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Chapter Three

Church and Contemporary Nigerian Society: Social Teachings of the Church: past and present – enunciation of relevant theological principles¹

Introduction

The basic aim of this chapter is commitment to a faith that does justice. Following the opening of the windows of the Vatican through Pope John XXIII via the Second Vatican Council in 1961, we in the Church have come to understand more fully and to appreciate more deeply that a “living faith” leads directly to a “loving action” in the transformation of the world. This paper must be considered principally as a participation in the worldwide call for the knowledge and spread of the Church’s Social Teaching as Pope John XXIII has declared;

“But today more than ever, it is essential that its doctrine be known, assimilated, and put into effect in the form and manner that the different situations allow and demand. It is a difficult task indeed, yet a most noble one. To the performance of it, we call not only our own sons and daughters scattered throughout the world, but also men and women of goodwill everywhere”²

Concluding, the Pope calls for the unity of thought and action.

“It is not enough merely to formulate a social doctrine. It must be translated into reality. And this is particularly the Church’s Social Doctrine, the light of which is truth, justice its objective and love its driving force”. (Mater et Magistra).

We cannot convert and lead others rightly if we do not know the way. We cannot find the way if we have no faith. We cannot work for the unity of all Christians, if we are arrogantly frantic about our private affiliations or confessions and intolerant of other groups. We must open up to learn, to live and to love.

¹ At the Seminar by the Nigerian Association of Ecumenical Theologians at St Augustine’s Seminary, Jos in 1998

² Mater et Magistra.

I pray that the set goals of this seminar be translated into reality for the good of God's children on earth, the liberation of Africa, the salvation of souls and the glory of God.

The Problems

Somehow, one is forced to believe that we have reached the end of time. Under present day events, hunger, industrial pollution, injustices of unimaginable extents, wars, moral disintegration, plagues of various sorts including HIV/AIDS, genetic manipulation and of course, an era that lacks belief in God, in man and in any meaning in human life, theologians are at the cross-road. There are many questions and little answers. In earlier times, namely; Old Testament and the New Testament times, the theologian arrogated to himself monopoly of ultimate answers to complicated questions since he was the "analytic student of the mind of God". Today, the theologian has joined the questioners to such an extent that instead of throwing more light to issues of faith and life, he has decided to accept the original human condition of ignorance and to join in a new search.

The situation is worsened when we discover the 'sophisticated' in-fighting among theologians as to who has the best and lasting answer to our problems, who is the heretic and the orthodox. There is thus an attendant crisis of a lack of orientation. Many are confused, and those who previously pretended to be strong have been forced, dragged or misled to join the faceless mob. Faced with an embarrassing and unacceptable situation where equality of all mankind is only "pep talk", where justice is considered an illusion, where human rights have no place and the rule of law a matter for the elite, one cannot but question the credibility and condition of our secular and spiritual leaders, who lay claim and authority, not only over bodies of men, but also over their consciences. The promises that things might be better and that the future is brighter have been considered historically fallacious and misleading. Hopelessness and absurdity seem to have taken the upper hand. The Promised Land is 'a doom' land.

Look around you, here in Nigeria and in most countries of the developing world and you will discover the brutal realities confronting many of God's children. They are hungry, they are poor, they are exploited and they die young. The phenomenon is incomprehensible, especially in a world where food, medicaments and clothing are burn off in alarming proportions, 40,000 children die each day for lack of water, medicine and food. 90% of the Nigerian population lives on "oil doom" while a marginal 10% enjoys "oil

boom”. People who do not preach it, while those who talk about the Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) live in “earthly heaven” practice SAP.

