

POVERTY: A CATHOLIC SOCIAL TEACHING PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

Poverty is a major threat to human life because it dishonours the human person who is the image of God. It affects the community from a domestic setting thus, depriving individuals of the very basic needs they require for a decent living. This deprivation of essential requirements for life is dehumanizing. Poverty is therefore, a serious challenge to the people. This article interprets poverty within the Catholic Church perspective to see how it has affected people. It further provides a critical judging of poverty in the light of theological arguments by focusing on the dialogue between various moral theological perspectives on the human person as a morally autonomous individual whose dignity is being threatened by the social evil of poverty. The article evaluates poverty from the Biblical foundation. It examines the Old Testament's and New Testament's concept of poverty. It also offers the basis of the dignity of the poor within the Roman Catholic social teaching from the early church to middle ages.

Keywords: Catholic Church, Catholic Social Teaching, Community, Human Person, Image of God, Poverty

Introduction

This article addresses the issue of poverty from the theological point of view as explained in the Church's social teaching. The main purpose of the article is to present a comprehensive textual and

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critical analysis of the Catholic Church's treatment of poverty in her social teaching, concentrating on the crucial biblical texts, some selected Church Fathers and St Thomas Aquinas as a doctor of the Church. The article is divided into three sections. The first section intends to examine the Old Testament's understanding of poverty: nature and practice of poverty. It discusses the concept of poverty and the basis for the dignity of the poor in the Old Testament. It also analyses the Biblical idea of the Jubilee Year in relation to poverty reduction and relief.

The second section investigates the New Testament's attitude to both material and spiritual poverty. It discusses Jesus as the promoter of the dignity of the poor. Here emphasis is placed on Jesus' outlook and behaviour towards the poor. Furthermore, critical analysis of poverty in the early Christian community is given. The third section gives a description of the Catholic Church Tradition on poverty. The focus is on the teaching of the Fathers of the Church on poverty.

1. Biblical Understanding of Poverty

1.1. Poverty in the Old Testament

In the creation narratives, the human persons, who are made in the image and likeness of God, are raised up above other creatures. They are beneficiaries of divine blessing and stewards of the land and all that contains in it. They have to give an account of their work to God the owner and master of creation.¹ The issue of poverty comes to them as a lack of expertise and opportunity to implement things.² The fall in Genesis chapter three indicates that the people in confusion experience poverty. God gave each person intellect, will and strength to work but some make wrong choices and others sit back to wait to be fed. Opting for wrong choice is protesting against God and this is an element of poverty. In the Bible, economic poverty is an evil to be rectified (Deut 15:11). Wealth on the other hand, is not an evil in itself, but it is essential for the good of the kingdom. However, it risks neglect of God and of the poor while God's main concern is the care of the poor.³

In the Old Testament the state of poverty makes afflicted and lower class people who are subjected to oppression and exploitation, with

¹Pontifical Biblical Commission, *The Bible and Morality: Biblical Roots of Christian Conduct*, Vatican: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2008, 51.

²B.L. Myers, "Poverty," in *Global Dictionary of Theology*, ed., William A. Dyrness et al, USA: Intervarsity Press, 2008, 687-696.

³Benedict T. Viviano, "The Gospel According to Matthew," in *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, ed. Raymond Brown et al, London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1990, 630-674, 640.

no power to defend themselves to be regarded as the poor of Yahweh. The Hebrew Bible uses the term *ani* to mean poor, humble, afflicted.⁴ The word *dal* is also used to mean languishing in poverty.⁵ These people who experience poverty because of oppressing social systems are known as God's favourites.⁶ They are poor at the gain of the rich since they have no voice and place in the commercial and administrative systems.

They live in households which are central economic and social units. In these families, members are related and they cooperate in fulfilling their responsibility. They contribute and use things of the family nevertheless; each person is aware of himself or herself as part of the family and not so much as an individual.⁷ Their ethical economy is focused on relationships. This idea is so much visible. In Gen 7:1 for instance, Noah and his extended family were saved. After the Israelites arrived in the Promised Land, God disseminated the land fairly to household units and clans. In Josh 24:15, Joshua did not stand alone before God but he made his commitment to God in the name of his family.

Apart from being economic and social condition, poverty in the Old Testament is also seen as "an interior disposition, a spiritual attitude"⁸ which discloses the mystical treasures. This spiritual attitude is attested in the prayer and spirit of Yahweh's poor. The cries of the poor were heard by God (Job 34:28). The needy did not only beseech Yahweh but also they prayed to him (Ps 9-10:22, 25, 69). They expressed their hopes as they waited for Yahweh's salvation (Ps 54:7ff, 69:23-30). For instance, Jeremiah entrusted his cause to Yahweh (Jer 20: 12 ff).⁹

1.1.1. Socio-Spiritual Aspects of Poverty

Poverty in the Scripture is both social and spiritual. In the Pentateuch, the book of Exodus (23:6, 30:15), emphasizes equitable treatment for the poor. The term *lebyon* is used to represent those who are properly poor and needy. The people in these categories are allowed to eat the food from the land that is left fallow (Ex

⁴Raymond E. Brown, "The Canticles and the Jewish Christian Anawim," *The Birth of the Messiah: A Commentary on the Infancy Narratives in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke*, New York: Doubleday, 1977, 350-355, 350.

⁵John L. Mckenzie, "Poor," in *Dictionary of the Bible*, Milwaukee: The Bruce Publishing Company, 1965, 681-684.

