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FROM THE EDITOR

You have in your hands volume 6 of *Insight: Journal of Religious Studies*. The journey that began in 2004, when *Insight* was born, has not been an easy one. There have been series of challenges that threatened the growth of the baby then. However, we were encouraged by God's promise, "Though thy beginning was small, yet thy latter end should greatly increase" (Job 8:7). Thus, having crossed the fifth volume in our endeavour, we believe strongly that the present volume is the beginning of the great increase which God is granting this Journal. Congratulations to our authors and contributors who are making this historic step with the Journal into greatness.

In this volume, we have put together well researched articles from our contributors who continue to believe in and partner with us in this academic exercise. In the next issue of *Insight*, we plan to put together articles that discuss various aspects of the relationship between religion (including its practices) and health. Contributors of articles are encouraged to write along this line. Nevertheless, contributors can still send articles on general areas to the Editor, in preparation for the regular issue that will follow. We are working toward attaining a good retention rate of articles so we can go to press at will.

Beginning with volume 5 (2009) of *Insight*, we started hosting all our articles online on the official website of Babcock University, Nigeria, for wider access and readership. We have plans to put all the back issues (2004-2008) online in the near future.

Thank you for believing in *Insight* and partnering with us. Enjoy your reading and please, send in an article for publication in *Insight: Journal of Religious Studies* as soon as you can.

Michael Onyedikachi Akpa, PhD
Editor

²² Ibid., 115-116.

²³ J. A. Onimhawo and Imaekhai, "The Morality of Suicide: An Evaluation" in *Practical Issues in Applied Ethics*, (Benin: Teredia Publication, 1999), 126.

²⁴ Joseph Fletcher, *Situation Ethics: The New Morality*, (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, n.d), 27-28.

²⁵ Cicero, "On Ends" in *The Hellenistic Philosophers*, vol. 1, ed. A. A. Long and D. N. Sedhey (ed.), (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 425.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Louis Infield (trans), *Immanuel Kant Lectures on Ethics*, 151.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ The detail of this discussion is well articulated in Ebun Oduwale, "Suicide" in Ebun Oduwale and Mabol Olaolu (ed.), *Fundamental Theories and Issues in Ethics*, (Ibadan: Ben-El Book, 2001), 141.

³⁰ See Onimhawo and Imaekhai, J. A. Onimhawo and Imaekhai, "The Morality of Suicide: An Evaluation" 131.

³¹ Louis Infield (trans), *Immanuel Kant Lectures on Ethics*, 153-154.

³² See Jeffrey Olen and Vincent Barry, *Applying Ethics*, 212.

³³ Ibid., 213.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Malcon Muggeridge, cf. Mabol Olaolu, "Euthanasia" in Ebun Oduwale, "Suicide" in Ebun Oduwale and Mabol Olaolu (ed.), *Fundamental Theories and Issues in Ethics*, 154.

A CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVE ON SYSTEMIC POVERTY

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I. Introduction

The poorer nations of the world have been adjudged as worst hit by the current global economic meltdown. As it is well known, the economic crunch was caused by the failed economic policies of the rich countries in Europe and America. Today, the developing nations are bearing the brunt. According to Raul Castro, the miscalculated market forces and undue dependence on same caused the current hardship. He rightly observed,

As usual, the wealthy countries were the source of the current crisis, which was affected by the . . . illogic of the international economic order that depends on blind market principles and consumption, and wealth of the few.¹

The consequence of the above situation is the present grinding systemic poverty in the world today. More people now suffer from this kind of poverty, which is increasingly enhanced and sustained by the dynamics of local and international social structures. In ways peculiar to the Old and New Testament times, what we find in daily life, especially in Africa is systemic poverty. This is the result of imbalance that is not accidental but institutional. It is part of the long-term structure of powerful market praxis. This systemic poverty can be described as a flagrant form of institutionalized economic violence done to the common people. And this has become normative in the society. What we have in this 21st century is not

merely an incidental poverty. Rather, it is a structural and systemic poverty that is becoming part and parcel of our world's social fabric despite all the talks about globalization.

To this end, the thrust of this paper is to examine the concept of poverty and poverty in spirit commanded by Jesus Christ. It will also explore types of poverty, characteristics and systemic structures that have left many people trapped in poverty. Guidelines for action shall be suggested in the light of developing nations and common people. This will serve as the concluding remarks.