It is in these context dear friends that I write this paper assigned to me. It is an unpalatable topic, taking into cognizance that the situation is not changing for any better. In the context of Nigeria, for example, corruption has come to stay with us as a “registered institution”. Believe it or not, the practice of giving and taking bribes have been accepted by many of our citizens as a “survival strategy” and a way of life, with the little exception of a “little rest” who might either follow the majority or be brutalized by the tragic human element of “*join them when you cannot beat them*”. Military dictatorship in Nigeria as elsewhere has replaced the God-given gift of self-rule and the value of democracy. The economic sphere leaves much to be desired as over 80% of the population of Nigeria lives in poverty and squalor, without drinking water, no light, no decent housing, no food to eat, no good jobs, no acceptable relevant and adaptable education and no reasonable content of a certain acceptable ‘quality of life’.

The responsible authorities in government have taken many false steps and the consequences will be felt for a generation to come. Religious bigotry and double morality have not made the people of our generation any better than the apostates of old who sought for God where there was immediate material result. Authentic and true religiosity seems to have been sacrificed at the altar of clever psychologists, dupes, charlatans and non-performers. At last, the saying of Jesus Christ in the Bible “woe to this generation... she seeks constantly for sign” appears to have come to pass. As far as ecumenism is concerned, many Christians have been grossly divided over cosmetics, but not over the substance of he who called us to his services. Ecumenism has been marginalized as an affair for the “talkative”, keeping in mind that for over 300 years, we have been talking. The results of over 300 years talking has not been seen in the unity of Christian, rather further divisions, even within the confessions and polarizations into progressive, conservative and orthodox have taken place. In spite of many single and group efforts by very sincere and honest people, the Christian search for unity cannot be said to be considerably positive. We have still a long way to go.

Introducing the Social Teachings of the Church

Many Christians are not aware of the fact that the Church has some Social Teachings. Some are baffled and the direct question often is: “What has the Church to do with human Society”? Even today, it is a rare theology

department or seminary, which provides a course dealing specifically with the Church's Social Teaching. That the Church has developed a body of teachings on social, economic, political and cultural matters and what that body says seems to have been forgotten, or never known.

There are diverse reasons as to why ignorance exists and they include;

- The documents are long and the language too academic and theological. Oftentimes, the documents seem to be rather abstract, dry in content, and not very attractive to pick up and read for simple folks.
- They are not often preached about from the pulpit or taught Catechism classes.
- Most annoyingly is the fact that many Christians cannot get hold of this teaching. Where do you buy an encyclical? Thank God if our rural parishes have medals, crosses, rosary, pieta, bibles and 'Child of Mary' to sell.
- The topics frequently are a challenge, dealing as they do, with controversial social issues, and therefore they make some readers uncomfortable. Many readers think of '*Humane Vitae*' (on Human life, 1968) which forbade the use of contraceptive pills, and pre-marital sexual behaviour, which led to much debate over the Church's unchallenged authority over sex-life in Europe and America.

Signs of Hope

In spite of the above, however, there has been a small resurgence of interest in the Social Teaching. New attention is paid to what the Church has to say on the political and economic issues of the day. The serious crises facing mankind on national and international fronts concerning the social order and the right order of values have challenged priests, politicians, teachers, workers, businessmen and professional people. Many are in search of answers and the Church's position seems to still weigh on people's consciences.

In the face of injustice, poverty, international debt, falling standards of living and economic and political disparities, accompanied by the threats of a world war and complicated by contemporary social events and issues, many honest citizens are now searching for explanations, guidelines and directions based on a Christian vision of the world. Catholic Social Teachings has been challenged to offer answer from theological perspective to some of these questions. What is the Church's position on war and peace, missiles and

arms race? What of economic justice for all, international development and racism. Have we any words to offer on human rights, apartheid, military dictatorships, the dignity and worth of all persons, the sacredness of human life? What of labour, trade unions, work, the poor, women etc? There is a growing interest for Christian responses to such questions. More and more people are discovering or re-discovering for the first time, the rich heritage of the social teaching of Christianity. Some respond with surprise, enthusiasm and astonishment. Others with suspicion and rejection. Especially guilty are politicians of the left or the right who feel challenged by these teachings and make noise if the views in a teaching do not favour their political lineage.

