

AN APPRAISAL OF THE ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH'S UNDERSTANDING OF THE PREFERENTIAL OPTION FOR THE POOR

Kimeli B. Richard^{1*}, Prof. Eunice Kamaara² and Prof. Joseph Kahiga²

¹Department of Philosophy, Religion and Theology, School of Arts and Social Sciences, Moi University; P. O. Box 3900-30100, Eldoret, Kenya

²Department of Philosophy, Religion and Theology, School of Arts and Social Sciences, Moi University

ABSTRACT: *This paper traces the foundation of the doctrine of the preferential option for the poor from the Old Testament into the New Testament. The paper also draws its arguments from Liberation Theology and prophetic messages in the Old Testament of the Bible. It then proceeds to highlight the teachings on option for the poor from Catholic social teachings, especially magisterial documents. The paper is a product of literature review for a research project on the topic of preferential option for the poor which was conducted in the Catholic Diocese of Eldoret in Kenya. From the review, it is evident that the option was given an impetus in the New Testament through the person of Jesus Christ whose messianic activities fulfilled what the prophets of old had foretold. Although the Messiah suffered death on the cross, the teaching of the Catholic Catechism presents this as liberation per se. As such, the Biblical notion of God opting to stand on the side of the poor, right from the time of the people of Israel to latter Christianity, continues to influence the Catholic Social teaching as evidenced by major papal documents and patristic teachings. Underlying the option is the conviction that the Church cannot isolate itself from the community that it is required to transform. Therefore, the preferential option for the poor is a teaching that had been received and domesticated as shown not only by the establishment of schools in the diocese but more so the way poor students get support.*

KEYWORDS: Roman Catholic Church, Understanding, Preferential Option, Poor

INTRODUCTION

Poverty in the socio-economic circles is viewed as the inability of individuals to meet basic needs. It is associated with characteristics such as unemployment, inability to provide food for oneself and family, the lack of decent housing, inability to educate one's children; poor health and lack of access to medical care. Poverty is also a multidimensional concept that includes inadequacy of income and deprivation of basic needs and rights, such as denied access to productive assets as well as to social infrastructure. While economists and social scientists write about poverty in this basic way, the Church insists that poverty is far more complex.

Poverty is 'many-faced', 'many-layered' and 'multi-dimensional' and cannot be reduced to quantities of goods that are, or rather are not, available (Oyugi & Ong'ang'a, 2004). Most theologians, among them Gutierrez (1988), Boff (1988) and Theuri (1994), argue that people who experience poverty are affected psychologically, emotionally, spiritually, physically and at the same time it affects their family, community, and social relations. It is, therefore, not possible to consider any single dimension of poverty in isolation as this would drastically reduce our understanding of the phenomenon. In the Bible, poverty has been referred to as a social phenomenon. The Biblical Dictionary Index and Concordance define poverty as lack, need and want. It is a state of desperation which culminates in social suffering of one and

family. This sentiment is well captured in the book of Genesis, which proclaims that: “there will still be five years of famine; and I do not want you, your family, and your livestock to starve” (Genesis 45:11). In most cases, poverty, as cited in the Bible, is an adverse reality that has to be eradicated.

According to the Genesis story, involuntary poverty in all its forms and manifestations is a result of the fall of man and its consequences. Jesus Christ Himself recognized the fact that the poor will always be there. However, the recognition of Jesus does not imply that the poor should be ignored but be cared for (Acts 6, 7). There are indications that God the Creator never willed any human being to be poor or to be deprived of any basic needs (Genesis 1:22, 28-30). It is imperative that the plight of the poor has both direct and indirect impact on the rich, whether in developing countries or developed ones. More often than not, the poor are treated with a lot of suspicion in the event of losses and other crimes-related cases. Due to this negative attitude towards these lowly placed members of society, the poor rank the lowest in status almost in every society and those in positions of leadership only view them as potential voters and people ready for hire by politicians to commit felony. Beyond this, the participation of the poor in national issues is not guaranteed because their role is always seen as that aimed at serving the interest of the rich.

However, the message of Christ to the poor is that good news will be preached to them for theirs is the Kingdom of God (Matthew 5:3). This is all the reason why the Catholic Church should be ready all the times to give service to humanity, particularly to the poor. In the entire Old Testament tradition, poverty is regarded as a scandalous condition that should never exist in the land because it might force one to steal and bring disgrace to God (Proverbs 30:9). The New Testament, however, presents hope and encouragement to the poor despite their tribulations for they will receive blessings of a new heaven and a new earth when Jesus’ victory is complete. Assistance to the poor is therefore not a new phenomenon to the Church. It is as old as the Bible itself. Both the Old and the New Testaments affirm that the prophets’ and Christ’s intentions were to remind the rich of their natural responsibility towards the needy of society. If the war against the oppression of the weak by the powerful was to be met, it had to target all those structures that promote this inhuman treatment.

The Law of Moses, for example, safeguarded the interest of the poor by appealing to other members of the community with means to give them a lending hand. In Pentateuch is quoted:

If any of the towns in the land that the Lord your God is giving you there is a fellow Israelite in need, then do not be selfish and refuse to help him. Instead, be generous and lend him as much as he needs. Do not refuse to lend him something, just because the year when debts are cancelled is near (Deuteronomy 15:7-9).

