

Africa: Rethinking the Mission-Charity Paradigm

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One of the major trends in contemporary missiology is the linkage of mission with charity. The result of this prevalent trend is that mission and charitable work are often perceived as synonymous. Thus, the two terms are often in danger of losing their traditional force and meaning. It also reduces the respect and dignity that ought to be given to the recipients of both mission and charity. The last phenomenon is compounded all the more by the influence of the modern mass communications media. In a bid to attract financial donors, some missionaries and Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) present a miserable picture of the people and place where they are working. By so doing, the central theme of the Christian proclamation of salvation and the restoration of human dignity in Jesus Christ are relegated to the background. The recipients of mission and charity are made to lose their self-respect and human dignity. Mission itself is made ambiguous.

Moreover, instead of realistically reflecting on the root causes of the African situation, the foreign media and their sponsors continue to feed the world with a false image of Africa, thus promoting the colonial image of, and foreign interest in, the continent. Rightly or wrongly, some African authors have viewed this development as a psychic war being waged against Africa and its people through the media and the charitable organizations. The Lord Jesus' warning, "fear not those who kill the body, but those who kill the spirit", was right on the mark.

At the beginning of this twenty-first century, it behoves us to rethink mission with the prophetic warning of Jesus. In this paper, I wish to examine the mission-charity paradigm from the perspective of the Gospel according to Matthew, taking Africa as a study case. The topic will be discussed as follows:

- 1) Matthew and Almsgiving
- 2) Matthew and Poverty
- 3) The Mission-charity trend
- 4) Towards a new approach

1. Matthew and Almsgiving

In the New Testament (NT), the duty of giving to the needy or the poor is praised and raised to almost the same level as the duty of human beings to God. In Matthew (as in other synoptic gospels), this phenomenon is emphasized all the more. It assumes a *new meaning* which radically enlightens the practice in the Old Testament (OT). In fact, in the earlier books of the OT, the duty of giving to the poor is not mentioned. The prophets often speak of the duty of compassion to the poor, but their emphasis falls upon justice rather than upon charity. Charity to the poor, though praised in Proverbs (3:27; 22:9; 28:27), also has a similar scope. It is particularly from the Greek period that almsgiving becomes one of the principal works of charity (Ib 4:6-11; Sir 3:30-4:10; 17:22; Dn 4:24). The Talmud praises almsgiving. But in its case, almsgiving is praised to the extent it helps to raise the status symbol of the giver or the rich class. Almsgiving becomes one of the ways of showing how wealthy one is. If it is done by the entire community, it assumes a nationalistic outlook and pride. Thus, by the time of Jesus' coming, there was a total loss of the prophetic meaning of almsgiving: compassion and justice to the poor.¹

Therefore, the novelty of the NT in this regard, as Matthew shows, lies on one major significant fact. Jesus mentions almsgiving to correct the ostentation prevalent in the practice of charity to the

poor: “So when you give alms, do not have it trumpeted before you; this is what the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets to win human admiration. In truth I tell you, they have had their reward” (Mt 6:2). In this singular teaching, Jesus condemns any form of publicity in almsgiving: “But when you give alms, your left hand must not know what your right hand is doing; your almsgiving must be secret, and your Father who sees all that is done in secret will reward you (Mt 6:3-4). This is, in fact, an intolerable and a new language to the people. Jesus is addressing an audience that is used to publicising their almsgiving to the poor. For this audience or community, uprightness before God is measured by this type of charity to the poor. Thus, for this people, to perform a publicised kind of almsgiving is to fulfil a religious obligation. Indeed, for the Jews, the good works which make someone righteous in the sight of God were principally: almsgiving, prayer and fasting (Mt 6:1-18). Therefore, Jesus is here teaching his disciples a duty and manner of almsgiving different from the practice of the time. Almsgiving should be done in humility and in silence before God and the people. It should come from the right motive rather than the ostentatious display of wealth and pride. Almsgiving is rewarded if it is made without publicity.

Furthermore, almsgiving has substance only when it is made in the name of God, the Father of Jesus Christ, and with full respect for the human dignity, justice and compassion due to the recipient of the alms. This last point is very important because in Jesus’ time there were communities of the poor who existed as a result of the unjust social structures of the time. And there is no doubt that Jesus is referring to this class of the poor in his inaugural speech that launched his public ministry: “The spirit of the Lord is upon me. He has anointed me to bring the good news to the afflicted. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to captives, sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim a year of favour from the Lord (Lk 4:18). In the OT, the group that immediately comes to mind here are the *‘ani*. There are several Hebrew words to express poverty, but none of them explains it more forcefully than the word *‘ani*. Literally, it means “afflicted”; and the affliction consists in membership of a lower class which is indigent and subject to oppression with no power to defend itself. The related word *‘anaw* is synonymous, but is more frequently used of the poor in a religious sense.

