

Nnebedum, Chigozie. (2017). The poor you will always have with you: A socio-theological impulse for Priests and Religious to help the Poor, Homeless, and Refugees. In: Friends of God and Servants of God's People. Pp. 1-16

The poor you will always have with you: A socio-theological impulse for Priests and Religious to help the Poor, Homeless, and Refugees.

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Two friends were walking along the beach and saw lots of Nile tilapias that were washed ashore by wave. They were twisting in agony. One of the friends started picking and throwing the fish back in the water. His friend reminded him that it is of no use - "It doesn't matter the amount of effort you make, you cannot save all of them, leave them, and let's move on". The friend responded while showing him the one in his hand - "well it matters to this one am holding" And he threw it into the water and continued the rescue mission as far as he could go.

Do not say that the needs of the people are numerous that you cannot solve all. Do not say that the poor, the needy and the migrants or refugees are too many that you need not waste your time trying to help. These should not be counted as numbers but as individuals. Alleviating the pains and suffering of one of them can be counted as important as helping a whole lot of them.

1. Introduction

Whenever the word "poor" is used the mind tends automatically to one direction - lack of money. The poor, as we shall use here, refers to those who are off the social ladder. Among such are the migrants who are often forced to leave their comfort zones in search of greener pastures but find the doors closed to them. Some who find themselves in are subjected to inhuman treatments of all sorts. We have the refugees who are fleeing from life threatening situations in their regions. We have the homeless whose major problem is that they don't have homes. We have the poor who are not sure of the next meal.

When we talk about poverty are we referring to economic or social poverty or both? What is poverty? How do people become poor? Who is a poor person? who is a homeless person? It may interest us all to know that the answers to these questions are relative depending on the criteria one may use to define them. When we hear of a poor person what comes to our mind? Someone with dirty clothes, hungry and without a home? Or someone who is not able to pay the medical bills and so must go back without receiving treatment? Or someone who simply say "I am poor"? The word "poor" comes from the Greek words "*penes*" and "*ptochos*" which refer to a manual worker (the contrast is "*plousios*" which refers to one from a higher class who needs not to work). While a *penes* possesses very little wealth, a *ptochos* is destitute of all resources and is reduced to a beggar. That one is poor does not necessarily mean that one is jobless. To determine who a poor person is, as far as our task here is concerned, we will

consider what we may call "income-based and consumption-based" methods. How much does one earn and how much does one need for one's basic needs which are food, shelter and cloth? Suffice it to say that income-based method of determining poverty will help to reveal the extent one is lacking in the other needs. If the income is meagre, there may be problem with feeding, accommodation, clothing and eventually access to health care. We can, though relatively, maintain that when the basic needs are not met with ease because the income-base is very low or equals to zero, then one "may" be termed poor. However, it is very pertinent to quickly relay the fact that a substantial disagreement to the above may exist among policy experts and sociologists due to lack of a unified definition of poverty or causes of poverty. The complication is further exemplified in a situation where some people, out of their own volition followed and remained in the path that impoverished them.

2. The poor and the homeless. But Why?

Some people appear destitute of money but at the same time refuse to work preferring to beg instead, or destitute of home but would refuse any chance of getting shelter because that would cage them and limit their chances of appearing as beggars and so they would prefer to remain homeless.

Each individual has the right to find what is necessary for his livelihood - of course in a morally justifiable and legally acceptable way. This is part of the universal purpose of creation when the injunction came from the creator to "fill the earth and subdue it" (Gen.1:28). The earth has enough to furnish us with the means for progress because "...created goods should abound for them on a reasonable basis."¹ Unfortunately today we are no longer unaware of the fact that countless people out there are ravaged by poverty in such a way that many are malnourished. While many die due to hunger and poverty others live in affluence. There is poverty because some people out there have refused to build a system in the world where every person can live a life worthy of human beings.

3. Do we suppose to have the poor always among us?

It may amount to a whole lot of task in determining what Jesus really meant when he made the statement - "The poor you will always have with you". Does that mean that the problem of

poverty can't be solved? Or do we see the statement as a consolation to those who worry about tackling poverty and injustice without success. This should not be misinterpreted as an insinuation to take the wind out of the commandment of Jesus to work for Justice and show compassion to the poor. As is the case with Jesus and indeed most of the New Testament writers, this statement is made in reference to another in the Old Testament: "If among you, one of your brothers should become poor, in any of your towns within your land that the Lord your God is giving you, you shall not harden your heart or shut your hand against your poor brother, but you shall open your hand to him and lend him sufficient for his need, whatever it may be...For the poor you will always have with you in the land. Therefore I command you, 'you shall open wide your hand to your brother, to the needy and to the poor, in your land.'" (Deut 15:7-11). To remain at the level of a superficial interpretation of the sentence - "the poor you will always have among you", without reference to the corresponding Old Testament version that completes it - "you shall open wide your hand to your brother, to the needy and the poor..."(Deut 15:11), would mean to interpret the statement with prejudice in one's favour.