⁶Myers, "Poverty," 688.

⁷Myers, "Poverty," 688.

⁸Léon Roy, "Poor," in *Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, ed., Xavier Léon-Dufour, 2nd Edition, New York: Seabury Press, 1973, 436-438.

⁹Léon Roy, "Poor," in *Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, ed, Xavier Léon-Dufour, 437.

23:11).¹⁰ The laws ensured the fair treatment of the poor especially their social well-being through equitable distribution of goods and foods. Equity is also demonstrated by the collection of income tax from rich and poor alike.

In the Bible, justice is first and foremost an attribute of God who is just.¹¹ Not only because he is fair and honest in his dealings with human beings, but also because all his activity is a matter of putting right what is wrong. To reflect his justice, the law emphasizes equality in administering justice among the people in Israel. This law states: "You will not be unjust in administering justice. You will neither be partial to the poor nor over owed by the great, but will administer justice to your fellow citizen justly" (Lev 19: 15). Israelites are called to be just as Yahweh is just. Wage labourers and slaves were therefore, to be treated fairly. According to Norman G. Kurland, justice "involves discovered principles which can be applied in practical ways to help people resolve and avoid human conflicts."¹² They are called to live justly so as to avoid classes of the rich and the poor. At the level of justice, everyone gains his or her dignity and each person becomes a giver without expecting a return of what is shared with others.

As a chosen race, Israel was a Theocratic nation. Its people were called to be holy as Yahweh is holy (Lev 19:2). The holiness of Yahweh is manifested in the love he has for his people. This law of holiness is a whole tradition of the Bible in which humanity is moulded by God's Will.¹³ The book of Leviticus shows the enacted law of love of neighbour and responsibility towards the poor and needy as it states: "When you reap the harvest of your land, you will not reap the very edges of the field, nor will you gather the gleanings of the harvest, nor will you strip your vineyard bare, nor pick up the fallen grapes. You will leave them for the poor and the stranger" (Lev 19: 9-10).

¹⁰Thomas D. Hanks, "Poor, Poverty," *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, vol. 5, ed, David Noel Freedman, New York: Doubleday, 1992, 402-424, 404.

¹¹Marcella Momanyi, "Effective Teacher Education and Professional Development in the 21st Century," *African Ecclesial Review*, 54, 3 & 4 (September/December 2012) 203-242, 209.

¹²Norman G. Kurland, "Economic Justice in the Age of the Robot," *Curing World Poverty: The New Role of Property*, ed, John H. Muller, Missouri: Social Justice Review, 1994, 61-74, 61. Cf: L. Karen, *Six Theories of Justice: Perspectives from Philosophical and Theological Ethics*, Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1986, 73-74. Also Bernard Häring, "Justice," in *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, Vol. VIII, Washington DC: The Catholic University of America, 1967, 68-72. Cf: Pius XI Encyclical Letter *Quadragesimo Anno*, nos. 87, 137.

¹³Pontifical Biblical Commission, *The Bible and Morality*, 65.

In Deuteronomy 24:10-11, a poor person is to be treated with respect and supported by others in his/her economic needs. Thus, in Exodus 22:25 and Leviticus 25:35-38 the Israelites were not to charge interest to the poor among their people. The poor include the widow, fatherless, and strangers (Lev 19:9-10, 23:22, and Deut 24:19-22).

1.1.2. *The Biblical Idea of Jubilee Year as Solution to Poverty*

Sabbatical and Jubilee years were important moments to the Israelites. The Jubilee Year is translated as “the year of the Lord’s favour.”¹⁴ As regards the Jubilee Year, Christopher J. Wright notes that the term jubilee is viewed in the Hebrew language as *yobel* which means ram. He asserts that, “... ram’s horn was used for trumpets and the year of jubilee was announced by the blowing of the trumpet.”¹⁵ According to him, ‘Jubilee Year’ comes at the end of seven Sabbatical Years.¹⁶ It was announced by sounding the trumpet to indicate the Day of Atonement on which the Jubilee celebrations begun. In Lev 25:8-10 the Jubilee Year is the fiftieth year but scholars believe that it is actually the forty-ninth year, “the 7th Sabbatical Year.”¹⁷ The implication of the Jubilee Year is that “God owns all the property and wishes to allocate it in a way that meets the needs of all his people.”¹⁸ Debts were thus cancelled (Deut 15:1-9) and alienated property was to be restored even if the price could not be found.¹⁹ The Jubilee gave release for Hebrews who had become slaves through poverty (Lev 25:39-41, 54). “Land and homes were redistributed to all families of Israel in this fiftieth year as a call to radical social justice.”²⁰ Radical social justice entails a march in singleness of heart as Peter Brown says: “No hidden motives should lurk within it. The believer should face others with a heart as transparent to their needs as it was to the will of God.”²¹ I accept Brown’s notion that having one heart

¹⁴Luke T. Johnson, *The Gospel of Luke*, Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1991, 79.

¹⁵Christopher J. Wright, “Jubilee Year of,” in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, Vol. 3, ed, David Noel Freedman, New York: Doubleday, 1992, 1025-1030, 1025.

¹⁶The Sabbath was a day of a holy convocation and a special feast of the Lord (Lev 23:2 & 3).

¹⁷Wright, “Jubilee Year of,” in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, 1025.

