
SOCIAL JUSTICE AND POVERTY IN NIGERIAN SOCIETY: A THEOLOGICAL MORAL STUDY

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ABSTRACT:

This paper is titled “Social Justice and Poverty in Nigerian Society: A Theological Moral Study. It investigates the problem of social justice and poverty in Nigerian society. Despite being a democratic nation, democracy in Nigeria has not had significant and direct benefit to the people, especially those at the lower strata of the society. This is due to increasing incidence of poverty in the country, which manifests itself in unemployment, hunger, poor standard of education, poor health, lack of security and low economic status among others. The paper explores the causes of the deplorable situation of social justice and poverty in a country that is blessed with great natural and human resources. It aims at reawakening the consciousness of the people to respect human dignity and social justice. The paper naturally has moral or ethical orientation. It discovers that poverty is on the increase because of corruption, weak administration and poor inter-sectional governance system in the country. The paper argues that if enabling environment is created, and the youth are exposed to other forms of self- sustenance, poverty reduction in the country will improve significantly. It recommends among others technical education for the youth, government intensive involvement, and solidarity with and effective preference for the poor and vulnerable. It maintains that to reduce the issue of social justice and poverty in Nigeria, Nigeria as a nation should be reformed and repositioned, enabling environment should be created for the development of market and civil society, institutions, and inter-sectional governance system should be seriously encouraged.

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Introduction:

All humans belong to one universal human family. God made them in His own image and likeness; male and female, He created them. (Gen 1:26-27). The fact that humans have the spark of God in them makes them special kind of beings that are superior to other creatures. The psalmist says, “What is man that you, Lord, are mindful of him, and the son of man that you do care for him? Yet you made him little less than God, and you crown him with glory and honour (Ps. 8:5-7). It is this spark of God in humans, this spiritual and immortal soul, which confers superior powers on humans. God himself confirmed this when He said to our first-parents, “Be masters of the fish in the sea; the birds of heaven and all the living creatures that move on earth” (Gen. 1:28). This special relation with God extends to all human beings whether white or black, educated or uneducated, fetus, young or old, civilized or uncivilized, rich or poor, healthy or sick, even those in the vegetative state. They all enjoy this special relationship and nobody in any circumstance has the right to deprive them of life.

However, in our contemporary society, it seems that human beings are graded according to what they can produce, their social status, economic positions, contributions to the society, their political affiliations and even according to the faith they profess. In Nigeria, this situation is manifested in all sectors of Life. The gap between the rich and the poor increases on daily basis. The poor is denied justice that is due to him or her. It is not difficult to see marginalization on faces of the victims in the society. The powerless and voiceless have been driven into oblivion. The scourge of poverty in Nigeria is an incontrovertible fact, which results in hunger, ignorance, malnutrition, disease, unemployment, poor access to credit facilities and low life expectancy as well as a general level of human hopelessness.² The goal of the paper is to investigate poverty and social problems in Nigeria from theological Moral perspective and proffer solutions to the problem. It underscores how majority of Nigerian citizens are rendered poor in

² Segun, Oshewolo, “Gallopings Poverty in Nigeria: An Appraisal of Government’s Interventionist Policies,” in *Journal of Sustainable Development in Africa*, Vol.12, No. 6, (Clarion University of Pennsylvania, Clarion, Pennsylvania, 2010), www.works.bepress.com/segun_oshewolo/25, accessed: 12/11/2019.

a country endowed with rich material and human resources. It aims at reawakening consciousness of individuals to respect human dignity and social justice.

Nigeria is a country that is richly blessed, yet the people are poor. Nigeria is richly endowed and the country's wealth potentials manifest in the form of natural, geographical and socio-economic factors. With these conditions, Nigeria should rank among the world richest countries that should have no business with extreme poverty.³ However, the country has witnessed a monumental increase in the level of poverty. The level of poverty stood at 74.2% in the year 2000.⁴ The prevalence of poverty and misery in Nigeria is however a paradox. Nigeria should by no means be a poor nation. Not only that Nigeria is an oil-producing nation, she is endowed with other natural and human resources which are enough to put her on a solid part to economic development and greatness. But Nigeria still wallows in abject poverty despite her stupendous wealth.⁵ The document "*misericordiae vultus*" (MV) reminds us the mind of God and our mission on earth not only as Nigerians but above all as brothers and sisters, belonging to the family of God- the human family; and our corresponding responsibilities. This becomes clear as we move into the next section of this discussion.

CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATIONS

Fundamental Human Rights

By nature humans have values, which all must respect and promote, defend and cherish. They are referred to as fundamental human rights. In every community they are the minimum conditions for life; and events continue to render human rights as a subject very essential in different parts of the contemporary society. Fundamental human rights are rights essentially belonging to what

³ Omotola, J. S., "Combating Poverty for Sustainable Human Development in Nigeria," in *Journal of Poverty*, vol.12, No. 6, (The Continuing Struggle, Nigeria, 2008) 496-517.

⁴ Segun, Oshewolo, "Galloping Poverty in Nigeria: An Appraisal of Government's Interventionist Policies," in *Journal of Sustainable Development in Africa*, Vol.12, No. 6, (Clarion University of Pennsylvania, Clarion, Pennsylvania, 2010), www.works.bepress.com/segun_oshewolo/25, accessed: 12/11/2019.

⁵ Oluwatusin, A. O. and Agbolarin-Egbebi, A. F., "Poverty and Sustainability of Democracy in Nigeria," in *IOSR Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences (IOSR-JHSS)*, Vol. 20, Issue 2, Ver.111, 2015, PP36-42, www.iosrjournals.org, accessed: 12/11/2019.

it means to be truly human. If these rights are not fully acknowledged and exercised, human beings cannot in any way fulfil their original destiny as “*Imago Dei*” – beings created in the image and likeness of God. (Gen1:26). In fact, to deny these rights is to deny humanity. United Nations avers that human right can be defined as those rights which are inherent in our nature. They are inherent to the nature of all human beings without any distinction as to their race, sex, language or religion. Without them we cannot live as human beings”⁶. It means then that human rights are inevitable in order to attain fullest development and use of the qualities and potentials that make human beings what they are. Together with fundamental freedom, human rights give us the opportunity to fully develop and use our human qualities, our intelligence, our talents, our conscience, in order to satisfy our spiritual and other needs. The Catechism of the Catholic Church observes that these rights must be recognized and represented “as a constitutive element of a civil society and its registration”⁷. In line with this thought, human right is a claim due to a human being. “A human right is a claim to be able and allowed to perform an action because one is a human being”⁸. The individual is performing the action not because he/she is a citizen, or is permitted by law or because he has a grant from the president or any other constituted human authority. In fact the state is there to protect and promote these human rights.

It is inscribed in the American Declaration of Independence in 1776: “We hold these truth to be self-evident; that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by the creator with certain rights; that among these are life, liberty and pursuit of happiness; that to secure these rights, governments are instituted among men, deriving their just power from the consent of the governed”⁹. It is “self-evident” namely that all men are created equal. Therefore, no person is greater than the other. It means then that all men have the same final destiny and that they are all equal in their intrinsic dignity as human being; and of course, they are in subordination to their creator. In essence human freedom calls for responsibility. Hence,

⁶ Efeturi Ojakaminor. “*Catholic Social Doctrine*”, (Pauline Publications, Nairobi, Kenya, 1996), 39.

⁷ “*Catechism of the Catholic Church*,” Revised. Ed., No. 2273, (Pauline Publications, Kenya, Africa, 2011), 484.

⁸ Efeturi Ojakaminor. “*Catholic Social Doctrine*”, 1996, 39.

⁹ “New Catholic Encyclopaedia,” Vol. IV, “Democracy,” (Washington, 1967), 101

this subordination has rights, duties and limitations from its inception.

Article 3 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights says “Everyone has the Right to life, liberty and security of person”¹⁰. Article 6 paragraph 1, states that “Every individual has the inherent right to life, this right shall be protected by law. No one shall be arbitrarily deprived of his life”¹¹. The United Nations bodies have tried to issue statements regarding the protection and promotion of human rights; and Nigerian government cannot claim to be ignorant of these statements, because she is a member state. It follows then that the fundamental human rights, have their basis on the dignity of human person which we are to consider in the following section.