This way or that way, there are no easy answers to hard problems that would be found in these social teachings. What can be found, according to M. Schultheis and P. Henriot is “social wisdom” based on;

- Biblical insights,
- The Tradition of the Fathers of the Church,
- Scholastic philosophy,
- Theological reflection,
- Contemporary experience of the people of God struggling to live out faith and justice. (Ref: *The Rich Heritage of Catholic Teaching*, Washington, Centre of Concern, p.2).

We can do no better here than quote Pope John XIII from his social encyclical to the universal Church (1961) titled: “*Mater et Magistra*”, Mother and Teacher, where he writes;

“The Church has formulated particularly over the past hundred years, and through the efforts of a very well-informed body of priests and laymen, a social doctrine which points out with clarity the sure way to social reconstruction. The principles are of universal application, for they take human nature into account, and the varying conditions in which man’s life is lived. They all take into account the principal characteristics of contemporary society acceptable to all” (Mater et Magistra).

The Pontiff calls for the knowledge and spread of this teaching where he says;

“But today more than ever, it is essential that this doctrine be known, assimilated, and put into effect in the form and manner that the different situations allow and demand. It is difficult task

indeed, yet a most noble one. For the performance of it, we call not only our own sons and daughters scattered throughout the world, but also men and women of goodwill everywhere” (Mater et Magistra).

Concluding, the Pope calls for unity in thought and action.

“It is not enough merely to formulate a social doctrine. It must be translated into reality. And this is particularly true of the Church’s social doctrine, the light of which is truth, justice its objective and loves its driving force” (Mater et Magistra).

Towards a Contextual Theological Approach: A Challenge

From the foregoing, are we not challenged as Africans and theologians to look inwards and to develop a contextual social ethics relevant to us? Are we not challenged to place our findings at the disposal of the Church? Today, in our search for a new theological attitude, or Africanness, we must influence our Christianity in the sense that morality becomes a liberating event, morality of the beatitudes in a political context, as the spirit of justice, love of neighbour, reconciliation. This is where marriage, childbirth, work, trade, economics, social organizations, war, love, and various dimensions of life make their impact on theology from the African traditional perspective. Theology talking to Africa must attempt to adapt, enculturate and fit into the situation of the African. In times past, various documents were completely taken over into the African world without seeking for the relevant points, which concerned the human person of Africa.

Today, as African theologians, we must be faced with challenges of unity and diversity. How can we in the unity of Catholicity seek for elements, which are relevant for our context from the bible and the social encyclicals without disrupting the unity of Catholicity? It is time for Africans to say what is and what is not ourselves. To redefine and reverse the frames of reference. To establish original African values and place them in the context of our behavioural patterns without denying the basic truths that guide man. This new movement must make changes in the entire process of assimilating teachings from outside by giving definitions which arise from an African framework. The voice of Christ talking to man in African has to be truly heard without the risk of alienation or over-watering. The ultimate essence of theology is of a mystical order, the encounter with God. In the context of Africa, this must involve the God of liberation, the God of the poor, the lonely and oppressed. One can assert that African spirituality has produced

its most valid and useful reflection. Like the Boff brothers, Clodovis and Leonardo have written on liberation theology;

- Conversion to the poor and to the evangelical poverty.
- A communion of sisters and brothers in a committed community.
- Hope in a kingdom of God in history in the form of a new society.
- Service to and with the oppressed.
- Incarnation among and solidarity with the outcast.
- The prophetic courage and freedom of proclamation and denunciation.

The Cross of Persecution and Martyrdom, in the Footsteps and Discipleship of Jesus Christ. (Boff. L, and C: *Liberation Theology: From Confrontation? To Dialogue*, Harper and Row, N.Y. 1986 p. 30).

Enunciation of Relevant Theological Principles:

Religious and Social Dimensions of Life are Linked:

The “social” human construction of the world is not “secular” in the sense of being outside of God’s plan, but is ultimately involved with the dynamic of the reign of God. Therefore, faith and justice are closely linked together. (*Gaudium et Spes*, 1965 n.39).