Furthermore, the considerable debts of the poor were waived in the years of Jubilee (Leviticus 25, 27:14). Jubilee was one of the feasts of the Jews which were to be celebrated once after fifty years. All property would revert back to its original holder. It was to be a year of restoration where the poor who had been bought by the rich were to be released to reunite with their families.

As the people of Israel journeyed to the promised land under the leadership of Joshua, they were taught to do three things: to give the soil a rest and not farm; to free Israelite slaves; and to return the land and houses to the first owners or their children (Leviticus 25). In the Old Testament too, if a poor person was hungry, he was permitted to eat in the field or vineyard of another (Deuteronomy 23:24-25). The prophets denounced the rich because they had neglected

or mistreated the poor (Isaiah 1:23; 10:2; Ezekiel 22:29; Amos 5:11-14). In the New Testament, there are similar orders concerning the poor. Jesus witnessed the state of poverty amongst the people and proclaimed the Gospel of liberation against socio-economic injustices and political oppression as implied below.

When Jesus entered the temple in Luke 4:18-19, He quoted the prophecy of Isaiah 61 (Luke 4:18-19) to give the message of hope to those who were materially and spiritually down. The Good News Jesus brought to humanity was not only meant for spiritual nourishment (saving the soul) but it was also to take care of the physical needs of the body by setting man free from all manner of suffering, including social, economic and political injustices. This declaration by Jesus of his true ministry (to the poor), elicited negative reactions towards him from the people which mysteriously led to his total rejection by his own people of means and who saw him as a rebel against the corrupt and unjust social system (Gutierrez, 2010).

The poor, to whom Jesus referred, were those who are materially poor, who die of hunger and disease, who are illiterate, unemployed, the exploited, persons denied the right to be persons. Thus, the poor do not only lack simply material goods but they also miss, on the level of human dignity and full participation in socio-political life. Those found in this category are principally peasants, manual labourers, marginalized urban dwellers, and in particular the children and women of these social groups (Theuri, 1994). Since the time of Jesus, the Christian Church has considered itself as the Church of the poor. Christ followers have been charged with the responsibility of taking Christ's gospel to the world today. To be a Christian today, the believer must live according to the command and example of Jesus Christ. He/she must manifest to all the purpose for which Christ came into the world and died, in word and in action: in worship and in service (Theuri, 1994). The condition Christ imposed on Christianity when asked, "Why do you call me, Lord, Lord, and yet you don't do what I tell you? (Luke 6:46) explains the Church's social responsibility today, which includes visiting prisoners, clothing the naked, feeding the hungry, or the captives.

Jesus' condition points out clearly the inseparability of Christian faith and concern for social, economic, and political justice. Gutierrez (2010) avers that the gospel commitment of the Church should be like that of Christ who took on full solidarity with humanity, and therefore, should be a commitment to those most in need. When one draws nearer to the poor in order to accompany them and serve them, they are doing what Christ taught them to do when he became their brother, and clothed himself with poverty like them. The privilege of the poor thus has its theological basis in God. The poor are blessed not just because of the mere fact that they are poor, but because the kingdom of God is expressed in the manifestation of his justice and love in their favour. This central feature of evangelization is stressed in God's action of redemption to humanity; He sent His son specifically, who was born poor and lived among the poor to make us rich with His poverty (2 Corinthians 8:9).

The separation of religion and life is thus a contradiction of the biblical teaching, since both the Old and New Testaments show God's care for the poor in this world. Consequently, and from the foregoing literature review, poverty can be defined as a state of being in shortage of basic elements required for a dignified living. This could be economic, material, moral, intellectual or spiritual, among others. This relative and subtle meaning of poverty raises one important question: who are the poor? The message of Christ to the poor is that the good news will be preached to them for theirs is the Kingdom of God (Luke 4:18).

Kodia (2005) explains three categories of the poor as falling under the following: The first group is the indigent poor. This refers to those who are economically deprived. According to

the Biblical references, their poverty could be attributed their own sin whether laziness, extravagance or gluttony; the second group is those who are socially or politically oppressed. In the Old Testament, it was clearly recognized that poverty would not normally just happen. It was usually due to the sins of others – a situation of social injustices, which easily deteriorated because the poor were not in a position to change it. The Law of Moses, for example, emphasized the need for impartial justice in the courts, in particular for the poor and the powerless; the third category is the humble poor. These are those who are spiritually meek and dependent on God for their survival. Oppressed by men, and helpless to liberate themselves, they turn to God for help. It is this third category that the poor came to be synonymous with the pious and this social condition became a symbol of their spiritual dependence.

Notten and Neubourg (2011) also looks at poverty in three different ways: absolute, relative and official. In this case everybody could be poor or rich depending on the scale that is officially in use. According to these authors, poverty is contextual and is subject to changing standards as situations keep on changing- that is different categories of people have different specific standards. For example, there are those who view a vehicle as a status symbol, and for them anybody who has a vehicle is regarded to be rich. To some a house can be a status symbol. Only the rich are assumed to live in permanent houses.

Carothers (1988) details how the poor have remained poor due to sins and wickedness of the rich who want to have cheap labour for their yards, kitchens and industries. He notes that some Christians are involved in this act yet they are supposed to be the keepers of the poor to show their love for Jesus Christ. The author belabours the meaning and spiritual roots of Christians care for the poor. Carothers further posits that the demand for solidarity with the poor is a demand made of every Christian because it is an apostolic duty. Any denial of the reality of poverty by Christians whether openly or indirectly is an affront to the Gospels and their teachings. Like the aforementioned, this one is also relevant to the present study but too general and fails to state what Christians should actually do to alleviate the problems of the poor. This study is thus different from the cited works in that the focus is on what the Church is doing to assist in poverty alleviation than its causes. It also applies the gospel's spiritual solidarity with the poor to their real social and economic situations.