Human Dignity

Human dignity is the foundation of human rights. Human dignity indicates the worth of being human. It does not arise from any human declaration or any institution. On the contrary human dignity is a given, universally shared reality. “It is conferred on man by virtue of the creative act from which the human person took his or her origin”¹². Hence, together, we are all human; and to realize in action the human dignity, human rights are indispensable. We cannot do without them. We need human right in order to avoid the destruction of human dignity. This dignity is something due to the human person by reason of his likeness to God”¹³. What it means in effect is that, the dignity of the person is the basis of the equality of all human among themselves. Every human being has this dignity as well as the rights which flow from the same dignity and no one can deny them of the two. The first of these rights is the right to life and the defense of Life, together with the well-being and full development of individuals and peoples. Faith in human dignity indicates the fact that human being is created in the image and likeness of God. Therefore, it is not human institution or social covenant that demands human rights; rather it is the creator, God

¹⁰ Tarcisio Agostoni. “*Every Citizen’s Handbook: Building a Peaceful Society*”, (Pauline Publications, Nairobi, Kenya, 2005). 387.

¹¹ Tarcisio Agostoni. “*Every Citizen’s Handbook: Building a Peaceful Society*”, 2005, 395.

¹² Efeturi, Ojakaminor, “*Catholic Social Doctrine*,” 1996, 39.

¹³ John Paul II. “Encyclical Letter, *Centesimus Annus*”, No.32, (Pauline Publication, Africa, 2002), 38.

himself who demands it. The ultimate foundation of the rights of man is his dignity as a creature made in God's image¹⁴.

Furthermore, to indicate how precious humans are in the sight of God, the Creator, sent his only begotten son to die for us. Hence, each individual person can say without any sign of contradiction: "Christ died for me". Hence the great worth of the human person. To despise human dignity is a grave sin against God, the creator. Efeturi citing Pope Leo XIII's *Rerum Novarum* says that no one may violate with impunity the dignity of man which God Himself treats with great reverence¹⁵. This demonstrates the price paid for human dignity by the shedding of the blood of the son of God. The dignity of the human person is manifested in all its radiance when the person's origins and destiny are considered: created by God in his image and likeness as well as redeemed by the precious blood of Christ, the person is called to be a "child in the son" and a temple of the spirit, destined for eternal life of blessed communion with God. For this reason every violation of the personal dignity of the human person cries out for vengeance to God¹⁶. This means that any attack on human dignity is indirectly an attack on God himself, whose image the human being is. Therefore human rights are seriously founded on the fact that humans are created in the image and likeness of God (Gen. 1:26). This is further strengthened by the incarnation through which Jesus Christ has, in some way united himself with each man¹⁷. So in the final analysis, the dignity of human person is based on the fact that every human being is created in the image and likeness of God and is also called by grace to be a child of God. For this reason this dignity must be respected and promoted.

Social Justice and Poverty

The scripture gives us insight of ethical orientations for our individual life, and ethical directives for life in the society. It is to this that the concept of justice belongs. Justice demands that each individual person receives his/her due. So every individual has the right to be recognized and treated as a person to enable him or her to carry on an existence worthy of a human being. The Catechism of the Catholic Church maintains that "Justice is the moral virtue

¹⁴ Efeturi Ojakaminor. "Catholic Social Doctrine", 1996, 41

¹⁵ Efeturi, Ojakaminor, "Catholic Social Doctrine," 1996, 19.

¹⁶ John Paul II Apostolic Exhortation *Christifideles Laici*, N0 37.

¹⁷ Austin Flannery, Vatican II, *Gaudium et Spes* No. 22. (Dominican Publication, Dublin, 1975), 923.

that consists in the constant and firm will of persons to give what is due to God and neighbor”¹⁸. Justice is classified according to different levels of human relationship namely: - commutative justice, general or legal justice, distributive justice, social justice and penal justice.