Among the Israelites of the time of the Exodus and before the rise of kingship and monarchical rule, there was a close family and clan interdependence as well as a degree of community ownership. This tradition helped to protect the individual and the smaller group against extreme need as long as the group had something to share. However, Israel’s settlement on the land brought it with the growth of individual ownership, and life in villages and cities led to greater individual responsibility for subsistence. Israel’s expanding economy also brought the rise of a wealthy class and the emergence of depressed and oppressed peasants and artisans. This development enhanced the culture of slavery and regulations for the liberation or redemption of the slaves were put in place. It also created the atmosphere that favoured the display of wealth and ostentation in almsgiving.

From the prophetic literature, it is clear that the increase in wealth and the spread of dire poverty became even more of a social problem under the monarchy, due largely to the conquests of David and the trading of Solomon and his successors. Prophets rebuked the oppression of the poor and the denial of their basic human dignity. For instance, harsh exactions of debts are crimes rebuked by Amos (2:7; 4:1; 5:11). Isaiah utters woe to those who expand their holdings of land (5:8), and speaks of the denial of rights and justice to the poor (10:2), and of those who crush and grind the poor by exacting the full measure of their debts (3:15). The Book of Deuteronomy prescribes liberty to the poor both by loan and gift, and clearly alludes to the crime of defrauding the poor day labourer of his wages (15:1-18). The oppression of the poor and needy is a crime for which Yahweh will destroy the kingdom (Ez 22:29). The Book of Psalms speaks of the duty of judges to render justice to the poor and needy and to protect them from oppression. The Psalms frequently refer to the oppression of the poor by the wicked rich (Ps 82[81]:3-4; 10[9]:2,9,17f). Yahweh does not forget the cry of the poor (Ps 9:13,19).

Thus, in the Psalms and Prophets, we meet a concept of the poor which is both religious and socio-economic. Moreover, the Psalms and Prophets (particularly of the postexilic period), present the dehumanising treatment of the poor as a motive why Yahweh will come as their deliverer. The purification of Israel demands the destruction of the rich and the powerful, who are such wicked oppressors that they are beyond redemption. There is no place for them in the restored Israel. The remnant which survives the fall of Israel will be poor and needy (Zp 3:12). Yahweh hears the prayer of the poor and delivers them from the hands of the wicked rich and

the powerful (Pss 22[21]:27; 35[34]:10; 76[75]:10). The poor rejoice when they hear the voice of Yahweh (Ps 37[36]:11). This verse is the basis of Mt 5:5 translated in most English versions as “meek”; but the word designates the lowly and oppressed class as described above.² This is clear in Ps 69[68]:33, where the parallelism of the line makes poor synonymous with those who seek God and look to Him for their liberation from poverty. Yahweh is the saviour of the poor and needy (Jer 20:13).

2. Matthew and Poverty

In the NT, particularly in Matthew, the dominant idea of poverty indicates that Jesus came not to glorify poverty but to deliver us from it. The kinds of poverty and the mechanisms of impoverishment which were operative in Jesus’ time and which he condemned have neither human nor religious value. On the contrary this poverty and the mechanisms are agents that debase people and destroy their dignity as persons. Therefore, they are anti-evangelical agents. Engelbert Mveng who made the foregoing statement, rebukes those who reproach the Gospel for its beatification of poverty. The poor of the Beatitudes are not blessed because they are poor, but because the Reign of God is theirs (Mt 5:1-12). In other words, Jesus has not come to institutionalise and beatify misery, but to deliver us from it. This is the message of Zechariah’s *Benedictus* (Lk 1:68-79), and that is what the *Magnificat* proclaims (Lk 1:47-55). It is what the charter of the Beatitudes promulgates (Mt 5:1-12), and what the Lord himself reveals in the synagogues at Nazareth, as he inaugurates his public ministry (Lk 4:18-20).³

The critical situations that we live and experience in the Third World today, have induced some to use the Gospel to justify poverty. But this approach makes it difficult for one to appreciate the essence of Jesus’ teaching on poverty and the new meaning he gives to it. Whatever be the semantic approaches in the Hebrew or Aramaic vocabularies *dalim* and *anawim*, or their Greek translations into *penes*, *ptochos*, and *tapeinos*, we need only observe the praxis of the Lord Jesus in order to appreciate a certain number of evident facts. In Matthew the poor are called blessed (5:3), more precisely the “poor in spirit”. This does not mean detachment, but reflects the OT usage discussed above, precisely the lowly classes, whose spirit is crushed by their need and by oppression. “Poor in spirit” is not only synonymous with Luke 6:20 but also with “meek” of Matthew 5:5; which also reflects the OT vocabulary mentioned above. The revolutionary character of this statement should not be missed; the curse of poverty is removed by it, and the blessing consists in the Kingdom of Heaven, which surpasses all wealth. The saying does not mean that only the poor enter the Kingdom of Heaven, but *even* the poor; it is an implicit response to the haughtiness of the Pharisees. A similar response to the Pharisees lies in Jesus’ employment of Isaiah 61:1 (Mt 11:5; Lk 4:18) to announce the messianic character of his mission; the Good News is brought to the poor, who are not excluded from the kingdom.