The commandment "open wide your hand to your brother" is a categorical imperative from the Lord and can be interpreted in so many ways depending on the ability and situation of both the giver and the receiver. To be generous or stingy goes beyond apathy and tight-fistedness. Apart from the Old Testament version that precedes the New Testament usage of the statement by Jesus, the statement came as a stinging rebuke to Judas who was scornful towards Mary for pouring an expensive ointment on the feet of Jesus (John 12:3 - 7). Accordingly, whoever uses these words of Jesus as a justification for his/her insensitivity to the sufferings of the poor is committing the same sin Judas committed and so is guilty of the sin of Judas.

It is often argued that poverty is relative. What constitutes poverty in Europe may not be the same in the African setting. When one is not able to pay for a desired holidays, buy certain toys for the kids, change cars as one would wish or buy certain household equipment, one 'may be tempted' to consider oneself as a poor person in Europe (especially in central Europe). Whereas some people in the African context are still struggling to put food on the table or afford medical services. Whatever the criteria for determining the authenticity of poverty may be, we are all called to work towards the creation of atmosphere that is conducive for everyone to have, at least, the minimum essentials for life. When we all work to reduce the "moral deficiencies of those who are mutilated by selfishness"² then we may be on the right way towards fighting the existence of absolute poverty.

The poor will always exist among us so long as there are people who are selfish. There is no justification for anyone to keep in exclusivity what he does not need, especially when others are living in lack. The world is giving to all and when one gives to the needy, one is handing over what is meant for the use of all which one has arrogated to oneself³. If the Church's teaching on justice in the sharing of the goods within the society is heeded to, there will be less poverty in the society.

4. Reaching out to the Poor out of Love - A universal Call for all

In the preface of the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World "Gaudium et Spes" (GS), the fathers of the Sacred Council stated that "The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the men of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these too are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ."⁴ In that statement, the council reiterates its eloquent voice to declare its position in showing solidarity with the entire mankind. The solidarity meant here is "all-encompassing-solidarity" which allows the human person to have access to everything that is needed for leading a truly human life such as food, cloth, shelter among many others. This is achievable if we have a genuine love for one another as authentic Christians. The word "Love", though one of the most used words is nonetheless one of the most abused words. The commandment "love one another" of John 13:34 - 35 supplements the injunction "love your neighbour" of Mtt 22:39. The love that should typify an authentic Christian is summarized by Christ thus: "For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you made me welcome, lacking clothes and your clothed me, sick and you visited me, in prison and you came to see me." (Matt 25: 35 - 36). Anyone who makes effort to get rid of love of neighbour in his/her life should be prepared to get rid of human beings as a human person.⁵ It is to be observed that in the judgement scenario of the passage in question, the condemnation to the left hand side would not be on account of having done something evil. It would rather be because of the good the condemned neglected to do: "...in so far as you neglected to do this to one of the least of these, you neglected to do it to me" (Matt 25: 45). The authenticity of our Christian life is going to be evaluated based on many actions some of which are how we attended to the needs of those around us as crystallised in the circumstances thus outlined by Jesus: hunger, thirst, being strangers, lacking clothes, sickness, being in prison. Great people who have shown love showed their convictions through their works.⁶ Typical instances include St. Theresa of the Child Jesus (What matters in life is not the great deeds, but great love), and Mother Theresa, who was recently (04.09.16) raised to the dignity of the altars.

St. Paul lived his life according to the message of Christ and his unique interpretation and application of His message. Standing on this conviction, he enjoins his followers thus: "follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ" (1 Cor. 11:1). In following Christ St. Paul was open to the Spirit. Those who got his teachings were able to prove that through their representation of Christ. On their own part, the people of Antioch noticed this representation of the life of the man called Christ in the community of the disciples at the time and they were "nicknamed" Christians (Christ-like). That was because they behaved like a man called Christ (Acts 11: 25, 26). That they were first called Christians not in Jerusalem but in Antioch - a non-Jewish city - was remarkable. One of the reasons was their openness and love for each other and their readiness to share and show compassion for the down trodden - virtues which Christ practised.