Commutative Justice: Here the private people, as well as a group are bearers of rights. It is commutative because it is generally expressed in community, that is, in giving and receiving. This kind of justice exists between one person and another or between groups acting as if they are private persons. Commutative justice demands that one strives for a fair standard of giving and receiving in return. It forbids encroaching on the rights of the others. Basic violations of commutative justice are theft, fraud, and unjust damage of property.

General or Legal Justice: Legal justice is also called general legal justice. Here the community is the bearer of rights. It stipulates the proper relation of individual to the common good. Therefore, one is disposed to do and does what is right in relation to the common good. It is the disposition/will to do the right thing. Its fulfillment is the work of official agencies of the community, as well as of each individual member.

Distributive Justice: This refers to the relation between a particular community and the members of the same community. Distributive justice requires a “fair and proper distribution of public benefits and burdens among the members of the community”¹⁹. So distributive justice intends the good of each individual as a member of the community. The governmental agency alone exercises this virtue. Each individual has basic rights within the community. This must be recognized.

Social Justice: Social Justice is a new and very essential sub-specie of the virtue of justice. It is applied basically and primarily to the relation between the worker and the owner of capital. Social justice refers to the organization of society in such a way that the common good, to which all are expected to contribute in proportion to their ability and opportunity is available to all the members for their

¹⁸ The *Catechism of the Catholic Church, Revised Ed.*, No. 1807, 2011, 339.

¹⁹ A. Fagothey, “*Rights and Reason, Ethics in Theory and Practice*”, Milton A Gonslave, ed., 9th Ed. (Eaglewood cliffs, New Jersey: Prencice Hall, 1989), 208.

ready use and enjoyment”²⁰. It means that social justice demands the elimination of discrimination resulting from inequalities and offering of equal opportunity to each member of the society. This involves the creation of structures which will enable every individual participate responsibly in social and economic life”²¹.

Penal Justice: This is the temperate will to restore violated justice and order through punishment proportionate to the violation to the exigencies of the social order. Above all, it is a virtue proper to superiors and judges, who in meting out punishment should aim only at the furtherance and protection of the common good. However it is also a virtue of the subject who is prepared to undergo punishment if necessary and a virtue of the other members of the community who contribute to the restoration of violated justice and order.

Peace: Creation which reflects the divine story spires peace, for “the Lord is peace” (Judges 6:24). Peace is founded on the primary relationship that exists between every human being and God Himself, a relationship marked by righteousness (cf. Gen. 17:1)²². The goal of every society is nothing but peace. Peace is a value and a universal duty founded on a rational and moral order of society that has its root in God himself, “the first source of being, the essential truth and supreme good”²³. Peace is not merely the absence of war, nor can it be reduced solely to the maintenance of a balance of power between enemies”²⁴. Instead it is founded on a correct understanding of human person”²⁵ and it requires the establishment of an order based on Justice and charity. Peace flows from justice. Whenever peace is lacking, war erupts and everything may be lost; but nothing is lost by peace. In fact peace is very essential in the development of any community, nation and even in the development of the human person.

²⁰ Austin Fagothey, “*Right and Reason, Ethics in Theory and Practice*”, Milton A Gonslave, ed., 9th Ed. (Eaglewood cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1989), 205

²¹ Lucius I. Ugorji, “*The Memoirs of a Shepherd*”, (SNAAP Press Enugu, 2000), 23.

²² Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, “*Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*”, (Pauline Publications, Nairobi, 2005), 263.

²³ Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, 2005, 265

²⁴ Vatican II Council, Pastoral Constitution, G.S No. 78.

²⁵ John Paul II, “Encyclical Letter *Centesimus Annus*”, No. 32, 2002, 38.