Consequently, Jesus who belonged to the lower classes made no attempt to escape or to disguise it. The crowds that follow Jesus and listen to him are plainly and simply crowds of the poor, the lame, the blind, the halting, the deaf, the mute, and those humble folk who, after listening to the Lord for hours and hours, reach into their pockets and find not so much as a piece of bread or fish to eat. Secondly, at no moment does Jesus preach resignation to sin, poverty, wretchedness, sickness, or the like. On the contrary, he has come to set people free, and that is why he works his wonders. His solidarity with the poor, the weak, and the oppressed does not consist in sitting down beside them to bemoan and bewail the cruelty of fate, under the demagogic pretext of identifying with them. Jesus’ solidarity with them consists in proclaiming to them the Good News of their liberation, as he delivers them from their physical, moral, and spiritual misery. Moreover, nowhere is Jesus seen publicising the wonders he was doing among the poor and needy. In fact, he warns that those wonders should be kept secret. The NT shows that the publicity given to his ministry among the people is not done by Jesus himself nor by his immediate disciples, but often by the beneficiaries of those wonders and miracles. Jesus does not trumpet his wonders. People come to know and identify with him through his teaching and deeds. His deeds speak for him. Whenever he is with the public, his preoccupation is always centred on the proclamation of the kingdom, liberation and the offer of salvation in him. He does not advertise the misery of the poor nor does he make them the object of public pity and sympathy.

Through his teaching and deeds Jesus begins to attract the attention and anger of the religious and political leaders who see him as a threat. Jesus’ identification with the poor and the preaching of their

liberation does not appear to be Good News to the patricians, particularly the religious and political leaders who benefit from the poverty of the poor. The structures that breed poverty are man-made. The people are poor because of the social structures operating in society. The rich and the powerful create this situation. Hence, they will continue to have the poor with them as long as these structures are operative. Poverty therefore is a source of wealth for the rich and the powerful. This is the basis of Jesus' words to his disciples in Mt 26:6-13 during the anointing at Bethany (see also Mk 14:3-9). Matthew and Mark record that some disciples were indignant at what they considered to be a waste of an expensive ointment which could have been sold for a high price and the money given to the poor. John specifically mentions Judas Iscariot as the person who made that statement. John adds that Judas made the statement not because he cared for the poor, but because he was a thief; he was in charge of the common funds and used to help himself to the contents (Jn 12:1-9). In other words, Judas Iscariot belongs to that class of people that build their wealth by seeking donations in the name of the poor. Thus, for people like Judas, poverty is an indispensable industry that should not be done away with, but is something to be developed.⁴ One such mechanism is the perversion of meaning contained in political rhetoric such as the one employed by Judas. This rhetoric claims to speak for the welfare of the poor but produces misery, oppression and dependence.

The foregoing underscores the response Jesus gave to Judas: "Leave her alone; she was keeping it for the day of my burial. You have the poor with you always, you will not always have me" (Jn 12:7-8). In other words, as long as there are people like Judas, who build their wealth on the misery of other people, they will continue to have the poor with them. This is because poverty is the source of their wealth. But with Jesus one will be delivered from poverty. As Mveng argues, the Bible shows us clearly that the term "poverty" refers primarily to those who are oppressed by the unequal structures in this world put in place by people like Judas Iscariot. This is fundamentally the meaning of *'amí*, which implies not deserved poverty but rather impoverishment through unjust oppression.⁵ In the words of J. Jeremias, the biblical message is not one of the glorification of poverty for its own sake; rather, it is a message about God's concern for those who are oppressed, and the demand to eradicate poverty from every level of life.⁶

The above discussion shows that one should avoid the danger of confusing the poverty of Jesus, which he preached and lived, with the modern mechanisms of impoverishment. The attitude of Jesus towards wealth was simple; it is an obstacle to the Kingdom of Heaven. His refusal to accept any income, even by earning, is a striking feature of his public ministry. Moreover, it must not be thought that the poverty of Jesus was excessive in comparison with the common poverty of his time; the economic conditions of the place and time were such as to emphasize the excess both of wealth and of poverty. The social and economic condition of Jesus was not preached as an ideal; it was simply taken for granted. Jesus did not exhibit the "piety of poverty" of the OT; he does indeed recommend the attitude, but the attitude arises from a real social and economic depression. He preached against the structures that breed dehumanising socio-economic conditions and worked for the liberation of the poor from such oppressive situations. The background must be understood in order that the words of Jesus as reported in the Gospels may not seem less emphatic than they are. Furthermore, the doctrine and spirituality of the evangelical counsels of poverty, consecrated celibacy, and obedience should not be confused with the forms of poverty and impoverishment which we experience in the Third World today.