In an Encyclical, *Populorum Progressio* (The Development of Peoples), Pope John Paul VI (1976) acknowledges the gravity of poverty in the world and its effects on people. The Pope asserts that aid to the poor members of society is not just a matter of eliminating hunger nor reducing poverty, but rather, it should be a question of building a world where every man no matter what his race, religion or nationality, can live a fully human life, free from servitude imposed on him by others or by natural forces which he has no control. He further notes that the luxury of a few is an insult to the wretched poverty of the vast masses. This is contrary to the plan of God and to the honour that is due to him.

The Pope concludes by noting that in this anxiety and sorrow the Church sees a situation of social sinfulness, which is all the more serious because it exists in countries that consider themselves Christians and they are capable of changing the situation. Similarly, Pope John Paul II (1987) points out that there are millions of people living in poverty and underdevelopment in the world today; those human beings who lack the goods and services needed for better living are much more numerous than those who possess them. The two encyclicals conclude by noting that Christians have a moral obligation according to the degree of their responsibilities, to take into consideration the plight of the poor in society.

Ayiemba, Theuri and Mungai (2015) aver that God is deeply involved with the life of the people, especially how God, throughout the history of salvation, has shown to be very attentive to the needs of people, particularly of the poor, the exploited and the less cared about in society. They quote several chapters and verses both in the Old and New Testaments to show how God empowers the people to rid themselves of the conditions of misery they are in, for example, 1 Kings 17:7-24; John 5:1-4; and Mark 6:30-44, they conclude by noting that the Church must be involved in the life of the people, most of all, of the ways through which they are empowered so as to free themselves from the fetters of any type of poverty.

This is a classic example of Christian theology of human development manifesting itself in God's desire to liberate the down trodden of society, particularly the poor. The work has a lot of relevance to the present study and was used to evaluate the extent to which the Church has applied this principle to alleviate poverty. In a similar vein, Pierli and Ratti (2002) posit that a people's development is not derived primarily from money but from the formation of consciences and the gradual maturing of thinking and pattern of behaviour. The human person is the principle agent of development not money or technology. The Church forms the consciences by revealing to people the God whom they seek and do not know. It instils in a person the grandeur of the human person, created in God's image and loved by Him; the equality of all men and women as God's sons and daughters, the mastery of the human person over nature; created by God and placed at the human being's service and the obligation to work for the development of the whole person and of all human kind. The originality of the Christian approach to any particular social issue such as poverty alleviation is that, at the heart of any given question there stands the human person, and not profit, power or technology. This is what informs the Christian churches social teaching which focuses on the primary role the human person must play in the improvement of their own life and future.

Option for the Poor in the Old Testament

The preferential option for the poor has biblical origins. The Old Testament portrays the people of God as the poor of Yahweh, *the Anawim*. Mockeridge (2003) advances the Old Testament response to the poor by invoking a radical approach to their plight. For him, rich people with excess from their basic needs should give back to the poor what is theirs as a right. From this argument, it can be gathered that the role of the community should be that of letting the poor take part in seeking solutions to their challenges rather than being viewed as a problem. From the perspective of church's social teaching, there has to be a way of opting for the poor however small it may be. The lesson given from the book of Exodus is that the poor should be the priority of the church. It also presupposes that the people themselves take it up as a calling to help the poor. Most of the liberation theologians who emerged in the Latin America found this push to help the poor as a spiritual test of a just society.

The stories of Exodus from Egypt (Ex. 12:2-6) and Babylon (Lev.26:34) are indicators of how God removed Israelites from social bondage. The journey out of Egypt was a Divine act of liberation of the poor and the oppressed people. It was during this period of oppression that the daughter of Pharaoh practiced royal charity towards the little Moses who had been left to float in a river. The study of this nature is enriched by Exodus because Christianity should be tested by the level with which members rise to the invitation to help the poor. The Catholic Diocese of Eldoret in its quest to respond to this noble task meets with challenges but the spirit of the Old Testament focus is the springboard for continuous struggle.

Pixley (1983) opines that Pharaoh's daughter had no option other than to show love for the poor and those understood as outcasts. The Exodus event is an invitation to care for the needy

thus: *You shall not oppress the poor or vulnerable. God will hear their cry* (Ex. 22:20). The book of Exodus presents the gesture of Pharaoh's daughter as a royal duty rather than a call. This study is about the church that comes in to play the same role that Pharaoh's daughter took. She accepted to nurse Moses till he grew to discover that potential he had to lead. The poor children in the community have great potential that the church as an institution can tap by going out of its way to assist. The justification is drawn from the fact that she went ahead to make Moses her son. What was required from Pharaoh's daughter at that time can be traced to what priests taught in Leviticus thus: "...a portion of the harvest is set aside for the poor and the stranger..." (Leviticus 19:9).

The above text was meant to motivate the people of Israel to voluntarily give to the needy. The priests had a duty to teach this truth to the people. When missionaries came to Africa, they managed to attract rich settler farmers who readily offered to sponsor some of the children from poor backgrounds. This gesture is what the study finds motivation because it means that the mission of the church to assist the poor originates from volunteers who first came to teach and to treat in mission hospitals. From the narratives of priests dedicating themselves to educate as well as empower through education, the church became a power through which those who succeed through the system come back to help the poor.