Poverty

There are several concepts of poverty. Poverty encompasses different dimensions of deprivation that relate to human capacities, including consumption and food, security, health, education, rights, voice, decent work.²⁶ Due to the variety of poverty situation worldwide, scholars do not have one single definition of it. Debates are ongoing on what is meant by “poverty”, how it might be explained and who constitute “the poor.” The concept “poverty,” may be absolute or relative. Absolute poverty is theoretically associated to the vital minimum, while relative poverty incorporates the concern with inequality or relative deprivation, where the bare minimum is socially guaranteed. Absolute poverty is the inability to attain a minimum standard of living or poverty line.²⁷ Absolute poverty is further defined as “a condition of life degraded by diseases, deprivation, and squalor.”²⁸ There are some basic human capabilities, which, if absent, could result to poverty. It includes the capability to “lead a long, healing, healthy, creative life and to enjoy a decent standard of living, freedom, dignity, self-respect and the respect of others.”²⁹ This paper considers widows, orphans, those unemployed, those economically, socially, and politically deprived as the poor.

Social Justice and Poverty: Nigerian Experience

Poverty is not peculiar to Nigeria. It is a universal phenomenon. In Nigeria the percentage of the “core poor” rose from 6.2% to 29.3%, and declined to 22.0% in 2004.³⁰

About 70% of the Nigerian population now lives in abject poverty.³¹ How our most vulnerable brothers and sisters are fairing is the big questions. The voiceless in the society are crying every day because of injustice being done to them on daily basis. There is no job opportunity for our youth, and those who are working are not sure of the same job tomorrow nor are they paid when due. Insecurity of

²⁶ Segun Oshewolo, “*Gallop ing poverty in Nigeria: An Appraisal of Government’s interventionist Policies*.” www.works.bepress.com/segun-oshe wol o/, 2010, accessed. 12/11/2019

²⁷ Segun, Oshewolo, 2010, accessed: 12/11/2019

²⁸ World Bank, “*Poverty in the Age of Globalization*”, (Washington DC, 2000), 2.

²⁹ United Nations Development Programme, Human Development Report 1997, (New York; Oxford University, Press, 1997), 6.

³⁰ United Nations Development Programme, Human Development Report Nigeria 2008-2009, *Achieving Growth with Equity*, (New York; Oxford University Press, 2009), 10.

³¹ Omotola J.S., “*Combating Poverty for Sustainable Human Development in Nigeria*,” 2008, 496-517

life and property in the country is on the increase. Educational system in Nigeria is nothing to write home about. The public schools where the children of the poor can go and acquire basic education are no longer functioning well. A good number of the teachers are not even qualified. Some graduates cannot defend their certificates. What of the constant strike of lecturers in our tertiary institutions and Universities? Yet a huge sum of money is allocated to education in the budget every year.

Most Rev. Alfred Adewale Martins vividly describe the situation in Nigeria thus: corruption is the bane of Nigeria's socio-economic development and the main cause of poverty in the land. It is unimaginable that a country that is described as the giant of Africa and one of the 10 fastest growing economies on the globe, harbours some of the poorest people in the world with as many as 69% of its population living below poverty line. Given the country's enormous resources, it should never be said that such a huge portion of the populace are living in abject poverty"³². The society is classified into the rich and the poor. People are discriminated on the basis of their religion, ethnic origin, in the distribution of national resources, and their political affiliations. In Nigeria fraud, bribery and corruption, abduction, and kidnapping are now becoming the order of the day. The Nigerian economy has dropped to the lowest level since independence. In a country that is so blessed with mineral and natural resources, the government has put the citizens into perpetual agony due to mismanagement.

In fact the Government programmes are not people-oriented programmes. There are constant community protests and there seems to be total neglect of oil-producing areas by the government agencies, no basic social infrastructure including building of roads, schools and hospitals. On the part of each employee, social justice requires hard work and diligence. It also requires many Nigerians employed in the public sector to change their present poor attitude to work.

Causes of Poverty in Nigeria.