Christians are called to play active roles in the society according to the teachings they received from Christ. A typical example here was Barnabas. His life and attitude represented that of openness and impartiality. Moving beyond the boundaries and prejudices of his associates, he took Paul in when others rejected him. He saw him as a refugee and by taking him he gave him a status. Barnabas managed Paul's migration and it benefited, not only both but also, those who witnessed their missionary activities. Both Paul and Barnabas preached to the Gentiles thereby going beyond the confines of Jewish religious paradigmatic conducts. This is the injunction of Christ who instructed His apostles to "go out to the whole world; proclaim the gospel to all creation" (Mk: 16, 15). They are to teach the people about the kingdom of God built upon love. Those who do not believe in Jesus and in His teachings should see the difference when they see the disciples - "By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another." (John 13:35). Because of the love that was visible among the Christians Tertullian (160 - 220)⁷, for instance, was able to defend the Christians and challenged the pagans with the life the Christians were leading. He invited the non-believers to observe and see "...how they love each other and how they are ready to die for each other." This was a contrast to the life of the pagans who hated one another and were ready to kill one another.

Priest and Religious are to take the virtuous actions of the Saints as examples worthy of emulation. But the task is not for them alone. The call to "compassion for the poor and the needy" is a universal call. Therefore it is not meant only for the priests and the religious. It is a call to action according to individual capacity and in this sense everybody is involved - the poor inclusive. The Vatican II council puts it thus: "The laity... are to witnesses to Christ in all circumstances and at the very heart of the community of mankind."⁸ The call could simply be

termed as ethics of mutuality.⁹ The understanding of the idea of mutuality will help us to clearly see open-handedness as a vocation we owe each other as far as social ethics is concerned. We should treat others as we would want to be treated. This is the so-called Golden Rule (GR) which is not usually clear in terms of meaning and interpretation. However, in consideration of our attitudes towards the poor and the needy the GR demands of us to apply our experiences, sufferings, pains and joys. Whatever you will like to experience, do same to others and don't let others experience what you would dislike to suffer. Here the rule of empathy could come into play. Emotional feelings and perception of pleasant and unpleasant treatment ought to help us in reasoning out how we should act when confronted with someone in need. "By imaginatively putting myself into the place of the other person my own willing becomes the measure of how to treat them."¹⁰

This rule should take exception of people with strange desires and abnormal motivations. Here we can categorise two of such motivations:

1. Masochists' drive
2. Escapists' generosity

The Masochists could desire to hurt others and take joy by doing so because they would wish to be hurt by others, while escapists' generosity aims at easing off the pain of seeing the poor person suffering. The giver here thinks of himself and his feelings and not necessarily that of the poor person. He simply gives to calm his agony of seeing someone suffering. Such should not be the motivation to adhere to the universal call to help the poor and the needy. The motive should rather be because we are brothers.

5. A call for an attitudinal Change towards the poor and the homeless

In his address to the International Union of Superiors General (IUSG) Pope Francis asked the prelates to take very seriously "a poverty learned with the humble, the poor, the sick and all those who are on the existential outskirts of life."¹¹ The Pope encouraged priests to leave their comfort zones and have contacts with the poor. He reiterated this point during the chrism mass in 2016 when he urged the priests to identify with "the poor, the outcast and the oppressed."¹² This is in line with the call to the priesthood which amongst many other things includes, like St. Paul, being everything to all men: "So though I was not a slave to any

human being, I put myself in slavery to all people, to win as many as I could..., to the weak, I made myself weak, to win the weak." (1 Corinthians 9: 19 -22). The Vatican II puts it thus: "Although priests owe service to everybody, the poor and the weaker ones have been committed to their care in a special way."¹³

The priest as "*alte Christus*" (another Christ) is called to assume the posture of generosity and open-handedness which was consistent in the life of Jesus Christ himself. This forms the root of the priestly vocation and ministry. While in the womb of Mary, Jesus bore witness to the song sung by Mary in the Magnificat: "He has filled the hungry with good things..." (Luke 1:53). This prophecy was fulfilled by Jesus in his ministry. He fed the 5000 (Matth 14:13 -21); he fed 4000 (Matth 15: 29 -39) and in John 6 we read that variegated crowd who followed him all ate enough. As against the wish of his disciples to send the people away to buy food for themselves, Jesus was ready to do otherwise and through the "open-handedness" of the little boy to share, he was able to feed the 5000 people with five loaves and two fish. After the ascension, the early Christians took the injunction to be "open-handed" to the poor very seriously. The whole believers were united in one spirit so much that there was no private possession and none was in want (Acts 4: 32 - 34).