We can conclude that in Matthew (as in the entire NT), the poverty of the evangelical counsel does not belong to the structures of sin and modern means of impoverishment that dominate the world. Evangelical poverty lies in the imitation of Jesus Christ who has freely come to deliver us from sin, from hatred, from death, and from our physical, moral and spiritual misery. Evangelical poverty belongs to the reign of the Beatitudes: "One must leave everything to follow Jesus Christ – leave the reign of this world with its structures of sin and its industries of power, wealth, domination, and misery, in order to gain access to the Reign of the evangelical Beatitudes".⁷ The story of the rich man who would not renounce his possessions to follow Jesus is an excellent illustration of the basis of "the evangelical counsel" of poverty. It is found in all three synoptics with slight variations (Mk 10:17ff; Mt 19:16ff; Lk 18:18ff). And where Mark and Luke have "one thing is lacking to you," Matthew has "if you wish to be perfect." Jesus makes the total renunciation of wealth a condition of "following him", that is, of joining the group of disciples who lived as he did and had given up home and income (Mt 19:27-29; Mk 10:28-30; Lk 18:28-30).

3. The Mission-Charity Trend

Our starting point is the present linkage of mission with charity. This practice is best illustrated in Africa. Here, I shall give a brief analysis of this phenomenon, taking Africa as a study case. The overall aim is to underline how the perspective in the NT, particularly, the Gospel of Matthew could inspire a new approach to mission and charity without harming the dignity of the human person in the mission territories. Thus, it is not to underrate the assistance the rich can render to the poor (or the old Churches to the young Churches). Rather, it is to demonstrate that if the prevailing mission-charity trend is not checked, it could harm the goal of the Christian mission and thereby jeopardize the Gospel teaching on charity.

a) *Historical background*

Christian missionaries came to Africa (especially, beginning from the 15th century), when there was no developed theology of mission. Moreover, during the two centuries (15th and 19th) of missionary expansion in Africa, there was no Council convoked nor was there a major theological shift similar to the one that took place when Christianity encountered the Hellenistic world.⁸ Africa was considered “the land of the deepest, darkest, heathen night, inhabited by dark-skinned backward people, the poorest of the poor, unintelligent, without culture, language, religion, civilization, etc.”⁹ According to this belief (sustained by the so-called theology of the *curse*), Africa was the target *par excellence* of mission. This was the belief that informed William Carey’s book on Christian mission in Africa. Many missionaries, historians and anthropologists have often based their studies and mission in Africa on this belief. Great thinkers, such as G.W.F. Hegel, I. Kant, starting from this belief, have developed theories which postulated that the Africans were unruly and “*savage*”, and that there was nothing in Africa which really deserved the name “human”.¹⁰ The British Field Marshal Bernard Montgomery was influenced by this belief when he drew up a plan to make Africa a continent ruled by the Whites after a secret visit there in 1947. And so he hailed the Cecil Rhodes spirit, based on the apartheid emerging in South Africa.¹¹ In other words, this belief, which is still very much with us and is not about to go away, paved the way not only for the Christian penetration of Africa but also for the growth of European power and commerce on the continent. The latter process was officially sanctioned by the Berlin Conference of 1884-85, at which the European powers partitioned and divided up the continent of Africa (in a system of *divide and rule*). The colonial boundaries have continued to be a source of tension and fighting in post-independent African States, and in the actualisation of real ecclesial communion in African local Churches.¹²

On the basis of this belief foreign mission agencies and charitable organizations have recruited workers for Africa as it is the poorest continent. Some have risen to hero status in the West because of their African experiences. Yet all their efforts seem to have availed the continent little. Africans are still poor and languishing. Indeed, Africans themselves have been aware of their own vulnerability for sometime. Tiéno puts it as follows: Is Africa good only for promoting outsiders to hero status? The impasse here rests on the fact that many people easily associate material deprivation, technological simplicity, skin colour, with spiritual needs. Africans are the poorest of the poor, the third world of the Third World as the American Journalist, Lance Morrow, said.¹³ Since Africa is inhabited by dark-skinned backward people, it must follow that Africans are most in need not only of “*missionizing*”, but also of the philanthropists’ invasion and of foreign occupation. Moreover, since Africa has the highest number of the world’s poorest countries, it must follow logically that it is the place where the un-reached are found. When missiologists are convinced of this, an inevitable link between mission and charity develops. Mission and charitable work become synonymous.¹⁴

However, thanks to the palaeo-anthropology, which uses highly developed scientific methods for dating fossils, artefacts and relics, some as old as two and half million years, we know now that Africa was not a cultural wilderness before its contact with the foreign powers. From the Maghreb in North Africa to the Olduvai Gorge in Tanzania and the Swartkrans in Transvaal in South Africa, archaeological excavations have revealed that man has had a very long history in Africa. Although,

scientific statements are generally tentative in character, one thing is certain; before 5,000 B.C. there were already human beings in Africa. Therefore, they must have had some way of living and of relating to each other, developing social organizations and values, some form of religion, and all that constitute what is referred to today as culture or civilization.¹⁵