¹⁸Kent A. Van Til, *Less than Two Dollars a Day: A Christian View of World Poverty and the Free Market*, Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2007, 76.

¹⁹John O’Brien, “Poverty,” in *The New Dictionary of Catholic Social Thought*, ed. Judith Dwyer, Collegeville Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1994, 770-776, 771.

²⁰Chris U. Manus, “Re-reading Luke 4:17b-19 in the Nigerian Poverty Context,” *Poverty and Riches in the Bible: Proceedings of the Thirtieth Congress of Panafrican Association of Catholic Exegetes*, Panafrican Association of Catholic Exegetes, Johannesburg, 2-8 September 2007, Kinshasa, Imprimerie Jules Impres, 2009, 133-149.

²¹Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1988, 36.

enhances solidarity in responding to the needs of others for the common good and promotion of human dignity.

During Sabbatical and Jubilee festivals, the poor received special treatment like eating freely of the produce of all of the fields (Ex 23:10-11, Lev 25:6-7, 12). The condition to assist the poor involved the right of redemption from suppression by a blood relative (Lev 24:47-49).

However, relative nature of poverty was clearly verified. In matters of offering sacrifices, the poor were not exempted. Before Yahweh the poor and the rich are equal. Both had a religious obligation to worship and offer sacrifice to Yahweh. All people soothed Yahweh through offering sacrifices of reparation for the sins committed. Yahweh approved whatever was offered as a sacrifice to him (Lev 5:7-13). If a person was not able to offer a normal expiation lamb, she/he could bring two pigeons (Lev 5:7). One who could not afford even a pigeon was to offer a dough of flour (Lev 5:11). This law did not exclude the poor from doing penance and worship, but it was not enacted to oppress them or to pervert justice against them. George Lobo affirms that, "the law should be designed to protect the poor and needy as it were with the Israelite Law."²²

1.3. Solidarity towards the Poor in the Prophetic Literature

In the Old Testament prophets cry out for justice and care of the poor in their societies. The term prophet is derived from the Greek word, *prophetes*, meaning *pro*, behalf of, and *phetes*, meaning speak. So a prophet is a representative or one who speaks on behalf of God.²³ In the Old Testament, prophets analyse intensely the injustice and mistreatment of the poor. According to Constance Bansikiza, the prophets opposed any evil that oppressed and discriminated upon the poor.²⁴ Our study is focusing on prophet Amos.

Amos fought for the life of the poor. For him, the poor are victims of social injustice (Am 2:7, 8:4). Social injustice is an act against the free gifts of Yahweh to his people. Amos' focus is on the violation of social order. He denounced the social injustice in Israel and proclaimed the act of being in solidarity with God and with the oppressed people. This solidarity enhances the rights of the poor.

²²George V. Lobo, *Christian Living according to Vatican II: Moral Theology Today*, Bangalore: Theological Publications in India, 1982, 38.

²³Victor Zinkuratire & Angelo Colacrai, ed. *African Bible: Introduction to the Prophetic Books*, Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 1999, 1183.

²⁴Constance Bansikiza, *Responding to Poverty in Africa*, Eldoret: AMECEA Gaba Publications, 2001, 63.

Amos is known as the prophet of social justice although he does not belong to the family of prophets (1 Kings 20:35).²⁵ Before his call to prophethood, he was a shepherd in Tekoa in the kingdom of Judah when Uziah was the king (Am 1:1). Yahweh however, chose and sent him as his messenger to the kingdom of Israel where Jeroboam was reigning as a king (2 Kings 14:23-27). Jeroboam, son of Joash, was a prosperous king in Israel.²⁶

The Jewish history is indicated by an economic boom that is characterized by “an economic prosperity which found expression in an extremely wealthy and luxurious life of the population.”²⁷ The prosperous economic situation led to erosion of moral standards since the king, the priests and the upper classes were corrupt. They exploited the poor. Many Israelites were impoverished by the property-owners. As the rich ruling class was enjoying their wealth, the poor farmers were starving. When there were natural calamities as expressed in Amos’ visions in chapter seven, the condition of the poor farmers worsened because the soil could not yield them crops. As a result they were unable to pay debts and so they were fined. This fining is a moral corruption which had a great impact on the worship practices. Peter Brown points out that “the cry of the poor was a cry for justice in the face of oppressors.”²⁸

The rich separated their worship of Yahweh from the love for their neighbour. The poor suffered and in this context Yahweh sent Amos to the Israelites. He belongs to the 8th and 9th century pre-exilic prophets. Others include Hosea, Micah, Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel.²⁹

During the pre-exilic era there was so much stress on justice towards God without considering the love of neighbour in the community. Prophet Amos and other pre-exilic prophets reminded the people to embrace both religious and moral dimension of human justice. Neglecting the moral aspect of the human justice through injustice perpetrated by judges and kings in their oppression of the poor is “insult to the holiness of Yahweh.”³⁰

²⁵Peter F. Ellis, “1-2 Kings,” in *The Jerome Biblical Commentary*, ed. Raymond E. Brown *et al*, New Jersey: Prentice Hall-INC, 1968, 179-209, 187.

²⁶Alexander Jones, ed., *The New Jerusalem Bible*, London: Longman & Todd, 1986, 472.

²⁷Jacob Isaac, “Jeroboam II: Long Successful Reign,” in *Our People: A History of Jews*, http://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/464005/jewish/Jeroboam-II.htm. (accessed 2.6.2015).