One of the ways to know the worth of a priest's value of Christ's teaching on love for one another is by the way he treats the poor especially in difficult circumstances. To have the poor and the needy among us is to have the opportunity to learn solidarity, sharing and charity. It should not be debated whether the right to have a fair share of the earthly goods belongs to everyone. All people are obliged to show solidarity with the poor and come to their rescue. Anything short of that would amount to a grave offence against humanity.¹⁴ The Fathers and Doctors of the Church put it thus: "Feed the man dying of hunger, because if you do not feed him you are killing him."¹⁵ According to our individual ability, we should take initiatives to share what we have with those who do not have, especially in helping them to develop themselves.

Priests and religious, by virtue of their vocation, in some regions, are well placed to ensure that the voices of those who are less privileged are heard. They can do this through ensuring that goods and services are distributed and directed towards providing employment and income for sustenance.

It may interest us to know that most homeless people do not sleep on the corners of streets, motor parks, or uncompleted buildings. Most of them are simply people without fix-homes. People who bounce from one place to another to get shelter thus practising what we may call operational homelessness.

Part of the concrete actions the priests and religious could take is to motivate the stakeholders towards changing the system that creates poverty. This is because most of the time poverty is created by political will. Questions should be asked concerning many policies the government put in place: do they aim at reducing or increasing poverty? Are those policies people beneficial to the people? In a society where there is unemployment or no medical insurance, no social or disability security and the state's elites do take the surplus and give the commoners nothing in return, poverty and homelessness are inevitable. A system where workers are not paid their salaries at the end of the month, there are the possibilities of people suffering all sorts of hardships. As a result of hardship many will be displaced as refugees both internally and externally. Priests are, by their calling, relatively privileged people in the society, especially in the Nigerian society. They should use their status to alleviate poverty and serve as the voice of the voiceless. Perhaps all the poor and homeless people may not be helped at the same time but a little difference can matter. Beginning somewhere and in a little way can make a difference later.

We can start with the people we meet at our Church's gate, the cooks who serve our meals, and people who clean our premises, visit our offices, and run our errands. The poor usually lose social ties and are wanderers who are often seen as strangers in their own domain. This is a situation we should try to curtail. A beggar should not be bereft of all support. He or she is a human being. On the other hand, nothing is wrong with a homeless person. He is normal. The problem is that he hasn't got a place to call his home. The priests, as *alte Christus*, are enjoined to respond to the plight of the poor, homeless and refugees as Jesus did to the Lame, lepers, beggars, the likes (Matt 11:5).

Many poor and homeless ones beg for alms. As a result they are often seen on the roads, at the street corners or by the gates - where they can meet and be met, see and be seen by people. Let's not refuse to meet or see them. In addition to fighting the system that creates poverty, we are all exhorted to give alms (Luke 11:41). We are to imitate Christ who, as can be deduced from the story of the treachery of Judas, regularly gave alms to the poor (John 13:29). We can give more than "mere" money to the "least of these" as Christ taught us in the parable of the last judgement: The sheep will be separated from the goats, one group on the right and the other on the left. He will condemn according to his criteria for caring for the poor - "the least of these". "I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you made me welcome. Lacking clothes and you clothed me, sick and you visited me." (Matt 25:35 -36). Jesus thus endorses the proper attitude towards the poor, homeless and the refugee (stranger/wanderer) in this dialogue.

6. Conclusion

We are called upon to put up struggle against destitution, to examine our consciences and convey new impulses towards supporting works in favour of the needy.¹⁶ Priests and religious should advance the teaching of the Church in this direction. Those who are privileged should provide for the less privileged to give a relatively better quality life to them. We all share the same basic rights and duties. As such all should find an equal admittance to economic and social benefits from the riches of the world. Though the call to solidarity with the poor and the needy is a universal one, Christians are expected to be more in the forefront of the efforts to establish a universal brotherhood because "we cannot in truthfulness call upon that God who is the Father of all if we refuse to act in a brotherly way towards certain men, created to God's image."¹⁷

