Francis, who through his speeches and sermons included a lot about the poor within communities. This was actually an important theme in *Evangelii Gaudium* (2013) as was *Global Inequality in Laudato Si*, (2015).

While it is true that the world over resources are limited, the Church should ensure that they mobilize more resources and commit them to where they are needed most. There are instances when the Church resources have been committed to pursue selfish ends, which is not consistent with the teaching of Christ, the Apostles and early Church fathers. This view is supported by Lusambili *et al* (2016) who argued that good church leaders should never be led by self interest, greed or corruption. They have to think of the plight of those who are not as privileged as they are within their communities.

Respondent CCM 02 acknowledged existence of the Catholic interventions meant to improve the lives of vulnerable people and in particular children. A respondent from the among the ordinary citizens advised that she was not aware of any of the activities by the Catholic Church to improve the lives of the vulnerable. She only acknowledged the interventions by the political parties which are seen in the run up to elections, which are also implemented along party lines hence fail to address the needs of all the vulnerable children which is sharp contrast of the reasons why church was conceived. According to CAFOD (2021) the church has the largest aid network in the world. Why therefore the activities of the church were missing the eye of some in Epworth could actually prove that church was not reaching out to all communities.

There were mixed feelings from the respondents on whether the Catholic Church was reaching out to the Epworth Community as indeed many other communities. Some people from among the ordinary citizens weighed in to suggest that the focus of these interventions was for those who were members of the Catholic Church. These sentiments were however disputed by some of those who responded to the questionnaire. One female respondent advised that she had witnessed the vulnerable being supported by the Catholic Church agencies which was consistent with the views of Gustavo Guterrez who said the poor need to be placed at the center of the church’s spirituality. Adding his voice to this thinking Marava said, ‘the situation in the developing world has shown that the political administrative system and structures alone cannot bring the idea of sustainable development to fruition... the gaps can be filled if churches play a role through their value systems...’

Respondents from Makomo, Overspill, Solani and Domboramwari acknowledged the work that the Church was doing in Epworth to improve the lives of the vulnerable children. Names of children who were now at university and even beyond were shared to show that indeed the preferential option for the poor is being felt in Epworth.

Many families, have also been given meals, while others were given resources to start small income generating projects. Through these micro projects these families can now afford to provide themselves with regular standard meals which was in sharp contrast to the views advanced by Lusambili *et al* (2016) who suggested that the church was now on the shoulders of the poor who actually live from hand to mouth. During this investigation, the researcher actually witnessed some groups of vulnerable groups active in some church run programmes.

The majority of respondents agreed with the notion of the church engaging the schools so as to get details of children who would have dropped from school and those who were known to be struggling with fees. In the sentiments of these respondents this would help to reach out to many who would ordinarily would have been missed. The views of some scholars on related matters were that the priority of the poor within communities were not predicated on charity or compassion alone but engrained on justice. Any activities meant to improve the lives of the vulnerable was thus supposed to be looked as an uncompromised response to the mission of Christ. In responding to related matters Immanuel Kant suggested that what needs to be understood by all and sundry is the fact, ‘Every human being deserves respect, care and protection.’ This according to church tradition should be based on the thinking that every person is created in the image of God (*Imago Dei*).

**Recommendations**

In view of the findings in this study it is recommended that:

- The Church should look for more partners so as to raise more resources that will then be shared with the vulnerable communities
- The Church should set up inclusive programmes so that no deserving case will be left unattended.
- The Church should promote programmes at schools so that the appetite to drop from school is weakened.
- The Church leaders must be active in programmes that support the vulnerable so that they are not viewed as only being interested in the tithes and offerings of the poor.

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