There is no single cause or determinant of poverty. Instead, there are combinations of many complex factors which contribute to poverty not only in Nigeria but also in the world in general. They include:

³²Lucius I. Ugorji, "*The Memoirs of a Shepherd*",(SNAAP Press Enugu, 2000). 26

- 1). Lack of Economic Infrastructure: A viable economy is essential for provision of employment and so reducing poverty level in the nation. The Nigerian economy has a low performance and the growth rate is very low. This contributes to the level of poverty in the country.
- 2). Corruption of the Government: High level of corruption plagues Nigeria's government. Corruption, poor programme implementation and monitoring, poor accountability, lack of transparency in resource allocation among others have contributed immensely to poverty in Nigeria.
- 3). Poor Access to Education: A lack of good educational system affects many of the poorest in Nigeria. Many Nigerian children do not attend school at all especially the girls among them. This problem is profound in the Northern and more rural parts of Nigeria.
- 4). Debt Burden: The socio-economic condition in every society is largely dependent on huge capital investment by the public and private sectors. A debt-ridden economy becomes handicapped and shifts focus to debt servicing instead of economic development and creation of employment. This creates a static economy and leads to an increase in poverty.
- 5). Crime and Violence: The incessant unrest and attacks by insurgency has created a gaping hole in the Nigerian society. Many people have embraced migration and many displaced. Adequate security and proper integration of internally displaced persons will go a long way in reducing poverty in Nigeria.
- 6). Unfair Distribution of Material Resources: Majority of those who live in Nigeria are poor because they are alienated from the existing wealth- both in the world in general and in the nation in particular. Many people have been starved and have died due to poor economy, insufficient control over nature and lack of medical facilities. They do not have the basic necessities of life.
- 7). Unemployment: Unemployment is a key determinant of poverty. Gainful employment is very important for individual to earn income and escape from poverty. Many people in Nigeria have no means of earning a living and they are helpless. Many are ready to work but cannot find job and laziness has nothing to do with it at all. Many leave their villages to the city just to find something to

do, and they end up meeting more difficult situation and this does not disturb those in power.

8). Labour Market Deficiencies: The poor's most abundant resource is their labour, a virile labour market is important to reduce poverty and income inequality. There are low wages, low labour returns to rural self-empowerment activities and underdevelopment.

9). Migration: high migration rates do actually drain on skill. Those who migrate vacate jobs in labour market. It reduces the pace of economic growth and thus slows the process of overall job creation and affects the long-run development potential in a country.

10). Lack of Human Resources Development: This is the key for human capital development and capability. To escape from poverty, there is need for continued investment in human capital with improvements in efficiency. This is necessary to sustain reduction in poverty. Investment in people can boost the living standard of households, by expanding opportunities, attracting investment, raising productivity, and increasing earning power. It can also provide educational opportunities for adolescents and in so doing prevent some youths from becoming involved with gangs, drugs and violence.

11). Environmental Degradation: Environmental degradation is a cause of accentuated poverty. Oil-producing areas in Nigeria suffer environmental degradation. Their lands, water, air etc. are polluted. They lack good road, health and educational facilities. The people are dying, and the government shows no serious interest. Often politicians use the situation in the areas for politics.

However, there have been attempts at poverty alleviation by the government in order to make life comfortable for the citizenry and so reduce the incidence of poverty, but to no avail.

They failed to overcome three main reasons for this persistent poverty: income inequality, ethnic conflict, and political instability³³.

THEOLOGICAL MORAL APPRAISAL

³³*Catechism of the Catholic Church*. Nos. 1906 -1909.

Principle of Common Good

The common good is seen as the sum total of all political, cultural and economic conditions of social life, which enable humans to carry on their lives in a manner that conforms with their dignity as human beings³⁴. Common good requires prudence from each individual and even more from those in authority. It consists of three elements³⁵.

First it presupposes respect for the human person. The dignity and rights of the individual should be respected. This will enable each individual in the society to fulfill his or her vocation in life. Secondly it requires the social well-being and development of the group itself. It is the duty of the public authority to ensure that what is needed to lead a truly human life is made accessible to the citizenry. Things like food, clothing, health, work, education, culture, suitable information, the establishment of a family etc. Thirdly, the common good also requires peace. This means that there should be stability and security of a just order. One may refer to this as the basis of the right to personal and collective defense. The main task of political government is working for the common good. Political government exists only for the common good. In this lies its full justification and meaning. The government that cannot guarantee this to its citizenry has no reason to exist. Hence, “Serving the common good should be the only reason for seeking a political mandate. It demands self-sacrifice, commitment, patriotism and respect for the truth, fellow feeling and deep sense of justice and fair play”³⁶. On the other hand, it is also required of each citizen to religiously work for the common good. This can be done by one rising up to his/her civic responsibilities.