II. Concept of Poverty and the Poor in Spirit

Poverty as a general concept or as a virtue commanded by Jesus Christ can be described, defined, and interpreted in many different ways. It can include physical, spiritual as well as material poverty. Furthermore, its meaning fluctuates depending on the geographical, social, and economic setting. In other words, poverty in the 21st century, both as a concept and a virtue, is different from the more severe deprivation experienced in less industrialized nations in relation to the case in industrially advanced nations.

Webster Dictionary of English Language considers poverty in two ways: unproductiveness, deficiency or inadequate supply. This means lack in the face of need. It also gives the framework of the ideas section of poverty, which is defined as the religious renunciation of the right to own. In the case of poverty as unproductiveness, deficiency and inadequacy, Akanmidu's succinct submission comes to light. He noted that at this level of poverty, "the effort input is misplaced, unplanned and at best irrational. The significance of this kind of poverty is that the near adequate resources notwithstanding, people are still hungry and starved."² From the above, it can be deduced that by poverty, we are referring to the lack of sufficient material resources required for a decent life.

Poverty is not an isolated problem existing solely among a faceless number of people in a particular geographical location. Nor is it limited to dependent underprivileged groups. It is the condition that exists when people lack means to satisfy their basic needs. According to Akanmidu, "poverty, in its true meaning, is the state of lacking the means to exist adequately."³ In this context, the definition of poverty allows that we accept the submission that sufferings of all kinds are expressions of poverty. O'Brien is of this view when he noted that poverty is a condition

experienced at some time by many people, in different walks of life. He opined, "Many poor people are working but at wages insufficient to lift them out of poverty."⁴ For Manasseh Udo, poverty confronts the poor in the form of deprivation of life's basic necessities for comfortable daily living.⁵ In this case, the identification of poverty to a class of people requires a determination of what constitutes basic necessities.

Basic necessities are of two classes. The first class reflects the prevailing standard of living in the community. They are those necessary things for survival, e.g. food, shelter, portable water, health care, to name but a few. This first criterion covers those at the border line of hunger or death from avoidable exposure. According to Manasseh Udo, the poor under this circumstance "live on the very margin of existence, with inadequate food, shelter, clean water and healthy environment."⁶

The second class of basic necessities of life would extend to people whose nutrition, housing facilities and clothing, though adequate to preserve life, do not measure up to those of the population as a whole. As rightly observed by Akanmidu, although it can be deduced that the concept of poverty represented in the first form (first criteria) is more acute than the second, still, both represent the concept of poverty.⁷ In all, poverty is associated, for instance, with ill health, illiteracy, inability to participate in society and disorderly behaviour. It is related to inability of one to provide the basic needs of life. So, from whatever angle one attempts to describe or define poverty, its effects are harmful to individuals and to the society.

In the light of the above, poverty means lack of access to resources. It means to be in need. From such an understanding of poverty, it violates God's plan and nature, especially in the context of Jesus who received everything from God (Matt 11:27). If poverty contradicts God's nature, why would Jesus Christ give this command? What does Jesus mean by saying that the poor are blessed? Poverty in spirit, as Matthew 5:3 recorded suggests the OT theme of the 'poor' or 'meek'. They stand for the oppressed people of God who, nonetheless, trust in him for deliverance. Therefore, the concept of poverty as Jesus used it in Matthew 5:3 is more of the attitude of the mind. It is more of simplicity of life and solidarity with the disadvantaged. Liberation theologians call it the "preferential option for the poor". However, it is of little importance here whether the poverty is in spirit or in body. According to Michael Crosby, "If God had held one thing back Jesus could not have been fully the image of God. Everything was given to Jesus as one sharing fully in God's life."⁸

Poverty is an embarrassment if it is unrelated to a way of bringing about the plan of God. In other words, poverty can be sanctioned only if it is

voluntary or freely embraced as a way to promote the reign of God more concretely in our world. Here David Linge's concept of poverty becomes relevant. According to him, poverty in spirit "must be understood as a dissenting religious response to the effects of material prosperity on the society".⁹ This understanding of poverty suggests that poverty desired as a means to an end leads to religious perfection in a well-ordered life of worship and devotion to God. It is a way of being by which the individual lets things be what they are without applying the will or power.

In our society, those material needs that represent the basic necessities of life are water, food, clothing, shelter and health care. Everyone has a right to enough of these earth's resources in order to more fully be the image God. But it is not the case in this 21st century. As noted by Michael Crosby, we are all interconnected and, "whenever any person, group, or nation has more than enough, it not only denies basic resources to others, it becomes less human."¹⁰

This implies that living in a society like ours, dominated by an ethic that proclaims "the more the merrier" demands an urgent detachment. Albert Nolan puts it thus, that some suffer because of their poverty, and others have more than they need, is part of the kingdom of Satan.¹¹ It follows that any society that is so structured it is therefore, in this light that Jesus commanded poverty in spirit as a way of life. It is about a new style of life that is anti-consumerism. David E. Linge called it "a simple life of evangelical poverty."¹²

III. Types and Characteristics of Poverty

Among other sources, *The New Encyclopedia Britannica* identified three types of poverty.¹³ They are cyclical, collective, and concentrated poverty.