The story of Moses cannot be ignored. He grew up to be a liberator by killing a brutal oppressor (Exodus 2:12). Poverty is still a brutal force that requires to be toppled by all means. It needs an effort of members of a community who are bold like Moses. Fox (1986) translation and commentary on Exodus exemplifies many elements of Moses as a hero. The Exodus narrative about the miracle of God saving his people shapes this study in the sense that it is God not Moses who stands for the poor and the stranger. The text indicated above presents Moses as he seeks to intervene and correct a slave who was in the wrong. It prepares the reader to delve into Chapter 3 of Exodus where God acts decisively and interrupts Moses' pastoral existence as a shepherd and family man. The intention was to use Moses as a channel of mercy and justice. This story of God's rescue of the enslaved became an inspiration thousands of years later in Latin America. Poor and enslaved people worked under cruel burdens and cried to God for their freedom.

As a turning point in his life, Moses decided to intervene and saved his fellow Israelites from being molested. Perhaps this action of standing with the poor made the church to think of social justice in its teaching. The focus of liberation theology was essentially to locate the institution of church within the intricate challenges faced by people in the Latin America. The spirit that led people like Moses to want to stand for the downtrodden and poor members of the community of Israel relates to what the church should do to speak whenever there are acts of injustice. The catastrophe brought about by an inhuman regime (Plastarus, 1966, p. 87) made Israelites cry unceasingly to God. In the middle plagues, Moses discerned that when systems fail to provide solutions to challenges of poor people, they should be overthrown. For instance, Exodus 12:31-32 indicates a calling on the part of God's people to champion for the needy: "Thus says the Lord; let my people go that they may serve me in the wilderness" (Exodus 12:31).

Plastarus (1966) uses this text to argue that the events of Exodus were violent; they entailed destruction of Egyptian army and rescue of Israel. Boff (1979) saw this as a liberating grace from God who had warned the entire nation of Israel of vengeance if they defaulted from the covenant way of life. Through the Exodus event, God travels with Israel in their challenges of the wilderness. There was a call and invitation to a long journey to change an oppressive regime in preparation for the jubilee. This means that the starting point of their journey was the

plight of the poor people. Lohfink (1987) uses the term 'poor' to challenge believers concerning their mission to make a difference in the world. He invokes the Old Testament idea of Jubilee year and Sabbath tradition as a way of restoring property to the poor so as to re-establish equity among all people. Although such an endeavour was not easy, Lohfink (1987) acknowledges that the efforts done in the Old Testament amounted to option for the poor. From the time of the prophets to the period through the desert with Moses, Israel teaches the church today to rise up and remain with the poor. The study finds this argument by Lohfink relevant in re-awakening the spirit of sacrifice that is underneath preferential option for the poor.

Prior to the arrival of prophets, Israelites had adopted a character of fasting and giving sacrifices yet they deliberately neglected the poor. The prophet Isaiah was a strong defender of the poor people inflicted by challenges. Thus he taught: "God is a refuge for the poor" (Is. 25:4). This message of the prophet summarized the teachings of Moses in the Pentateuch. The New Testament would later pick this idea by terming religion that neglects the plight of the poor as perverted (Mathew 25:31-46).

Option for the Poor in the New Testament

The New Testament is a story of God vindicating the poor through the ministry of Jesus Christ and the Church born after the Pentecost. In this section, some commentators have reflected the option for the poor in the light of the New Testament. Jesus' public ministry began with a proclamation of Good News thus:

The spirit of the Lord is upon me, because He has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed... (Luke 4:18-21).

Lay understanding of the above statement of commission indicates the role that Jesus took as an advocate of the poor. For Jesus, this was a ministry of dedication to the poor and oppressed. His was a call to make preferential option for the poor by creating conditions through which their voices are heard, defended and their status elevated. When Jesus entered the Synagogue in Jerusalem, he read from the scroll of the prophet Isaiah to show that there existed a link between the Old Testament prophetic ministry and that of His time (Lk. 4:18). What many churches call the great commission started here with an invitation to lift up the poor and the disadvantaged in a real and concrete way. Luke's Gospel picks this idea of concern for the poor in this chapter in order to draw the readers to the ministry that awaited Jesus. Thus the mission of Christ to bring Good News to the poor and oppressed (Lk. 4:16-17) was passed to believers and more so those who lead them.

Preferential option for the poor means a call to look at the world from the perspective of the poor people in order to work in solidarity with them towards the attainment of social justice. The Gospels particularly deepen this mystery of poverty by tracing Jesus Christ to the village called Nazareth, a despised location. What this means is that the Church has to discern the plight of those who struggle to survive and the needs of vulnerable members of the society ahead of individual selfish interests. This is emphasised in the Gospel of St. Luke thus: "Blessed are the poor, theirs is the Kingdom of God..." (Lk. 6:20). The synoptic tradition introduced the healing ministry of Jesus as an example of how the early Church interacted with the poor intensely. In challenging abuse of power, Christ was standing in the tradition of Moses and prophets like John the Baptist who invited converts to speak for the powerless (Parker, 1992, p. 75). The title of Parkers' work '*Standing with the poor*' reflects the example of how

Jesus doubled His efforts to defend and promote the dignity of the poor and the vulnerable. As it is, this author brings to the fore the understanding that justice requires an option for the poor.