Principle of Solidarity

It is good to note from onset that solidarity is not just the mere feeling of compassion towards the less privileged: the poor and the weak. In fact the social expression of love is what is called solidarity. Just as each of our bodies has several parts and each part has a separate function, so all of us, in union with Christ form one body and as part of it we belong to each other” (Romans 12:4-6). It

³⁴Lucious. I. Ugoorji, “*The Memoirs of a Shepherd*”, (SNAAP Press Enugu, 2000), 26

³⁵Tariciso Agostoni, “*Every Citizen’s Handbook: Building a Peaceful Society*”, 2005, 63.

³⁶Tariciso Agostoni, “*Every Citizen’s Handbook: Building a Peaceful Society*”, 2005, 63.

implies that solidarity is the realization and constant awareness that we are one human family. By being born into this world, we are of one inheritance and one stock with every other human being³⁷. So, solidarity is co-responsibility emanating from the consciousness of interdependency. One sees it clearly in the determination to commit oneself to the good of all and each individual. One also sees it in the fight for freedom from oppression and exploitation. The fundamental value of solidarity stems from the fact that in spite of all the difference, people still share some oneness by being members of the same universal family of mankind. These differences and varieties with which God endowed humanity are for our enjoyment, enrichment and complementarity³⁸. In African traditional society solidarity is a way of life. One notices this in the family where the rich members help the poor, while the stronger assist the weak. It is also observed in funerals, weddings and the age grade system.

The term “the poor” in the Old Testament refers to “those groups of people who are economically deprived, who have no social status, who are treated unjustly by either foreign rulers or by the authority in their own land. The oppression may be because they are poor and as such, are at the mercy of the unscrupulous. They are poor because they are oppressed: they have been further impoverished by being cheated and deprived of their rights”³⁹. The other groups of the “poor” are doubly oppressed. Here the people are at risk not only because they are economically poor but also because they happen to be widows, orphans and resident aliens. They are individuals who have practically nobody to defend them against any form of exploitation.⁴⁰ Occasionally, God sent the prophets to protest against this injustice and to proclaim God’s care and concern for the poor. Prophets like Isaiah, Micah, Hosea, Amos, Jeremiah and Ezekiel spoke vehemently against injustice and oppression among the chosen people of God, (cf. Is.1:16-17; Micah.6:8).

The deeper meaning of the poor is given to us in the New Testament. Here Jesus is seen in some essential respects as one of

³⁷Donal Dorr, “*Option for the Poor: Catholic Social Teaching*”, Revised Ed. (Gill and MacMillan, Dublin, 1992), 6

³⁸Donal Dorr, “*Option for the Poor: Catholic Social Teaching*, Revised Ed. 1992, 6.

³⁹.Donal Dorr, “*Option for the Poor: Catholic Social Teaching*, Revised Ed. 1992, 7.

⁴⁰Paul VI, Address to the Diplomatic Corps Accredited to the Holy see, 14 Jan. 1978

“the poor” having “emptied himself” to share our humanity (Phil. 2:7). He was a native of a despised village (Jn. 1:46). He was also known as a carpenter’s son (Mtt. 13:55). Jesus was the innocent victim of persecution and was actually executed as criminal after an unjust trial.⁴¹ In His manifesto (Lk. 4:16-18), he says that He has come to restore things to right order- slaves are freed, debts are cancelled, property restored, broken relationship restored, and the place of the *anawim* to be a reality for people to enjoy. That is the ministry of Jesus, the ministry of liberation.