In the same vein, the foreign myth behind the theology of the curse which viewed Africans as children of the *Ham* has no substance. The truncated and conjectural theory derives from the pompous spirit of the mid-Victorian period of complacency and ignorance. Those who hold such a view have been proved wrong by modern scholarship in theology and Scripture. In fact, Engelbert Mveng has argued that no such curse was put on Africans; rather the Bible shows Yahweh taking the side of Moses and his African wife (Nm 11-12).¹⁶ According to Elochukwu Uzukwu, mediaeval Christian belief sustained such a curse, and the prayer for the conversion of Africa (composed after Vatican I), which was recited in many churches of Africa, until the Second Vatican Council suppressed it, proves the continued presence of such a belief.¹⁷ Such propaganda was designed to keep the outside world ignorant of the African reality and to justify keeping the continent as a place of adventure for the powerful nations of the Northern hemisphere.

b) Biblical and ecclesial perspectives: a key role for Africa

It requires a denial of the biblical account to view Africa as a cursed continent. Both Scripture and archaeological accounts show that it was in Africa that God revealed himself and the plan of salvation to Abraham and much later to Moses. The Israelites knew and still remember that some ethnic groups in Africa (the Blacks included), have direct links with them; some belonging to the so-called lost tribes of Israel after the event of the Exodus, and others as a result of long matrimonial and trade relationships (as is the case with the Ethiopians).

Thus, in the New Testament, Africa is recorded as having played some key roles in the Christ-event and in the growth of the Christian mission. There is the flight of the Holy Family to Egypt (Mt 2:13-23). On the way to the Calvary, an African named Simon of Cyrene helped Jesus to carry the cross (Lk 23:26; Acts 2:10). The implication of this is that the African continent is brought in at two very crucial moments in the life of Christ: at his infancy, safeguarding him from those who wanted to kill him, and at his passion, helping him to carry the cross of salvation. Again, at Pentecost, North Africans are said to have been among the witnesses. In other words, Africans were present at the public inauguration of the Church on the day of Pentecost in Jerusalem (Acts 2:1-13). In addition, the Apostle Philip is recorded as having baptised an Ethiopian eunuch, who returned to Africa with his new faith. Apollos, whom Paul spoke of with great admiration is an African, working among his countrymen and women in Alexandria, (Acts 18:24; I Cor 3:4-7). The Church in Egypt traces its apostolic origins to St Mark, who is still venerated as the founder and first Bishop of Alexandria. Christendom got its first faculty of theology in Alexandria, Egypt. The great theologians of Africa like Athanasius, Cyril, Augustine, Cyprian, Origin, Clement, Tertullian, etc., through their faith and writings gave shape to the Christian doctrine and life as we know it today. Anthony the Abbot from Egypt was the first to introduce monastic life (and therefore, the evangelical vows of consecrated celibacy, obedience and poverty), to Christianity. There were numerous African martyrs and saints before the modern era. Therefore, when in the 14th century the great King of Congo, Nzinga a Nkuwu, invited missionaries to Africa, he was hoping to see the revival of the type of Christianity which had previously flourished there, especially during the episcopate of Athanasius, the Bishop of Alexandria.

One could go on and on to prove that God has been dealing with Africa in a very positive way just as he has been dealing with other peoples and continents. There is no continent that is cursed by God. God does not curse his creation. On the contrary, God loves and walks with his creatures; even when they strayed away from the right path, God sent his Son to redeem them.

c) Ideological Shift

So, the division of the world into rich and poor is sustained by a truncated ideological rationalisation, the aim of which is to serve the economic and political ambitions of the wealthy and the powerful. In

other words, the rationalization behind the theology of the curse and its view that the sons and daughters of Africa are a cursed race, has its origin in this principle. This form of thought and stereotype are used to rationalize one ethnic group in its negative relationship with another. It is another ethnocentric attitude of one racial or ethnic group against another. Sometimes foreigners regard the continent of Africa as one vast homogeneous stock, divided into different people and nations by the European powers. The same kind of assumption of similarity of grouping, behaviour pattern and social development lies behind the use of the term “tribes”. It is often not realised that what are often called tribes are in fact nations. In many cases, each group may number as many as 20 million, comparable to that of many recognised European countries.