Werner (1985) discusses the *Magnificat* of the Blessed Virgin Mary to justify the design of God to stand with the lowly. The emphasis of this author puts into perspective the earlier motif in which authors such as Parker used the title of his work to suggest that the least privileged in the society will be lifted up by God. Werner and Parker knit together the prophetic voice and the mission of Christ both in Galilee and in Jerusalem. By introducing the poor of Yahweh here in the book the *Anawim*, Werner connects the Old Testament theology of salvation to the public display of Jesus' ministry as a lesson to what the Church was set out to do later on.

The work of the Church to help the poor is understood as God who comes down to save His people. Blessed Virgin is referred to this kind of salvation in the Psalms thus: "that those who waited for their salvation patiently were rewarded" (Psalms 25:31). For the Blessed Virgin Mary, her calling meant that God would finally lift the poor and shame those on the thrones. The Old Testament motif of people of Israel who waited for a long time for a saviour to break into their history means that God travels through the history of people until they succeed. Lohfink (1987) opted to trace this option for the poor in the light of the challenges faced by Moses. It worked for him and therefore the economy that the *Magnificat* brings to the study is that the Church has no option other than to show commitment to the cause of the poor.

Campell (1966, p. 63) points out Jesus' poverty from the background that He had nowhere to lay His head. This points out to the character of Jesus' total surrender to the Divine will. The argument connects with the beatitudes in the synoptic Gospels. Thus: "...blessed are the poor in the spirit for theirs is the kingdom of God..." (Mt. 5:3). Campell's exposition of Jesus' character throughout the Galilean ministry contradicts that of the rich young man in the Gospel of Mathew 19:16. This comparison is perhaps desired by the author to generate the thinking of liberation from riches so that the Church should stand out as a pointer to salvation. Jenkins David (1976), in *The Contradiction of Christianity*, points out the idea that all believers should emulate the poverty of Jesus by internalizing the social teaching of the Church and putting it in practice.

This argument is so critical to the study because there are members of the Church who may be comfortable with that which they own and do not find it a priority to help others. The parables used by Jesus in the synoptic Gospels especially that of the poor Lazarus at the mercy of the rich man point to the reality of a Church that hardly cares at times. Fitzmyer (1982, p. 87) uses the metaphor of the poor though with a different approach. He carefully links the story of Lazarus and the rich man to what Jesus did on the Thursday before His death when he washed the feet of the twelve disciples. According to him, the church should bend its knee in order to attend to those wounded by poverty instead of behaving indifferently like the rich man. Fitzmyer generates the Theology of liberation from the story in the Gospel of John 9:1-11 about a blind man healed by Jesus at the pool of Bethesda. In this Gospel narrative, the crowd by the pool thought that somebody in the family had sinned to necessitate the suffering of the blind man. Fitzmyer intelligently places this experience in the context in which believers should stop looking outside of the pool and start looking for ways to lift the poor from conditions of poverty (Fitzmyer, 1982, p. 88). This biblical story finds its place in the Catholic social doctrine relating to caring for the poor. Fitzmyer has carefully knitted together the experience of Israelites in the person of Moses to this Gospel story of healing by the pool.

The parallelism created in this story is that of Moses journeying with the murmuring Israelites from Egypt amidst serious poverty and calamity. Jesus, like Moses, was able to mingle with

others including the paralytic in Mathew 9:1-8. The Gospel message has since then influenced the way people deal with one another. Catholic social teaching is a reflection of how the Church listens to the message and translates it to address the country's situation. It is that which places a greater demand and conviction on the Church to act. The Word of God contains messages of economic and political reality as the Church seeks to bring people into the knowledge of Christ. It translates the message of the Gospel to the people so as to make them to be aware that one's spiritual development cannot be separated from the society one finds him or herself in.

The impact of the Church is felt depending on how it fulfils the mandate given to it by Jesus Christ. Like the way missionaries did with the early schools, it seeks to empower people intellectually through education in order to make them functional in their society. When Jesus Christ resurrected he sent forth the Holy Spirit which empowered the twelve to continue with the ministry he had begun. From the numerous emphasis made on Acts 2:42-47, 4:34, it appears as though it was an ideal scenario required of all believers. William Barclay in *The Daily Bible Study* discusses marks of a true Church (Barclay, 1976, p. 30). His argument on fellowship has been utilized in the social teaching of the Church. The ideal believers of Acts of the Apostles did not lack the basic items such as food and clothing.

The spirit that characterizes that community was sharing with the needy. This is critical to this research as it lays a background for the option for the poor. Paul admonishes the Corinthian Church to share with others till the point in which economic equality is attained (2 Cor. 8:2-5). The early Church was characterized by efforts to alleviate the suffering of the poor and the ravages inflicted on the human person. In Jerusalem for instance it made efforts to serve everyone including strangers (Acts 2:44-45; 4:32). In spite of the little resources that they had, members joyfully participated in sharing and assisting the poor (2 Cor. 8:9). From the writings of St. Paul to the Corinthians, the Church demonstrated the reality of love for God and neighbour. For the Church, this radical direction was required in order to separate itself from the world. Perhaps this is what it is demanded of now than ever before considering the role it needs to play as a conscience of society. It cannot afford to remain with the rich while the poor people are crying for justice. The Gospel that is preached is an invitation to the Church to courageously denounce all oppressive structures without fear of being victimized. When the people take over the development needs of others without being distinct and indifferent, then that is when true marks of the church can be seen (Barclay, 1976, p. 36).