Leo XIII’s *Rerum Novarum* was the first major step by the Vatican towards putting the church on the side of the poor and the working class. With this encyclical, the Pope came to the defense of the poor. The encyclical expresses deep concern for the plight of the poor and calls for a change in society. The good of the earth belongs to all. Within a country which belongs to each one, all should be equal before the law, find equal admittance to economic, cultural, civic and social life and benefit from a fair sharing of the nation’s riches⁴². This is based on the common fatherhood of God and the brother of all men. The goods of the earth are destined by God not only for all but also for all peoples⁴³. *Gaudium et Spes*⁴⁴ has linked the political issue of peace between nations to the issue of a just international economic order (GS. 83). It also proposed a concept of human development which underpins the present body of catholic social teaching (GS. 63).

Through careful theological development of the notion of solidarity by Saint John Paul 11, solidarity becomes the foundation for overcoming poverty. For him solidarity is a virtue which enables people to overcome distrust and to collaborate in the creation of international justice and peace⁴⁵. Therefore, “socio-economic problems can be resolved only with the help of all the forms of solidarity of the poor among themselves, between rich and poor, between employee in a business, solidarity among nations and peoples. International solidarity is a requirement of the moral order; world of peace depends in part upon this (CCC no. 1941). For this reason, we should always concern ourselves, here in Nigeria, with

⁴¹Austin Flannery, Vatican Council II, *Gaudium et Spes*, No. 69.

⁴²Donal Dorr, “*The Social Justice Agenda*”, (Gill and McMillian, 1994), 52 -53

⁴³Donal Dorr, “*The Social Justice Agenda*”, 1994, 58.

⁴⁴Austin Flannery, Vatican Council II, *Gaudium et Spes*, No. 69.

⁴⁵Pope Francis, “*Misericordiae Vultus* (MV): Bull of Indiction of the Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy,” (St. Paul’s Publication, Nigeria, 2016), 18

issues of justice and development both at national and international levels.

Recommendations and Conclusion

From the above exposition it is very clear that the Nigerian government is very far away from achieving social justice and alleviating the problems of poverty in the society. The social problems in Nigeria are multiplying every day. This paper offers the following recommendations which if followed diligently will yield positive results towards solving our social problems:

1. **Relief for the Poor:** The government should provide an agency or office for jobless people. With the help of rich ones among us and little percent from the salaries of those working, she provides little money monthly for the poor to take care of their basic needs of life – food, shelter, health and clothing. This will reduce robbery and insecurity in the country.
2. **Provision of Job Opportunity:** Poor ones in the society should be provided with the opportunity to work. In this way, they can make their living and help their families. There is dignity in labour. Working with their hands will certainly change their status and give them that sense of belonging.
3. **Justice for the Poor:** The poor ones in our society have been denied justice, security and rights as citizens. The government should ensure these basic necessities as they are the reason for its existence. Many of them have lost their land, economic trees, domestic animals, and crops to the government, the rich and powerful members of the society. Justice must be given to them.
4. **Education for the Poor:** This paper is of the opinion that education should be made available to the poor. Education is power. But poor families find it very difficult to foot the cost of education of their children; and most of these children are highly intelligent and talented. The government should also create conducive atmosphere for these children to be educated, without tears. The government and good-spirited individuals and organizations should offer scholarship to people like these.

5. **Adequate Care for Family:** Family is the cell of every society. The Government, leaders of thought and organizations should carefully look into the challenges facing our families. We are the product of our families and then, the society. If families cherish moral values, then society will be free from immorality. Neglect families and society suffers it, as is the case in Nigeria and many other parts of the world today.

Conclusion

The extraordinary Jubilee year of Mercy proclaimed by Holy Father, Pope Francis in 2016, should be seen by Nigerians as a call to reawaken any conscience that has grown dull in the face of the poor and the vulnerable in this country. We need to rediscover these corporal works of mercy: to feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, clothe the naked, welcome the stranger, heal the sick, visit the imprisoned and bury the dead. We should also not forget the spiritual works of mercy: to counsel the doubtful, instruct the ignorant, admonish sinners, comfort the afflicted, forgive offences, bear patiently with those who do us ills and pray for the living and the dead (MV. No. 15). These are the criteria upon which God will judge us at the end of time. Therefore, we should be our brothers' and sisters' keepers. This paper proposes that Nigerians begin today to turn to God and look critically into the social problems in this country. This is because any foundation that does not stand on God would crumble in a matter of time.