Dignity of the Human Person

Made in the image of God, women and men have pre-eminent places in the social order with inalienable political, social, legal and economic rights. The fundamental questions to ask about social development are: what is happening to people?

(*Populorum Progressio*, 1968, n.8 – 26)

Option for the Poor

A preferential love should be shown to the poor, whose needs and rights are given special attention in God’s eyes. “Poor” is understood to refer to the socially and economically disadvantaged who as a consequence of their status, suffer oppression and powerlessness” (*Octogesima Adveniens* 1971, n. 23).

Love and Justice are Linked

Love of neighbour is an absolute demand for Justice, because charity manifests itself in actions and structures, which respect human dignity,

protect human rights, and facilitate human development. To promote justice is to transform structures, which block love. (Justice in the World, 1971 n. 16 and 34).

Promotion of the Common Good

The common good is the sum total of all those conditions of social living, economic, political and cultural which make it possible for women and men to readily and fully achieve the perfection of their humanity. Individual rights are always experienced within the context of promotion of the common good. (*Mater et Magistra*, n. 56).

Political Participation

Democratic participation in decision-making is the best way to respect the dignity and liberty of people. The government is the instrument by which people co-operate together in order to achieve the common good (Christmas Message, 1944).

Economic Justice

The economy is for the people and the resources of the earth are to be equitably shared by all. Human work is the key of contemporary social questions. Labour takes precedence over both capital and technology in the production process. Just wages and the rights of workers to form trade unions are to be respected. Women and disabled people, migrants and unemployed people share fully in the profits of the production process in solidarity. (*Laborem Exercens*, 1981).

Stewardship

All properties have a “social mortgage”. All people are to respect and share the resources of the earth. By our work we are co-creators in the continuing development of the earth (*Laborem Exercens* 1981).

Global Solidarity

We belong to one human family and as such have mutual obligations to promote the development of all people across the world. In particular, the rich nations have responsibilities toward the poor nations and structures of the international order must reflect justice (*Populorum Progressio*, 1986)

Promotion of Peace

Peace is the fruit of justice and is dependent upon right order among humans and among nations. The arms race must cease and progressive disarmament take place if the future is to be secured. In order to promote peace and the

conditions of peace, an effective international authority is necessary (*Populorum Progressio*, 1986).

The Church and Politics

Paragraph 76 of the Vatican II document on the Church in the Modern World states that it is highly important, especially in pluralist societies that a proper view exists of the relation between the political community and the Church. The role of the Church being what it is, she must in no way be confused with the political community, nor bound to any political system. In their proper spheres, the political community and the Church are mutually independent and autonomous. Yet by different titles, each serves the personal and social vocation of the same human beings. The more they cooperate reasonably, the more effectively they will perform this service to everybody's advantage. Man is not confined to the temporal order. The Church, rooted in the redeemer's love, helps to make justice and charity flourish more vigorously within nations and between nations. She preaches the gospel truth and brings the light of her teaching to be on every province of human affairs with the witness of her faithful. Thus, she respects and promotes political liberty and responsibility. Always and everywhere the Church must be allowed to preach the faith with true freedom, teach her social doctrine, carry out her task among men unhampered and pass moral judgments even on matters concerning politics when fundamental rights or the salvation of souls require it.

The Church has also been urged by the great sons of Africa to fulfil this role and to keep the state faithful to the laws of God. The late Jomo Kenyatta, speaking to the Catholic Bishops of East Africa, said:

“One of the services you give to others is to help them keep going in the right direction. We have many distractions and can wander off the path. We need constantly to be put back on it again; we may not even know that we are going astray, that we are taking the wrong direction. That is why we need the Church in our midst to tell us when we are making a mistake. The Church is the conscience of society, and today society needs a conscience. Do not be afraid to speak. If we go wrong and you keep quiet, one day you may have to answer for our mistake”.