²⁸Peter Brown, *Through the Eye of a Needle: Wealth, the Fall of Rome, and Making of Christianity in the West, 350-550 AD*, Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2012, 79-80.

²⁹Von Rad Gerhard, *The Message of Prophets*, London: SCM Press, 1965, 32.

³⁰Léon-DuFour Xavier, ed. *Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, 282.

Social justice requires sharing of free gifts of God to all members in the community. Justice is God's unconditional requirement, if sharing of gifts and life is to progress.³¹ Social injustice is done when a few members exploit these gifts and perform the acts of fraud, usury, and oppression for personal gain at the expense of the poor. Preventing others from enjoying their rights is social injustice. It makes God angrier when it is directed to people who cannot defend themselves. For instance, the fraud of shopkeepers who made the bushel measure smaller and the shekel weight bigger by fraudulently tampering with the scales (Am 8:5).³² Luxurious living style of feasting and self-indulgence while using the money obtained through fraud and exploitation of the poor is social injustice. Those who committed this sin of social injustice in Israel were punished by going to exile. Social justice prevails when everyone observes his/her duty of promoting justice and gets his/her rights and when there is no injuring of the neighbours especially those whom God protects, the widows, orphans, strangers and the oppressed.

Social injustice does not promote solidarity in the community. During the time of Prophet Amos, the rich did not only deny the rights of the poor to decent life but also failed to demonstrate solidarity by not sharing the goods with the needy of the community. God sent Amos to deliver the message of solidarity to the Israelites. He lived in solidarity with the Israelites as he lived in solidarity with God. Bernard Häring highlights this double solidarity idea in his ethical prophetism as he claims: "A prophet is a person who has both a sense of God and a sense of man. He is characterised by his courage to face the real problems and to denounce lies."³³ This is possible when each individual member acquires a transformation of heart and embraces integrity.

2. Poverty in the New Testament

2.1. Jesus' Teaching on Poverty

Jesus identifies with the suffering and becomes a sign³⁴ of hope for them. His presence reveals the kingdom of God which renews people

³¹Donald E. Gowan, "The Book of Amos," in *The Interpreter's Bible: A Commentary in 12 Volumes, Introduction to Apocalyptic Literature, Daniel, Twelve Prophets*, vol.7, ed. Thomas G. Long et al, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1997, 339-431, 394.

³²Alexander Jones ed, *The New Jerusalem Bible*, London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1974, 1289.

³³Bernard Häring, *Sin in the Secular Age*, Slough-England: St Paul Publications, 1974, 114.

³⁴The word 'sign' is used of miracle in the Synoptic Gospels, but not in the same way as in John. Sign in this context is used in an eschatological setting, in reference to the

and transforms the social order. Jesus brings the Good News of liberation to the poor. He releases the oppressed and gives sight to the blind. He calms the broken-hearted. His message gives hope and salvation. By quoting Isaiah 61:1-2 Jesus points out that his presence makes the whole humanity find fulfilment of the desires for happiness, peace and righteousness.³⁵

2.1.1. Attitude to Wealth and Status

In the Gospel of Mark 10:17-22 there is a teaching about the economic activities. The question, “what must I do to inherit eternal life,” allows Jesus to list other six commandments which are socially concerned with the Decalogue (Mk 10:18).³⁶ With confidence the rich young man declared that he had kept all commandments since his youth (Mk 10:20). He lacked courage to let go of his earthly wealth even after Jesus opened his eyes to see what he needed. Wealth has to lead one to obtain the treasure in heaven attained by sacrificing his or her earthly possessions. Thus, the rich young man got a shock and went away grieving (Mk 10:22). It is a reality that Jesus’ teaching gives emotional disturbance especially when one is open to its truth without practicing it.

2.1.2. The Poor in the New Testament

Generally, there is a tendency of identifying people by addressing them through their conditions. The persons inflicted by poverty for instance, are called ‘the poor.’ Mentioning a person by this theoretical noun demeans his/her dignity. Such persons are human beings made in the image and likeness of God. By being poor does not make them less human beings. The act of reducing them from their names to the condition they have, increases their vulnerability.

In the New Testament, the poorest of the poor are called *ptochos* to mean beggar or oppressed. This term is used 34 times in the New Testament. In the Gospel of Mark it is used five times in three contexts; the rich man (Mk 10:21), the widow’s mite (Mk 12:42-43) and the anointing in Bethany (Mk 14:5, 7). In Luke’s Gospel the Greek term *penichros* is used to mean poor (Lk 21: 2). In Acts Luke uses the Greek word *endeos* which means needy (Acts 4:34). The word poor thus, connotes people who lack the basic necessities of life including

signs of the last times and of the Parousia. Cf; Raymond Brown, “The Signs of Jesus,” *The Anchor Bible: The Gospel According to John*, New York: Doubleday & Company, 1966, 527.

³⁵Joel B. Green, “Luke, Gospel of,” *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, ed., Joel B. Green, Nottingham: Inter-Varsity Press, 2013, 540-552.

³⁶Tow Project, *A Biblical Perspective on Faith and Work*, www.theologyofwork.org/new-testament/work (accessed 1.5.2015).

food, shelter, education, health care, freedom and dignity.³⁷ The Gospel of Luke demonstrates sympathy for the poor especially when Jesus insists on the admission of the poor in the kingdom of the father through the parable of the banquet (Lk 14:15) and of the rich man and Lazarus (Lk 16:19-31).