What the Lord requires of us is help which each of us can give in our own different capacities. That is Christian charity and service. Such charities are little signs of real love. We only need to utilize the opportunities which may present themselves in our daily lives. In our judgement on how we have shown concern of love to our fellows, we do not need to count in hundreds. Jesus did not demand that from us either. He made his criteria clear: "...in so far as you neglected to do this to one of the least of these..." (Matt 25: 45). The emphasis is on "ONE OF THESE". All who need our help are counted among them. "In our time...concern for neighbour transcends the confines of national communities and tends to broaden its horizon to the whole world."¹⁸ Christian charity knows no boundary once it is motivated by love because for such love to be authentic, it should be unconditional. Christ who taught us to love and to cross boundaries led the way for the action. He taught the Samaritan woman at the Jacob's well to break the ethnic barrier and prejudices, and help the one in need (Jn. 4: 8 - 9). He presented the parable of the good Samaritan of Lk. 10: 30-37 as an example of how we could utilize the opportunities that daily situations present to show love and charity irrespective of ethnic or religious backgrounds. This is how we ought to handle migrants and refugees. Our charitable actions as Christians should be independent of ideologies. It should be actions done from the heart. The heart should see where love is needed and act accordingly.¹⁹ Such actions should follow the programme Jesus established. He demonstrated, in concrete form, who our brother/sister should be and how they should be defined. During the Nigerian civil war 1967 - 1970, an Irish priest who was busy helping some people was asked by the authorities why he was helping those people from the other side and he replied: "I wasn't helping people from *the*

other side, I was simply helping people". The work this priest did was amazing and his light stood out brightly.

In our attitude towards the poor, the needy, Refugees, homeless and migrants, our lives as priests, religious or Christian must be radically different from the ordinary life. It must be grounded in love. That is what Jesus summarized when he said "[...] for I was hungry and you gave me food [...]" (Mtt 25:35 – 36). In his own way Isaiah puts it thus: "Is not this the type of fasting that pleases me: to break unjust fetters, to undo the thongs of the yoke. To let the oppressed go free, and to break all yokes? Is it not sharing your food with the hungry, and sheltering the homeless poor; if you see someone lacking clothes, to clothe him [...]. Then your light will blaze out like the dawn." (Isaiah 58: 6 - 8). Christ's love is a solidarity with the less privileged and an injunction to us all to be there for one another. In the words of Pope St. John Paul II, "we are all really responsible for all."²⁰

As we aspire to help the poor and the needy, we have to take a radical turn from the *status quo* which is 'give and receive in return'. The gospel message addresses us on how to go about this. St. Luke's recommendation on choosing guests to be invited summarises the teaching - "when you have a party, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind; then you will be blessed, for they have no means to repay you." (Luke 14:13 - 14).

Being poor, homeless or refugee is never a virtue and is not a situation that has great value here on earth. But our attitude towards them can be categorised as virtuous or vice and their situation is an opportunity for all to gain greater value when we think of God who promises heavenly resources, when the upright will rise again, in full and overflowing measure.

Notes

¹ Gaudium et Spes, 69.

² David J. O'Brien and Thomas A. Shannon, *Catholic Social Thought. The Documentary Heritage*, (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2005) p. 244.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Gaudium et Spes, 1.

⁵ On the Encyclical *Deus Caritas Est*, in *L'Osservatore Romano*, 26 April 2006).

⁶ Bruce J. Malina, *Wealth and Poverty in the New Testament and Its World*, *Interpretation* 41 (1987): 354-67.

⁷ Tertullian (160 - 220 AD) is regarded as the father of latin theology. But this position is criticised because he was not the first theologian of the west. Justin the Martyr and St. Irenaeus who was the bishop of Lyons wrote some works in the 2nd Century. But he was the first major scholar who wrote extensively in latin.

⁸ Gaudium et Spes, 43.

⁹ Gerhard Zecha, *The Golden Rule in Applied Ethics: How to make right decision in the theory and practice*, <http://www.humanistica.ro/anuare/2011/Continut/Art%2006.pdf>. 15.09.2017

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Pope Francis, https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2013/may/documents/papa-francesco_20130508_uisg.html. 15.09.2017

¹² Pope Francis, *Chrism mass*, <https://cruxnow.com/church/2016/03/24/pope-francis-calls-on-priests-to-stand-with-poor-outcast-and-oppressed>. 15.09.2017

¹³ *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, no. 6.

¹⁴ Gilda Hamel, *Poverty and Charity in Roman Palestine, First Three Centuries C.E.*, (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1990).

¹⁵ Gaudium et Spes, 69.

¹⁶ O'Brien & Shannon, *Catholic Social Thought*.

¹⁷ Ibid., 271.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, 38