The same attitude is seen in the use of the term “vernacular” in reference to African languages. Reference to them as vernaculars and dialects makes the erroneous assumption that all Africans speak the same language. But the fact is that some centuries ago, when the language of the Roman Empire, Latin, was regarded as the language of scholarship and civilization, the languages of other provinces of the empire (including English), were regarded as vernaculars. Hence, it is assumed that only the conquering or imperial people use a language, while their subjects use a vernacular. Actually no African language is more primitive or less developed than any of the modern European languages. What is more, any African language is capable of being used as a medium for scientific or technological discussion, learning or teaching, commerce, industry or the humanities.¹⁸ These days, for instance, at big celebrations in the West, to show that Africa is not forgotten, at the end of speeches given in the languages of various European nations, a word is often said in Swahili which is referred to in Europe as an African language, without saying it is particular to East Africa.

Therefore, the belief that defines Africa as a “dark continent” inhabited by the poorest of the poor, was borne from prejudice and ignorance. To say this is to affirm the fact that the presence of poverty in Africa is a systems problem. Poverty, as we experience it today in Africa, has no evangelical value nor any value at all. It is an evil that must be eradicated because its presence in Africa has continued to produce other evils that oppress and reduce human beings created in the image and likeness of God to a status almost equal to that of an animal. Poverty in Africa is a *dependency programme, a system of control*: to keep Africa for as long as possible under foreign tutelage.¹⁹ In this case, therefore, the theology of the Good Samaritan proposed in the Apostolic Exhortation *Ecclesia in Africa*²⁰ needs to be quantified and complemented by the prophetic theology proposed by the African Bishops in their message at the end of the 1994 Synod for Africa.²¹ The problem that remains is how to free the theology of the Good Samaritan from the prevalent tendency of paternalism, dependency and control.

d) Consequences for the mission

The mission-charity trend has a number of worrisome consequences for mission. For instance, it has brought about an unholy alliance between the press, the Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs), and the missionary agencies. These organisations engage in propaganda that is damaging to the African image in the name of seeking donations to help the poor people of the *dark* continent. Look at the journal of any foreign missionary institute, NGO or agency operating in Africa and you need not be told what their image of Africa is all about. This practice has induced some of these foreign agencies to tell lies as they define the people and culture of Africa at will. Christopher Clapham has recently drawn our attention to the fact that the arrival of the NGOs engendered a change in the content of the external world’s relationship with Africa, in ways, which reduced the role of normal State-State relations, and increased that of charitable and civil-right organizations. In addition, Clapham affirms that the NGOs broadly represent the privatisation of North-South relations. In Africa they come with strongly held Western values which encompass the full range of often contradictory attitudes and sentiments that the continent evokes.²²

In the same vein, Peter Sarpong contends that the way the foreign media portray the poor condition of Africa leaves no one in doubt that the term “poverty” is an ideological and political strategy, designed to demoralise and discourage Africans from believing that they are equal partners with the rest

of the world. For the media and most of the charitable organisations, Africa is synonymous with “poverty, AIDS, sexual promiscuity, tribal wars, refugees, hunger, disorderliness, disease, ignorance, etc”. In fact, in many cases, the media is used to poison the minds of Africans and to propagate crime, violence, falsehood, and immorality. What is more, only rarely do news items that are not derogatory to Africa appear in the media in Europe or North America. Sarpong insists that if we are to promote the dignity of the human person, created in the image and likeness of God, the media must balance their presentation of Africa so that people of good will can have an accurate image of the continent.²³

This trend has also resulted in missionaries being regarded with suspicion. If the local populace has criticized the missionary past for involvement in the Slave Trade, colonialism, and the degradation of the African and his culture; today, missionaries are viewed as collaborating with the Multinational companies, World Bank, International Monetary Fund (IMF), NGOs, etc. Missionaries have been suspected of being among the agents through whom their home nations export arms to aid war lords, one-party systems and military regimes in Africa. In some cases, they are even seen as being involved with groups that aid the foreign organisations that distribute drugs to young African women in the name of so-called family planning, but which in reality are meant to spread disease and reduce the fertility capacity of the recipients.

Another worrisome aspect of the mission-charity trend is the tendency to treat the people of the mission land, in this case, Africa, with a step-mother mentality. This tendency is another expression of the phenomenon already described. Its theology is based on the conception that Africans are still on the way, that they are still learners or rather like helpless children or junior members of the human race they are in constant need of benevolent care. The “on-the-way” theology does not view Africa as a continent like the others on the planet. It does not perceive Africa as a continent of people, just people, but as strange beings that demand a special kind of treatment. This theology does not feel that Africans have the capacity for beatific vision and ontological reality. It does not recognize the fact that becoming a good Christian does not depend on colour or place of birth but on one’s response to the faith in Jesus Christ. One may be born in Africa but respond to faith in Jesus Christ in a more authentic way than a person born in any of the so-called Christian nations.²⁴

Furthermore, the “on-the-way” theology explains why some people are angry when they see an African living in a decent building, driving a good car, or doing higher studies. In the psyche of these people, Africans are not born for such advanced luxury and studies. This is also why many religious orders in the North would prefer to close their communities and convents rather than invite their counterparts in Africa to help in the work of the new evangelisation of Europe. Missionaries from Africa are not received in Europe and America on the basis of equality and in the spirit of Pius XII’s Encyclical *Fidei donum*²⁵ for the same reason. Indeed, one has the impression that there is concern among people in Europe at the rising tide of Christianity in Africa. There is an unfounded fear that Africans are going to take over the leadership of the Church very soon if not checked.²⁶