The New Testament gives much attention to the poor who are referred to as *penes* in Greek.³⁸ *Penes* refers to a labourer or the type of a person who is not a wealthy landowner but who has to work hard to earn a living. Labourers are people who are economically and socially oppressed. In Matthew 8:20; and Luke 9:58 we learn that Jesus himself was poor as he exclaimed: "Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of man has nowhere to lay his head." By these comments Jesus lowered himself in order to accommodate everyone and raise the poor to a better state and he indicated some priorities for discipleship.³⁹

2.1.3. *Poverty in Beatitudes*

The discourse on beatitudes concerning the poor in the Gospel of Luke 6:20 puts it clearly that Jesus wants the poor to be recognized as the privileged heirs of the kingdom of heaven. Jesus does not qualify poverty by calling the poor 'blessed' because poverty for its sake is a social evil and there is no way it can be glorified. "Beatitude is an exclamation of congratulations that recognizes an existing state of happiness. It is a cry of joy based on the nearness of the kingdom of God."⁴⁰ Etymologically, the term beatitude comes from a Greek adjective *makarios* which means "fortunate," "happy" in a privileged situation, "well off." In a religious perspective *makarios* means "blessed." The wisdom tradition uses *makarios* to declare the blessing of those in fortunate circumstances, based on observation and experience (Sir 25:7-9) and proclaims their present reward and happiness. The Prophetic literature declares the present and future blessedness of those who are presently in dire circumstances, but who will be vindicated at the eschatological coming of God's Kingdom (Is 30:18).⁴¹

³⁷David N. Freedman, *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, 415.

³⁸Samuel Waje, *African Christian Ethics*, Nairobi: World Alive, 2008, 146.

³⁹Kevin E. McKenna, *You Did it for Me: Care for Your Neighbour as a Spiritual Practice*, Notre Dame: Ave Maria Press, 2005, 110.

⁴⁰Benedict T. Viviano, "The Gospel According to Matthew," in *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, ed. Raymond Brown, et al, London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1990, 630-674, 640.

⁴¹Eugene M. Boring, "The Gospel of Matthew," in *The New Interpreter's Bible, A Commentary in 12 Volumes, The New Testament Articles Matthew, Mark, vol.8*, ed. Thomas G. Long et al, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1997, 89-505, 178.

In Matthew 5:3, Jesus uses ‘the poor in Spirit’ to refer to the lowly classes whose spirit is crumpled by their need and by oppression.⁴² The poor ‘*ānāwīm*’ denotes “the needy ones of Israel who prefer the divine service to financial advantage. Their poverty is real and economic but with spiritual dimension.”⁴³ Beatitudes thus, act as stimulus to fight for the causes of poverty. They express justice proper to the reign of God where the poor belong and find their cause of joy. Lúcas Chan affirms: “the first beatitude mainly tells us that the poor in spirit are blessed by God.”⁴⁴ Saint Luke mentions the poor ones to mean those who follow Jesus (6:20). While for Matthew, the poor means those who seek and depend on God for their needs (5:3).⁴⁵

Beatitudes about the poor and the hungry define Jesus’ mission to the needy in Israel, and the beginning of a new age of salvation history. The poor are happy not because they are uprightly better than others, but because of God’s distinctive compassion for them. This happiness is because “God as an Oriental king has an obligation to protect the weak.”⁴⁶ Blessedness is also meant to be for the rich who share and identify with the disadvantaged by striving to build a better world to live in. Beatitudes thus have personal and social effects. For instance, embracing the first beatitude with delight signifies the presence of the kingdom of God. Once we accept this kingdom with gratitude, there will be no attitudes of exploiting the poor, handicapped, weak and stranger. There will be no unjust structures as beatitudes lead to the morality of the paschal mystery.⁴⁷

The beatitudes express a blessing on authentic discipleship in Christian community. They remind us of our obligation to help the poor in all aspects of life especially by choosing to be at their side through excavating deep into the root cause of poverty and questioning the social systems which bring oppression. For instance, lack of accountability and transparency by some individuals in running some public and Church projects and offices. The creeping of individualistic life style is making some people to lose the spirit of openness and sharing. The poor thus, suffer because of few individuals who monopolize the property which is intended to be

⁴²McKenzie, *Dictionary of the Bible*, 684.

⁴³Viviano, “The Gospel According to Matthew,” 640.

⁴⁴Lúcas Chan, *The Ten Commandments and the Beatitudes: Biblical Studies and Ethics for Real Life*, Bengaluru: Dharmaram Publications, 2015, 161.

⁴⁵Joel B. Green, *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, Leicester: Intervarsity Press, 1992, 706.

⁴⁶Viviano, “The Gospel According to Matthew,” 640.

⁴⁷Bernard Häring, *The Beatitudes: Their Personal and Social Implications*, Slough: St Paul Publications, 1976, 14, 94.

given to the needy.⁴⁸ People with such attitude need to be liberated from greed and selfishness and be ready to share resources with the poor and needy. Readiness to share with others is what Jesus proclaims so as to bring transformation in life.

They can be classified into those who are economically disadvantaged, physically handicapped, the widows/widowers, orphans, street children, HIV/AIDS patients, and people with albinism. Other marginalized in the society include the exploited, and victims of injustice. Our responsibility is to help them to uplift their standards of living so as to actualize the love of God and neighbour. Saint James obliges us to do good to the poor as he says: "If one of the brothers or one of the sisters is in need of clothes and has not enough food to live on, and one of you says to them, 'I wish you well; keep yourself warm and eat plenty,' without giving them these bare necessities of life, then what good is that?" (Jas 2:15-16).