Cyclical poverty is described as a widespread suffering due to temporary food shortage caused by natural disaster or war. This is the case in many war torn African countries. This type of poverty is limited by time. However, it can lead to high rate of unemployment, reduced national income and production. Collective poverty, on the other hand, is contrasted to cyclical poverty which is temporary. This type of poverty involves a relatively permanent inadequacy of means to provide basic needs. It can be generalized, packaged and transmitted from generation to generation. This is what Oscar Lewis referred to as "culture of poverty."¹⁴

In any community where collective poverty is prevalent, "death from starvation is not unusual. Low life expectancy, high levels of maternal and

infant mortality, and poor health characterize life in these societies."¹⁵ This type of poverty is related to economic underdevelopment. The total resources in these communities would be insignificant to support the population adequately, even if they were equally divided among all the community members.

Concentrated poverty exists in regions bypassed by industrial development and agricultural efficiency. In this case, the people cannot compete profitably. The people here suffer high mortality rate, poor health and so forth. For instance, we notice this type of poverty in Niger Delta area of Nigeria. Economic hardship and devastating poverty are the order of the day in the Niger Delta. Death toll is therefore high as the people are poor and cannot get access to good health care.¹⁶

In Africa, in general and Nigeria, in particular, people face these three types of poverty highlighted above in various degrees, as well as anthropological poverty. Thus, Sugirtharajah submitted that the fact of poverty in Africa is not just about having or not having material things but "it is about the interior of African selfhood that has been affected as centuries of colonialism robbed Africans of their own ways of living and their cultural heritage."¹⁷ Thus, many African nations suffer low self-esteem and at individual levels, we applaud and internalize the values of the colonial masters at the expense of African cultural values.

Regardless of the type of poverty one is concerned with, the following characteristics can be identified:

1. It strikes some groups more severely than others, especially children, and female-headed families;
2. The rates of poverty are often highest among those who have borne the brunt of racial prejudice and discrimination (e.g. Niger Delta people of Nigeria);
3. Despite talks about ethnic equality, prejudice and discriminatory practices still exist in labour market, in educational system and in electoral politics as a result of poverty, especially in less developed countries.¹⁸

IV. Systemic Structure of Poverty

As noted earlier, the grinding poverty of many people who live in ghettos is an insult to human dignity. It is not the plan of God. Jesus came to

free humanity not only from the shackles of sin but from the shackles of whatever robs human life of its inherent dignity. It is the will of God that all people live with the dignity that befits human being. To this end William Johnston says, "no longer can pious Christians tell the destitute and downtrodden that they are God's chosen people who will receive their reward in heaven."¹⁹ Johnston's observation has moved many men and women throughout the world to become increasingly sensitive to oppressive and systemic structure of poverty.

Systemic structure of poverty is a situation in which the enemies of humanity are hunger, sickness, oppression, and human rights violation. Under this structure, according to Johnston, "men and women are tortured. Empires rise and fall. Rich nations exploit poor nations. Multinational companies pollute the atmosphere, destroy nature and sell deadly arms to the highest bidder."²⁰ Thus, discussing structural injustice in the context of poverty, Donald Dorr argued that systemic structure of poverty has economic interest protection at the background. According to him, it is a situation in which "the economy of the colonized areas is reorganized to serve the interests of the imperial powers."²¹

In essence,

This means that control over poorer countries is not usually exercised now by overt military and political power but mainly in economic ways. This economic control can create even greater hardship than the old-style colonial rule because it affects every sphere of life.²²

This has generated youth restiveness in Niger Delta of Nigeria, among other things.

Typical systemic structure of poverty enslaves poor country to depend, for foreign earnings, on the export of either agricultural product or crude oil. Trade in these products is radically imbalanced in favour of the advanced countries. Prices are low and unstable and the market is controlled by foreign companies. Under this structured system, poorer countries like Nigeria sink deeper into debt and underdevelopment. Anyim Pius Anyim captured the systemic situation thus,

This year for instance, the IMF objected to plans by our government to spend on capital projects, to provide stable electricity, functional and affordable telephones, education, health and to improve infrastructure like road instead, we are being compelled under threat of server

sanctions, to commit to debt servicing even the little resources available. For Nigeria, this has posed a grave obstacle to our domestic agenda for development.²³

Under this circumstance, poverty at this scale cannot be accounted for in terms of the character of those who are poor. It is a structural matter; the structures of the global economic order are biased against the poor. Such is the world of today.