All this is due to cultural bias. The historical unhealthy relationship that has existed between Africans and people of the North has its origins in the myth that informed the theology of the curse which accounts for the peculiar and strange way in which the continent is still perceived, despised and marginalized. The tragic events of the past and of the present are justified on these grounds. Indeed, the present economic divide and financial system, which have continued to impoverish the people of Africa and other Third World countries, are the continuation of the same old belief and prejudice.

4. Towards a New Approach

Poverty, as Julius Nyerere says, is not the real problem of the modern world, because we have the knowledge and resources which could enable us to overcome poverty. The real problem, the thing which creates misery, wars and hatred, is the division of mankind into rich and poor. The significance of this division into rich and poor is not simply that the one has more food than he can eat, more clothes than he can wear. It is not simply that one nation has the resources to provide comfort for all its citizens, while the other cannot provide basic services. The reality and depth of the problem arises because the one who is rich has power over the lives of those who are poor, and the rich nation has power over the policies of those who are not rich. Even more important, our social and economic

system, nationally and internationally, supports these divisions and constantly increases them, so that the rich get ever richer and more powerful, while the poor get relatively poorer and less able to control their own future.²⁷

So, this is the form of poverty prevalent in the world today. It is a man-made poverty. Pope John Paul II notes that we need interdependence among nations and States on an equal basis in order to correct the current imbalance in global existence, and to give a human face to the economic system. The interdependence extends to all facets of life: politics, economics, ecology, culture, religion, etc. Interdependence can work only if all parties which relate are equal, with an equal voice, equal rights, equal power, and so forth.²⁸ Willy Brandt's commission on "North-South: A Programme for Survival" shared a similar view. The commission insisted that nations should urgently start taking concrete steps towards improving constructive North-South cooperation, without which the world economic situation could only deteriorate further, and possibly result in conflict and catastrophe. Furthermore, the commission asked that the world's economic and monetary system be reconsidered and restructured under circumstances nearly as serious as those of 1944, when the lingering horrors of the 1930s economic disaster inspired the Bretton Woods institutions: General Agreement on Trade and Tariff (GATT), IMF, and the World Bank. The vision and need for a new economic order were clear then. Today, these international finance institutions cannot deny being major contributors to the present socio-economic and political problems of many developing countries. This is why all hands must be on deck to give these financial institutions a human face so that poverty as we know it today can be eradicated and those who are rich use more of their wealth in the interest of peace.²⁹

Equally necessary is the need for a new language for missiology in relationship with the people of the developing nations, particularly in an African context. The prevailing language of missiology has prevented us from recognizing the potential of the local Churches and the people of Africa in the mission of the Church. There is a need to break with the type of missiological language which still sees Africans as junior members of the human race; which only sees the negative side of the people; which promotes paternalism; and which marginalizes and lies about the overall picture of the people's mentality and cultural heritage. There is a need to develop a language for missiology centred around the attractive identity of the people in the mission land, based on their cultural values, tradition and the Gospel message. A new language that will present the positive aspects of the people, with respect for their culture, tradition and self-esteem, treating them as normal and full members of the human family. In the light of the Second Vatican Council mission theology, the new language should be based on the fact that the poor will respond better to appreciation than to sympathy. They will do well when they are offered hope and not demoralization. The greatest enemy, the Bible tells us, is the one who kills the human spirit (cf. II Cor 3:6). To a large extent, today, the language of missiology in many mission territories could be described as one which kills the spirit of the poor. Indeed, what the poor nations need is not necessarily foreign aid (which often come with strings attached), but a change of attitude and mentality on the part of those who speak, study and deal with them. What a continent like Africa, for example, is asking for is the purification of memory and the evangelisation of the superstitious beliefs which have hitherto informed the external world's attitude and relationship with it.

5. Conclusion

It has always been the tactics of the rich and the powerful to exploit the poverty of the poor; to keep them in the dark and in ignorance. However, in the NT (particularly as reported in Matthew), we learn that Christianity has its origins and growth in the poor and lower classes who left everything to follow Jesus Christ. Christianity conquered society not from above but from below. In Jesus Christ, the poor and lowly whom society has excluded and oppressed, were able to find life and the force to dismantle the structures and mechanisms of impoverishment and discrimination. The example and teaching of Jesus which empowered the "wretched of society" were such that the Church of the early centuries easily thought of itself as the Church of the poor. These included not only the poor who are deprived of the necessities of life, but also of all those who renounced everything to follow the Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Thus, evangelisation in our time should also consist in a proclamation of Jesus Christ that will empower the poor, raise their consciousness and human dignity so that they can actively

participate in bringing about the Reign of God in their environment. It is in so doing that the poor, like the early Christians, could bring dynamism to Christianity and renew its face in our contemporary world so deeply in need of Jesus Christ and the salvation he has won for it.