The above assertion reveals the poor as Christ Incarnate (Mt 25:31-46).⁴⁹ Persons who lack love and interactions are poor. The sick, prisoners, homeless, strangers, and the hungry are distressed. They have a low self-esteem and suffer from loneliness. They need companionship to get rid of their distress and uplift their dignity. The wisdom of beatitudes which frees all people from human sufferings, challenges us not only to do what ought to be done but also to know that the poor are sons and daughters of God who have to be treated justly. The poor had a prominent place in Jesus' ministry because compassion and care for the needy is a central emphasis in many of his parables. For instance, in Luke 16:19-31, the rich man received condemnation not because of his riches but because he neglected the poor man (Lazarus) who lay at his gate.

Moreover, the poor enjoyed the great banquet when others had refused the invitation of Jesus in Luke 14:10-24. Jesus also noted the behaviour of the poor, and praised a poor widow's generosity while opposing the scribes who exploited the poor in Mark 12:38-44. In Mark 10:21 and Luke 18:22, Jesus advises the rich young ruler to sell his possessions and give to the poor while his conversation with Zacchaeus prompted the tax collector to give half of his possession to the poor as a sign of his conversion (Lk 19:1-10). The example of Zacchaeus gives a notion that the poor are known as lost souls.⁵⁰ In

⁴⁸Agnes Mmbaga, Aged 44, Medical Personnel, Interviewed by the Researcher, Same Parish, 29.7.2014.

⁴⁹Myers, "Poverty," 688.

⁵⁰Myers, "Poverty," 688.

other words, the poor are those in the state of sin. They have no opportunity to inherit the kingdom of God unless they receive salvation. I understand that salvation comes when they humble themselves and share all that God has given to them and also by entrusting their whole being to God's providence. This is possible through the theological virtues of love, hope and faith in God hence, holistic transformation.

The need to help the poor is not the only affair that Jesus insisted on but also his actions provided an example of compassionate care. In Acts 10:38 Peter says; "He went out doing good" thus, he raised the only son of the widow of Nain, a woman who would have been left destitute with no husband and no son to care for her (Lk 7:12-15). Thus, in Jesus we see the act of mercy towards others. James Keenan asserts that mercy is underscored in the Scripture as the requirement for salvation.⁵¹ This virtue of mercy is distinguished from other virtues within the Catholic tradition which identifies, insists and performs corporal and spiritual works of mercy.

2.2. Voluntary and Involuntary Poverty

Voluntary poverty involves a necessary desire for giving all, for relinquishing all, and for reserving nothing for self. Voluntary poverty is the lifestyle of Jesus. Through his authentic teaching, he shows us that we first need to be in order to have. He invites us to embrace voluntary poverty which is expressed in a simple standard of living for the kingdom of God (Mt 8:20; 2 Cor 8:9).

Benedict XVI calls voluntary poverty "a virtue, to be cultivated and chosen freely, as so many saints have done."⁵² Voluntary poverty is a life of simplistic heart whether one is rich or poor in this world's goods (Mt 5:3). The phrase "in spirit" which Jesus uses in the beatitudes indicates a personal-moral address which entails humility and detachment from wealth.⁵³ This form of poverty is a value to be embraced by all Christ's faithful to direct their affections rightly, lest they be hindered in their pursuit of perfect charity by the use of worldly things and by an adherence to riches which is contrary to the spirit of "evangelical poverty."⁵⁴

⁵¹James F. Keenan, *The Works of Mercy: The Heart of Catholicism*, 2nd ed., Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2008, 3.

⁵²Benedict XVI, Post-Synodal Exhortation on the Word of the Lord, *Verbum Domini* (30 September 2010), AAS 107 (2010) 681-787, 775.

⁵³Viviano, "The Gospel According to Matthew," 640.

⁵⁴*The Catechism of the Catholic Church: Compendium*, Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 2010, no. 2545; cf. Vatican II Council, *Lumen Gentium*, no. 42 §3.

Our richness comes through acknowledging that God is the only treasure who enables us to share who we are with the poor. In the attainment of perfect charity the first foundation is voluntary poverty where we live without property of our own (Mt 19:21).⁵⁵ In the celibate life of the community at Qumrān, poverty was voluntarily assumed following Jesus. In the course of his ministry, Jesus showed a great love to the poor (Lk 18:22, Jn 13:29). Looking after the poor and the needy is part of the most sacred duties of the Church (Acts 2:45, 4:32, 6:1-6, 11:27-30, Gal 2:10, I Cor 16:1-3).⁵⁶

There is a need of advocating for the poor through confronting the rich and challenging the structures of social and political injustice.⁵⁷ Voluntary poverty entails assisting people to overcome their poverty situation through instilling on them the value of work, progress, moral, social, economic and political responsibilities. Educating them on these values challenges some oppressive cultural structures under the umbrella of solidarity and hospitality.⁵⁸ Involuntary poverty involves a necessary desire for wealth.