From the beginning, the Church has a Divine mandate to care for the poor by way of organizing its activities to assist. The Church will fall into temptation of being part of a rotten and corrupt system of the world if it does not work towards alleviating injustice against the poor. In fact, it will be judged by how it handles the society within which members of the Church are part. It has its core responsibilities well defined to change extreme poverty for the better and make a deliberate choice to be in solidarity with the needy. Synoptic Gospels present Jesus Christ clearing the temple of those who had corrupted it by "overturning the table of money-changers, the seats of those who sold" (Matthew 21:12-15). Where this enthusiasm for the ministry to reach out to the poor seems to be waning away, the Church should make a deliberate move to revive it. The Catholic tradition to stand with the poor and the oppressed has developed over the ages as attested in its social teaching. The elaborate doctrinal teachings are brought out in its catechisms

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Option for the Poor in the Catholic Catechism

In the history of the Catholic faith, members have been assisted to grasp fundamental tenets by use of basic texts known as catechism. These texts have grown through time because of issues that the Church comes out to address within a particular epoch. The teaching regarding option for the poor has also grown through this process of revelation beginning from the first catechism to the latest. *The Baltimore Catechism of 1885* was so basic that it only emphasized corporal works of mercy such as quenching the thirsty, clothing the naked, feeding the hungry, and housing the homeless. It stressed that a believer is required to provide these simple tasks as instructed by the Gospel of Mathew 25:36.

O' Brien argues rightly that 'Much of the world goes to bed hungry and thus calling poverty a worldwide problem' (O'Brien, 1954). The Catholic Church was confronted with unjust treatment towards poor people especially at the beginning of 1900 AD. It therefore needed to come out with this catechism that outlined its position in the face of difficulties facing the poor. Initially, Pope John XXIII maintained that the world should emulate Jesus by sharing with the poor (John XXIII, 1961). This teaching challenged the Church to make a preferential option by creating conditions for marginalized voices to be heard. The Church had to be deliberate in defending the defenceless in the society. The period that preceded the Baltimore Catechism was industrial revolution in Europe. It was a period in which human labour was sought after at the expense of life itself. This deliberate action required that the Church had to critically assess its institutions in terms of how they stood with the poor.

The Church came out with its social teaching which a basis upon which Catholic sponsored schools became not only centres of learning but also avenues through which the poor are empowered. The whole of 1950s and 1960s, third world countries were in the process of independence struggle. The catechism required at the time had to address the challenges that came with independence struggle. The period after 1945, most of the nations in the world began the process of independence by signing freedom charters. The United Nations spearheaded campaigns for human rights. The Catholic voice in the catechism was added to this campaign thus:

...the time is at hand when United Nations Organization will be able to protect effectively the rights of man, those rights which are universal, inviolable and inalienable because they are based directly on the dignity of the human person (Hill, 1964).

The time following independence was so crucial for the Church in addressing social justice. Modern catechism addressed the plight of those struggling for freedom while addressing the plight of the poor as a priority. The Church at that time communicated to the world in need of human freedom, liberty, population explosion, global peace and unity in the light of faith (Hill, 1964). The challenge of industrial revolution shifted the Church's outlook on matters of the world during this time. Here the Catholic Church positioned itself to tackle the challenges of the poor in order to work for a just society keeping in mind the struggles of the poor. The history by then helped the Church to rethink and refocus its mission by way of re-adjusting its teaching in relation to the poor.

The modern catechism brought to the Church the realization of a new consciousness arising among the down trodden in the world seen through lenses of political and tribal conflicts

reported daily. The Church's teaching during this time was an invitation where members would be part of an initiative to search for their full humanity in the middle of world affairs. This catechism is therefore a re-affirmation to engage pastoral direction characterised by consciousness to the plight of the neighbour. The modern catechism would have been shallow in its teaching if it had ignored poor people who experienced cruel treatment in the face of the rich and powerful. The pastoral nature of the catechism was such that the Church was seen as a beacon of hope to many within the prevailing socio-economic situation.

The Bishops of Netherlands (1969) in their *New Catechism with Supplement* addressed the challenges of labour relations. The focus was on how to act correctly in speaking for the poor while maintaining its special place of holiness. The development of this new catechism was such that the message of Christ would be understood from people's experiences. The simple approach used by this catechism to address intricate matters affecting people was phenomenal. For a long time, it was common place thinking that those with wealth were required to provide for the poor. This was not the case with this new catechism because it opened the avenue for all members of the Church to take responsibility towards the poor. The idea of having a preferential option for the poor meant that at the bottom of every human heart lies that urge to see humanity and think of how to help irrespective of places of origin, colour or race.

Feiner and Vischer (1975), on *Common Catechism*, further situate the Church as a protector of the marginalized. It did this so well by adopting an ecumenical approach which in its entirety unearthed the social responsibility aspect of the Church in the face of emerging trends. While this Catechism was in print, the World Council of Churches (WCC) based in Geneva, had generated a report with similar sentiments on how to deal with the poor. During this time, the Pastoral Constitution on the church in modern world, *Gaudium et Spes*, a product of Vatican II Council (1962-5), developed a blue print for the Church on how to deal with the needy. One would say that this was the exact time that the term shifted from what was known initially as an option for the poor into what came to be known as preferential option for the poor.