Notes

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¹ Cf. Mckenzie, John, L., *Dictionary of the Bible*, London, Geoffrey Chapman, 1985, p. 21.

² Cf. Mckenzie, John, L., *op. cit.*, p. 683.

³ Cf. Mveng, Engelbert, "Impoverishment and Liberation: A Theological Approach for Africa and the Third World", in Gibellini, R. (ed.), *Paths of African Theology*, London, SCM, 1994, p. 163.

⁴ Cf. Oborji, Francis, A., *Trends in African Theology Since Vatican II: A Missiological Orientation*, Rome, Leberit, 1998, p. 170.

⁵ Cf. Mveng, Engelbert, *op. cit.*, pp. 163-164.

⁶ Cf. Jeremias, J., *New Testament Theology*, vol. 1, London, Heinemann, 1971, pp. 133ff.

⁷ Mveng, Engelbert, "Impoverishment and Liberation: A Theological Approach for Africa and the Third World", *op. cit.*, p. 164.

⁸ Cf. Bosch, David, J., *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*, New York, Orbis Books, 1993, pp. 190ff.

⁹ Carey, William, *An Inquiry into the obligations of Christians to use means for the conversion of the Heathens*, London, Hodder & Soughton, 1891, p. 63.

¹⁰ Cf. Ayisi, Eric, O., *An Introduction to the study of African culture*, London, Heinemann, 1992, p. 39.

¹¹ Cf. Dowden, Richard, "What is wrong with Africa?", in *The Tablet*, 16 January 1999, p. 72.

¹² Cf. John Paul II, *Ecclesia in Africa, Post-Synodal Exhortation*, Nairobi, Paulines Publications Africa, 1995, n. 49.

¹³ Cf. Morrow, Lance, "Africa: The Scramble for Existence", in *The Times*, 7 December 1992, p. 30.

¹⁴ Cf. Tiéno, Tite, "The Training of Missiologists for an African context", in Dudley Woodbery, J., *et al.* (eds), *Missiological Education for the 21st century*, New York, Orbis Books, 1996, p. 95.

¹⁵ Cf. Clark, J.D., "The Legacy of Prehistory: An Essay on the Background to the Individuality of African cultures", in Fage, J.D. (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Africa*, vol. 2, Cambridge, University Press, 1978, p. 13.

¹⁶ Cf. Mveng, Engelbert, "Négritude et civilisation Greco-romaine", in *Colloque sur la négritude*, Paris, Présence Africaine, 1971, pp. 46ff.

¹⁷ Cf. Uzukwu, Elochukwu, E., *A Listening Church: Autonomy and Communion in African Churches*, New York, Orbis Books, 1996, p. 22.

¹⁸ Cf. Afolayan, Adebisi, "African languages and literature in Today's World", in Olaniyan, Richard (ed.), *African History and Culture*, Lagos, Longman, 1996, pp. 179-180.

¹⁹ Cf. Parratt, John, *Reinventing Christianity: African Theology Today*, Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1995, p. 8.

²⁰ Cf. John Paul II, *Ecclesia in Africa*, n. 41.

²¹ Cf. Synod of Bishops. Special Assembly for Africa, *Message (Nuntius)*, Nairobi, Paulines Publications Africa, 1994, n. 15.

²² Cf. Clapham, Christopher, *Africa and the International System: The Politics of State Survival*, Cambridge, University Press, 1996, pp. 258ff.

²³ Cf. Sarpong, Peter, K., "Conclusion", in *African Synod: Documents, Reflections, Perspectives*, New York, Orbis Books, 1996, p. 225.

²⁴ Cf. Oborji, Francis, A., *La teologia africana e l'evangelizzazione*, Rome, Leberit, 1999, p. xii.

²⁵ Cf. Nzuzi, Bibaki, "The Missiology Institute of Kinshasa", in Karotemprel, S., *et al.* (eds), *Promoting Mission Studies: The Role of Missiological Institutes*, Shillong, VIP, 2000, p. 241.

²⁶ Cf. Ratzinger, Joseph, *Salt of the Earth: The Church at the end of the Millennium*, San Francisco, Ignatius Press, 1997, p. 262.

²⁷ Cf. Nyerere, Julius, "The Role of the Church in Society", in Parratt, John (ed.), *A Reader in African Christian Theology*, London, SPCK, 1987, p. 117.

²⁸ John Paul II, The Encyclical *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* (Social Concern), London, Catholic Truth Society, 1988, nn. 14, 17.

²⁹ Cf. Brandt, Willy, *Common Crisis North-South: Cooperation or World Recovery*, London, Pan Books, 1983, p. 1.

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