2.3. St Paul on Poverty as Spiritual Emptiness

In Philippians 2:5-7, Saint Paul narrates that Jesus emptied himself of his holiness state by letting go the good and coming down to the earth as a poor person. When he says 'Blessed are the poor' (Mt 5:3), he means blessed are those who empty themselves of good by sharing their wealth in terms of strength, time, talents and other natural and material resources. To empty oneself is to promote social justice by changing cultural and social structures which lead to oppression. Hence, the poor is one who empties him/herself.

Life becomes better when people embrace the virtue of humility. In Matthew 19:21, Jesus asks the rich young man to empty himself of his possessions in order to inherit the kingdom of heaven. We cannot empty ourselves if we are not humble. Thus, humility and self-sacrifice are qualities that characterize life in Christ. Our self-giving and community relations must be regulated by such qualities.⁵⁹

⁵⁵Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, q. 186, a. 3 trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province, New York: Christian Classics, 1948.

⁵⁶Henry Snyder Gehman, *The New Westminster Dictionary of the Bible*, Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1970, 760.

⁵⁷Aywald Shorter, *Religious Poverty in Africa*, Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 1998, 29.

⁵⁸Gloria W. Kenyuyfoon, *Women and Inculturated Evangelization in Africa*, Nairobi: CUEA Press, 2012, 246.

⁵⁹Brendan Byrne, "The Letter to the Philippians," in *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, ed. Raymond Brown et al, London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1990, 791-797, 794.

Many are times when people look for wealth, glory and power. They think that these elements will solve the problem of poverty in the society. These are human answers which can deceive. People need them but they should not be attached to them. According to Jesus, alleviation of poverty comes through self-emptying and obedience to God. This emptying of oneself is possible once each individual is able to befriend God who never changes. When we acknowledge that we are poor then we are able to know, trust and embrace God who is everything and our surrender to God makes us better people (Phil 2:1-11).

3. The Church Tradition on Poverty

The Church is established to improve the lives of people. Her duties of proclamation, service and communion are essential in the ministries of caring for the poor and promotion of holistic development. Development and liberation have profound relation where the human person is subject to social and economic links.⁶⁰ One cannot dissociate development from the plan of creation and plan of liberation. God has given us everything that we need for authentic advancement including ability to plan and work, utilize talents, our knowledge and land for development. God made all people in his image and likeness hence, every person whether rich or poor in material, social, moral or physical needs is most precious and excellent before God. In the Church, all have to appreciate each other in the inventive abilities.

Our mission in the Church is geared towards liberating people from poverty whether material or physical deprivation and economic insufficiency. Material poverty is an unacceptable situation in the human society. Its state makes the poor less human. Each one in the community must continue to do what Christ taught about social equality of people in terms of rights and obligations.

3.1. The Early Church and Poverty

According to the Christian faith, teaching and tradition,⁶¹ one is judged in the kingdom of God according to the measure of his or her love for the neighbour especially the poor. For a better awareness of this judgment, the apostolic tradition and teaching of the Fathers of the Church have always maintained the significance of the

⁶⁰Paul VI, Apostolic Exhortation, *On Evangelization in the Modern World, Evangelii Nuntiandi* (8 December 1975), 31: AAS 68 (1976) 5-76.

⁶¹George H. Tavard, "Tradition," in *The New Dictionary of Theology*, ed., Joseph A. Komonchak et al, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1987, 1037-1041. Cf. Todd A. Salzman, *What are they Saying about Catholic Method?* New York: Paulist Press, 2003, 110.

preferential option for the poor. To confirm this notion, Constance Bansikiza says: “the Fathers insisted that those who have possessions are stewards of those things and thus they have a moral responsibility to use them to meet the needs of the poor as well as their own.”⁶² Today, the social teaching of the Church underlines this option under a demand from all the rich not only to share their material goods with the poor but also to take up their course so as to go to the root causes of poverty and suffering.⁶³

Taking up the course of the poor is embracing them as “brothers (and sisters), members of the Christian community who could also claim justice and protection.”⁶⁴ Peter Brown states that Christianity in the early Church was meant to be all-inclusive where the very rich and the very poor faced each other in a one to one relationship. Thus, the preaching was to encourage the rich to reach out to the poor. The interrelatedness in this context confirms the spirit of ‘Ubuntu’⁶⁵ where one cannot be and do without the other in taking social responsibilities individually and communally, in our case, the alleviation of poverty.

3.2. Fathers of the Church on Poverty

The Fathers of the Church were so much concerned with the well-being of the human person and social issues. They focused their teaching on the respect for human dignity and they criticized the oppression and exploitation of the poor. In this regard, they give answers to our current challenges in the Church and society. Their teachings manifest doctrinal and spiritual wealth which motivate and support the poor who are deprived of their dignity within the community.⁶⁶ In this study we are limiting ourselves to St Basil and St John Chrysostom.

3.2.1. Saint Basil the Great of Caesarea

St Basil the Great (330-379 AD) was born in a Christian family in Caesarea.⁶⁷ He is known as the Father of Eastern Monasticism as after

⁶²Constance Bansikiza, *Responding to Poverty in Africa*, 67.

⁶³Paul VI, The Encyclical Letter, *Populorum Progressio* (March 26, 1967), 48-49, AAS 59, 1967.

⁶⁴Brown, *Through the Eye of a Needle*, 79.

⁶⁵Laurenti Magesa, *What is Not Sacred?: African Spirituality*, Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2013, 73. ‘Ubuntu’ is an African term which denotes humanity towards others or collective bond of membership that unites all humanity.