The Bishops of Africa

Recently, the Bishops of Africa at their general assembly reviewed the situation on our continent. We have good reasons to be glad and hopeful in

considering the many efforts made by the sons and daughters of this continent in general and by our leaders in particular to promote and rehabilitate fundamental African values. We are particularly happy about the recognition given to various countries. It must however be admitted that it is for other reasons that Africa finds herself at the centre of the world scene. We would be betraying our mission; we would be seriously failing in our duty, which we owe to the men of this land, if we were to remain silent. We denounce all that which constitute a violation of human integrity and everything that offends human dignity, such as sub-human conditions of life, arbitrary imprisonment and deportations. We condemn all crimes committed in the name of the security of the state, as if the state was absolute and not at the service of the citizen, that is to say the human person.

Teaching of the Church

In this statement, the Bishops of Africa are re-echoing and applying to the present situation the social teaching of the Church and the Pope. Despite the time that has elapsed, the message of Pope Pius XII to the world (Christmas, 1942) retains its validity and even reflects our situation today.

“Never has it been so important to understand clearly the true foundations of all social life as in these days when humanity, diseased by the poison of social errors and tossed by a fever of conflicting desires, doctrine and aims, has become the unhappy prey of disorder created by itself, and is experiencing the disruptive effects of false social theories that neglect and contravene the laws of God”.

The Original Reason

The original and essential purpose of social life is to preserve and perfect the human person. Reason enlightened by faith assigns to each person and to each particular association in the social organism a definite and noble place. Above all, it tells us that the purpose of the whole of the state’s activity, political and economic, is the permanent realization of the common good, that is to say, the provision of those external conditions which are needful to citizens as a whole for the development of their qualities and the fulfilment of their duties in every sphere of life, materials, intellectual and religious.

“If social life, such as God wills it, is to attain its end, it needs a juridical constitution in order to secure the balance. The security and the concord of society have also the right restrained within the honourable discipline of life. But no exercise of this right, and

anxious sense of responsibility in the sight of the eternal judge, before whose tribunal any established principles, will receive inevitable punishment and condemnation. The ultimate, deep-rooted principle which lies at the foundation of society cannot be abolished by any effort of human ingenuity; they may be denied, ignored, disregarded or disobeyed, but they can never be deprived of their juridical validity” (Radio Message, published in Acta Apostolicae Sedis, January 1943).

The Second Vatican Council

The second Vatican Council in its document: “The Church in the Modern World” observed that:

“A keener sense of human dignity has aroused in various parts of the world an eagerness to build a juridical, political order in which personal rights affecting public life are better protected. Such are the rights of free assembly, free association and, freedom of expression. Many are voicing disapproval of any kind of government which blocks civil or religious liberty, multiplies the victims of political crimes wrenches the exercise of authority from pursuing the common good to serving the advantage of a certain faction or the rulers themselves. The exercise of political authority, whether in a community as such or within the framework of the moral order, in pursuit of the common good, dynamically understood and according to a lawfully established juridical system. The citizens are then bound in conscience to obedience.

Where citizens are oppressed by public authority which exceeds its competence, they should not on that account refuse what is objectively required of them for the common good, but it is allowable for them within the limits of the law of nature and the Gospel, to defend their rights and those of their fellow citizens against this abuse of authority. When the exercise of rights is temporarily curtailed on behalf of the common good, it should be restored as quickly as possible after the emergency passes. (The Church in the Modern World, Para 73, 74, 75).

Human Rights

The most recent formulation of the teaching of the Church on human rights is that contained in the encyclical letter of Pope John “Peace on Earth”. In it, the Pope enumerates and explains the rights and duties of individuals and the state. Dealing with the individual and the political community he states:

“Man has a right to freedom in investigating the truth and, provided no harm is done to the moral order or the common good, also to freedom of speech and publication. He has likewise the right to be accurately informed about public events. Man’s personal dignity involves his right to take an active part in public life, and to make his own contribution to the common welfare of his fellow citizens. As a human person, he is entitled to legal protection. In consequence of the juridical order willed by God, man has his own inalienable right to juridical security. To him is assigned a certain, well-defined sphere of law, immured from arbitrary attack. Those who have authority in the state must exercise that authority in a way which is not only morally irreproachable but also best calculated to ensure or promote the state’s welfare. The attainment of the common good is the sole reason for the existence of the state rulers. Hence, every civil authority must strive to promote the common good in the interest of all without favouring any individual or group. The chief concern of civil authorities must therefore, be to ensure that the rights of the individual are recognized, co-coordinated, defended and promoted. Thus, any government which refused to recognize human rights or acted in violation of them, would not only fail in its duty; its decrees would be wholly lacking in binding force” (Peace on Earth, Paras 12, 26, 27, 53, 56, 60, 61).

These and other rights of individual formulated in the encyclical letter of Pope John “Peace on Earth” find their echo in the universal declaration of human rights of the United Nations, to which Switzerland is a signatory, in particular articles 3, 9, 11, 18, 29, 30.

Pope Paul VI and the 1971 Synod of Bishops

Representatives of all the Catholic Bishops of the world met again in 1971 to review the constitution made throughout the Catholic Church, the application of the teaching of Christ and his Church to the actual situation in the world today. His holiness Pope Paul VI confirmed and published their conclusion in the document entitled; *Justice in the World*. The Bishop writes:

“We see in the world a set of injustice which constitute the nucleus of today’s problems and whose solution requires the understanding of tasks and functions in every sector of society. Therefore, we must be prepared to take on new functions and new duties in every sector of human activity”.

Among these, mention is made of migrants, refugees, those persecuted for their faith: Justice is also violated by forms of oppression both old and new springing from restrictions of the rights of individuals. This is occurring both in the form of repression by the political power and violence on the part of private section. The Church has received from Christ the mission of preaching the gospel message, which contains a call to man to turn away from sin to the love of the father, universal brotherhood, and a consequent demand for justice in the world. This is the reason why the Church has the right indeed the duty to proclaim justice on the social, national, and international level and to denounce instances of injustice when the fundamental rights of man and his very salvation demand it. Her mission involves defending and promoting the dignity and fundamental rights of the human person.

A Yearning for Justice

“By the dark corners of the Ghetto;
 There we sat and wept, when we yearned for justice;
 Against the walls there we leaned;
 We declined to bow to the vows of silence and conformity;
 For daily our oppressors required of us a new loyalty;
 They demanded of us to drink from the cup of slavery;
 But how could we stand the sour taste of forced loyalty?
 If I forget to fling open the gates of freedom;
 I shall have betrayed her greatness;
 If I do not set freedom above my highest joy;
 Let me be silenced forever;
 If I leave you, O Ghetto;
 Let me be human forever”³.

List of the Social Encyclicals

1. *Rerum Novarum* (The condition of labour) Encyclical letter of *Pope Leo XIII*, 1891.
2. *Quadragesimo Anno* (The reconstruction of the Social order) Encyclical letter of *Pope Pius XII*, 1961.

³ Canaan Banana; *The Gospel according to the Ghetto* Mabo Press, Gwelo, 1980
 Page 10.

3. *Mater et Magistra* (Christianity and Social Progress). Encyclical letter of Pope John XXIII, 1961.
4. *Pacem in Terris* (Peace on Earth). Encyclical letter of Pope John XIII, 1963.
5. *Gaudium et Spes* (Pastoral Constitution of the Church in the Modern World), *Second Vatican Council*, 1965.
6. *Populorum Progressio* (The Development of Peoples), Encyclical letter of Pope Paul VI, 1971.
7. *Octogesima Adveniens* (A call to Action) Apostolic letter of Pope Paul VI, 1971.
8. *Justice in the World*. Statement of the Synod of Bishops, 1971.
9. *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (Evangelization in the Modern World) Apostolic Exhortation of Pope Paul VI, 1975.
10. *Laborem Exercens* (On Human Work) Encyclical letter of Pope John Paul II, 1981.
11. *Sollicitudo rei Socialis* (The Church's Social Concern), Pope John Paul II, 1987.