Most of the sentiments, including concern for the poor, were strengthened as an addition into the items in the Catechism. The emergence of the *Common Catechism* reflected in a new way that faith must be encountered as God's will in history. This argument draws its approach from the phenomenological direction employed by new Catechism of Bishops in the Netherlands discussed before. It looked at the conditions faced by the poor and made reflection on how to deal with the challenge from that point. During the time, nothing much was discussed concerning a preferential treatment given especially to the poor. It became silent because the target of the common catechism was ecumenical. This departure from what the church taught as a universal approach to the social teaching on the poor shifted in focus because of the intended audience of the catechism. Perhaps it is worth noting that particular social teaching applies only to particular audiences and not to others. In this case, the audience in Netherlands would be quite different from those in Africa.

A close look at the introductory sections of Malloy's (1976) *Catechism for Inquirers* indicated that faith is nothing other than an inquiry. This Catechism gave answers to basic questions on matters of faith and morals. With this Catechism for inquirers emerged many vernacular catechisms. The language adopted by the Catechism helped many communities to conceptualize and critically evaluate Church's teaching on the poor. These vernacular catechisms addressed basic faith matters of faith that would help in approaching social justice issues. Twenty years after *Catechism for inquirers* was published, *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* (1997) was circulated. Basic to this book was the teaching on respect for human life. This may have emerged from the Bill of rights enshrined in the U.N freedom

charter. Bill of rights started to occupy a central place in the Church's social teaching. It emphasized thus: "...respect for the human person proceeds by way of respect for the principle that everyone should look at the neighbour as another self" (Catechism, 1997).

From then onwards, a chapter on social justice started to appear in the catechism. The central place of catechism in forming the Church in matters of faith and morals started to be seen. Preferential option for the poor was strengthened by the emphasis given to rights and responsibilities towards other people. The catechism at this period became a reference material for action in matters of social concern. The social justice agenda in the Catholic catechism was a product of an historical epoch in which human rights issues required to be strongly articulated. This was the period after 1990 and so many international forums focused on United Nations Human Rights Charter. The definition of social justice in this Catechism transformed to include the conditions allows individuals to obtain what is their due... (Catechism, 1997).

The *Revised Edition* (2001) of *The Catechism* highlighted the needs of the poor and invited the Church to be in solidarity with them. *The Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC)* reflected on the plight of poor people in *The Revised Edition* by suggesting an action plan for Church. It emphasized that Christ identified with 'the least of these': the hungry, and the stranger (Catechism, 2001). What this catechism proposed was that through human solidarity, socio-economic problems would be solved or at least minimized. Solidarity is connoted in *The Revised Edition* as a practice of sharing spiritual goods other than material ones (Catechism, 2001). From the time this catechism came into existence, Church strategic plans had been re-worked to reflect the needs of the poor.

The *Compendium of the Catholic Catechism* advanced the teaching on social justice by bringing in the seven corporal works of mercy namely, feeding the hungry, giving a drink to the thirsty, clothing the naked, sheltering the homeless, visiting the sick, visiting those in prison and burying the dead. This catechism strongly emphasized: "...to receive in truth the body and blood of Christ given up for us, we must recognize Christ in the poorest..." (Catechism, 2005).

The emphasis placed on the teaching in this catechism emerged from what God revealed about Himself in Scripture: Preferential option for the poor cannot be separated from how one should look at human life and dignity of persons. The compendium affirms that all people possess inherent dignity and right to life consistent with that dignity. The teachings of the Church are strengthened by other writings of the magisterium comprising bishops and their successors.

The Poor in Catholic Social Teaching

Catholic social teaching is a body of doctrines developed by the Catholic Church so as to shed light on matters of social justice (Catechism of Catholic Church, 2000, p. 23). These teachings, like indicated before range from issues of poverty, economics and how the society is to be organized. The bishops of the Catholic Church while attending a conference in Medellin, Colombia, in 1968 with the theme 'Poverty in the Church' spoke of the preferential option for the poor as a biblical mandate. The deliberation of the Catholic Bishops meetings above was influenced by Gutierrez's religious vision in which the Church was to be understood in a new perspective as imitator of Christ (Walsh, 2013). The Medellin conference called upon the Catholic Church in Latin America to become a Church of the poor. Thus "To be the evangelizer of the poor and one with them, a witness to the value of the riches of the Kingdom, and the humble servant of all our people" (Massaro, 2010).

The Puebla meeting of 1979 re-emphasized preferential option for the poor as a pre-condition for a society where there is justice for all. The Catholic bishops described this term ‘option’ not to imply exclusion of anyone, but instead to imply a preference for the poor and a drawing closer to them (Feuchtman, 2009). This option for the poor is a perspective that maintains that one can measure the quality of justice in any society by the way the poor are treated. It is an invitation to discern, listen, see and respond to the cry of the poor through word and actions. The Church at that time was responding to the situation affecting people. As indicated in the introductory section of this study, poverty can be defined depending on the conditions of the people at a particular time. The Catholic bishops took time to look at poverty from the point of those who are genuinely needy and would attract response as indicated in the Gospel of St Matthew thus: “For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was a stranger and you invited me into your home” (Mt. 25:35).