⁶⁶Congregation for Catholic Education, *Instruction on the Study of the Fathers of the Church in the Formation of Priests*, 1, 43-44.

⁶⁷Henry Bettenson, ed., *The Later Church Fathers*, 11th impression, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991, 7.

abandoning his teaching career, he visited monastic communities in Africa (Egypt), Syria and Mesopotamia. While in these communities he was motivated to forsake his possessions for the support of the poor. He then withdrew to the desert and lived as a hermit. His life attracted followers who formed a community. He later became the bishop of Caesarea in Cappadocia (370-379 AD).

He taught that there should be equal measure for all people in the community to avoid falling into misery. In this manner he advocated for moderation in material possession. Philip Mulheim supports Basil by saying: “those charged with caring for bodily needs of the brothers needed merciful hearts and patient nature.”⁶⁸ Most of Basil’s sermons stressed on the acts of Christian love. He preached that “prosperity... is good to be administered and not a source of enjoyment.”⁶⁹ He further taught that the rich must not think of themselves as owners of everything. What they possess as surplus is meant to be for the poor. They must be contented with what is necessary and leave the rest to the needy. He states:

It remains, then for each to examine himself and for the rich man to take careful inventory of the private resources from which he is to offer gifts to God, to make sure that he has not oppressed a poor man or used force against one weaker than himself or cheated one dependent upon him, thus exercising authorization rather than justice.⁷⁰

For these words to be uttered, the rich must have closed their ears against the cry of the poor. The poor who lacked resources were forced even to sell their children as slaves to meet the basic needs of the rest of the family members. St Basil intervened by criticizing the rich who did not see the need of assisting the poor. He founded centres for Christian social services to cater for the needy individuals. He had such a great love for the poor that he sold his possessions, shared the proceeds with the poor and followed Christ.

3.2.2. *John Chrysostom (349 AD)*

John was a good preacher for which he was called Chrysostom, golden mouthed, and his excellent sermons made great contribution to the community. His sermon on the Gospel of Matthew 3-4 highlights how he was alert to the poor and needy of his time. He articulates: “those who do not provide for their neighbour, however, are threatened

⁶⁸Philip F. Mulheim, *Dedicated Poverty*, New York: Alba Books, 1975, 59.

⁶⁹Julio de Santa Ana, *Good News to the Poor: The Change of the Poor in the History of the Church*, New York: Orbis Books, 1979, 68.

⁷⁰The Fathers of the Church, *St Basil*, Translated by Monica M. Wagner, Boston: St Paul Editions, 1950, 82.

with hell and unquenchable fire and torments with the demons. Do not decorate this house and neglect your suffering brother.”⁷¹

According to John Chrysostom, rendering honour to Christ entails clothing the naked, feeding the hungry and sharing one’s wealth with the needy. This message of love for the poor challenged the rich who did not consider the needs of the less privileged. Many rich people of his time acquired private property by unjust means which made him to have a mentality that all private wealth was obtained through wrong means. Chrysostom challenges all people to have a heart of sharing their proceeds with the poor. Being indifferent to the needs of the poor is sheer unkindness and inhumanity.⁷²

4. The Middle Ages: St Thomas Aquinas’ Thought on Poverty

St Thomas Aquinas (1224-1274) talks of the state of perfection which consists essentially not in poverty, but in following Christ. Poverty for him is an instrument or exercise for the attainment of perfection. Fasting and privation of all one’s possessions are not perfection, but means to perfection.⁷³ He states that, by doing away with riches, one removes certain obstacle to charity. Some of these obstacles include cares which riches bring at the expense of listening to the Word of God, Love of riches which increases with the possession of wealth at the expense of flexibility in embracing the kingdom of heaven and vainglory or taking pride in riches which results from riches. Jesus does not forbid people to care about external things for livelihood, but the excessive care is a great distraction which hinders people from giving themselves wholly to God’s service.

In relation to the use and possession of goods, St Thomas notes that ownership of private property is morally legitimate as it is natural and serves valuable purposes.⁷⁴ For him, private property promotes peace and maintains greater order as it promotes responsibility toward material things. As he proposes the use of private property, he cautions owners to use goods for the common good.

⁷¹Aquilina Mike, *The Fathers of the Church: An Introduction to the First Christian Teachers*, Huntington Indiana: Our Sunday Visitor, 1999, 200.

⁷²Mike, *The Fathers of the Church: An Introduction to the First Christian Teachers*, 200.

⁷³St Thomas, Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, IIa-IIae, q. 188, a.7, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province, New York: Christian Classics, 1948.

⁷⁴Roberty Barry, “Thomas Aquinas Contribution of,” in *The New Dictionary of the Catholic Social Thought*, ed. Judith, Dwyer, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1994, 940-951, 943.

Conclusion

In this article we have discussed poverty from the Biblical and Church Tradition perspectives. We have pointed out that poverty has social and spiritual dimensions. As a socio-economic condition, poverty is experienced by the distressed and poor people who are subjected to oppression with no possibility for self-defence. On the other hand, poverty is a virtue, a state of interior disposition to God. It is demonstrated through prayer and participation in Biblical justice which consists of fullness of love, compassion, holiness and peace. We have also seen that the mission of the Church is to improve the lives of the poor and promote holistic development for all. Holistic development entails concern and care for the less privileged which calls all people to centre their lives on the Gospel by living in communion and solidarity. Solidarity is possible when all people embrace the commandment of love of God and neighbour especially the poor and needy.