V. Guidelines for Action and Conclusion

Economic growth is essential for poverty reduction. The progress recorded in reducing the proportion of people living in poverty has been the result of economic growth raising incomes generally, including those of poor people. But that is not all about it. Manasseh has rightly noted, "In our effort to tackle the problem of poverty in Nigeria, the only option open to us is to utilize religion in societal development."²⁴ To this end, the poverty of the gospels must be correctly interpreted and embraced. It means radical detachment from greed, possessiveness and wastage. It means self-emptying in imitation of Jesus Christ.

This freely chosen disposition to poverty would then lead to the principle of social solidarity. This implies that alleviating poverty requires fundamental changes in social and individual lives that perpetuate glaring inequalities of citizens. The process of change should be one that draws together all people, whatever their economic status, into one community.

Furthermore, the challenge to reduce poverty falls upon all members of the society. As individuals, all people have the duty to assist the less privileged through kind gestures and personal commitment. Moral responsibility to assist and empower the poor by working collectively through religions and government to establish just and effective institutions would be most result-oriented.

This would lead to healthy economy that provides employment opportunities at just wages for average school leavers who are capable of working. This is because poverty is intimately linked to the issue of employment

In recent times, the minimum wage has not been adjusted to keep pace with inflation. This has led to too many strikes like the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) and Health workers' strike to mention but

two.²⁵ Government should raise the minimum wage in order to restore the purchasing power workers have lost to inflation.

Finally, while job creation and just wages are major elements of government strategy against poverty, they are clearly not enough. Other more specific measures are necessary to remedy the systemic structures that cause poverty. This must include providing for those who cannot work. In committing ourselves to all these, we shall, in the words of Paul, overcome evil with good (Eph 6:18).

Endnotes

¹Raul Castro, *The Guardian*, Thursday, July 16, 2009, 1.

²R. A. Akanmidu, *Ethics and Poverty: Inquiries in Moral Philosophy*, (Lagos: Bahfik Educational Publishers, 1993), 45.

³Ibid., 44.

⁴David J. O'Brien (ed.), *Catholic Social Thought: The Documentary Heritage* (New York: Orbis Books, 1996), 618.

⁵Manasseh Essien Udo, "Religion and Culture of poverty: Nigerian situation," in R. A. Raji, et al, (eds.), *Religion, Governance and development in the 21st Century*, (Ilorin: Decency Printers, 2006), 402.

⁶Ibid, 403.

⁷Akanmidu, 45.

⁸Michael H. Crosby, *Spirituality of the Beatitudes*, (New York: Orbis Books, 1996), 57.

⁹David E. Linge, "Mysticism, Poverty and Reason in the Thought of Meister Eckharts", in *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, XLVI/4, 465.

¹⁰Crosby, 58-59.

¹¹Albert Nolan, *Jesus Before Christianity*, (New York: Orbis Books, 1991), 53.

¹²Linge, 466.

¹³*The New Encyclopedia Britannica*, vol. 14, William Benton Press, 1981, 930.

¹⁴Oscar Lewis, "The Culture and Poverty," in *Scientific American* 215.4 (October, 1964), 19-25.

¹⁵*The New Encyclopedia Britannica*, 934.

¹⁶I.O. Umejesi, "Environmental Pollution, Poverty, and Population Issues in the Niger Delta Region of Nigeria: The Religious Perspective," in *Religions: A Journal of NASR*, vol. 17, December, 2006, 68.

¹⁷R.S. Sugirtharajah, "Poverty" in Virginia Fabella, et al, (eds.), *Dictionary of Third World Theologies*, (New York: Orbis books, 2000), 171.

¹⁸O'Brien, 619-620.

¹⁹William Johnston, *The Science of Love*, (New York: Orbis Books, 2000), 257.

²⁰*Ibid.*, 259.

²¹Donald Dorr, *Spirituality and Justice*, (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1984), 53.

²²*Ibid.*, 54.

²³O. Ojiabor, "Anyim Takes on IMF over Anti-people Policies". *The Punch*. April 4th, 2001, 1-2.

²⁴Manasseh Essien Udo, 409.

²⁵For Details of Numerous Workers strike in Nigeria in 2009, see *The Guardian* Newspaper, July 13, 2009.