The Bishops cited the above section of the Gospel as a link between what Jesus did in the synagogue after quoting the prophet Isaiah and later sending the apostles to mission work. The work of the Church to proclaim liberty to captives was developed further by Dorr’s *Option for the Poor: A Hundred Years of Vatican Social Teaching* (1983) where he advances the Church’s response to structural injustice in the world (p. 97).

For a long time, the Catholic bishops through their pastoral letters have written to condemn unjust systems in which those who have do not care about those without. Catholic social thought recognized that “the poor and helpless have a claim to special consideration” (Pope Leo XIII, 1891). Pope Leo in his Encyclical *Rerum Novarum* (On Capital and Labour) contextualized the definition of the term poor. Whereas the Catholic social teaching addresses the poor as those without employment, drug addicts, a portion of the elderly and low income earners, the Pope transcended this definition to include the poor as those who lack the behind in so many areas of life and are marginalized. Every society will always have such kind people but the most tragic among all are the children of the poor. Pope John Paul II (1987) while addressing Catholic bishops in Brazil explained the preferential option for the poor as:

a call to special solidarity with the humble and the weak, with those who are suffering and weeping, who are humiliated and left on the fringes of life and society, in order to have them realize more fully their own dignity as human persons and children of God” (*Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, 39).

Pope John Paul II (1987) clarified that although “the precept to love all men and women admits no exclusion...it does admit a privileged engagement in favour of the poorest” (*Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, 40). What the Pope emphasizes is that preferential option for the poor is an undisputed component of the Catholic social teaching. The contribution of the church to the world should be tested by its care for poor people.

The onset of this term to the social teaching of the Church was intended to provide pastoral guidelines for members of the Church to be witnesses in the world. According to Phiri (as cited in Twomey, 2005), if the Church really wishes to commit itself to be on the side of the poor, it must do much more than proclaim this fact (*Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, 34). Cook (1958) calls this in his work, *The Expectation of the Poor, a new way of doing Theology* (p. 1021). At this historical period, Catholic social teaching was greatly influenced by teachers such as Leonardo Boff and Gutierrez. Apparently, preferential option for the poor became a solid and permanent part of the Catholic social teaching. Twomey (2005) provides an explanation on the development of this teaching on the option for the poor. His was an advanced version of what

it means to put the Church in the front line in its activities towards the poor. The Church in this context understands responsibility as a calling rather than just a task to be accomplished.

The Church lives within a world with socio-economic and political changes that make people desire for justice and equal participation. Within such experiences, it has to rethink of current pastoral orientations and principles, objectives and ways. The Theology of any church should be situated within a certain social reality that defends human dignity (Cook, 1958, p. 1022). This explains why the theology of liberation underlies Catholic social teaching. Ojaka (1996) emphasizes the fruits of Final Report of the 1985 Synod of Bishops of Latin America by indicating that they devoted a separate section to the preferential option for the poor. The Bishops on their part expressed Church's awareness of its mission to serve the poor by being prophetic (Ojaka, 1996, p. 24).

The Catholic social teaching encourages that members of the Church should oppose a system that oppresses people. Preferential option for the poor means having a vision, an invitation to look at things from the perspective of a poor person (Neuhaus, 1988). In their 1986 pastoral letter, *Economic Justice for All*, the American Catholic Bishops describe the preferential option as an "obligation to evaluate social and economic activity from the viewpoint of the poor and the powerless" (American Catholic Bishops, 1986, p. 56). The observation by the bishops touches on all the areas of life but particularly on access to quality education. Education is a factor that can enable poor people be elevated in many aspects. In 1986, the United States Catholic bishops delved into this theme of option for the poor by creating institutions to defend the defenceless (Massaro, 2010).

The institutions that were enhanced by the Magisterium included the inclusion of this Christian duty of protecting the poor in its canon law. The intention of the bishops was to have a legal system that addressed the emerging trends not captured in the Church's social teaching. This followed what Saint Pope John Paul II raised in the encyclical *On Reason and Faith* as exercise of Christian charity towards the poor (John Paul II, 1998, p. 6). Saint John Paul II reiterated in his encyclical that while it may look like a simple task to do, the option demands a lot of sacrifice from all members in a society.

Feutchmann and Bernardin (2005) note equally that preferential option is a way through which the Church can be understood as an advocate of justice. This traditional position of the Church as an arbiter of the society cannot be delegated. Lohfink (1987) points out that justice is easy to discuss but then there are underlying difficulties in making it realistically practical. But even if this ideal is difficult to achieve the Church cannot hide from the fact that it has to be seen to be standing for the poor. The advent of Liberation Theology was an opportune period for the Church to discern, listen, see and respond to the cry of the poor through actions. By doing so, people started to make contributions into that which rightfully belonged to the poor. Rather than looking at governments or those outside the church to care for the vulnerable, Pope Francis addressed all the faithful to be fully and deeply in touch with the poor and in so doing radiate joy into their tribulations (Francis, 2013, p. 47).

The Divine Mandate of the Church in Poverty Alleviation

The divine role of the Church in human history should be seen in God's act of creation. In the Genesis story of creation, a special place is assigned to the making of humanity, which is presented as the climax of God's creative undertaking. The first of these stories dignifies Adam (male and female) as the creature made after God's image and likeness (Genesis 1:26-27). The second shows God creating the first human out of earth, breathing life into him, and finally

settling him and his companion in the garden to live off bounty. Closely examined, creation stories carry a wealth of meaning at many levels in human life. As God's image, Adam is placed over other creatures and given a calling under God to promote and continue with the work of creation. Here, the human being is portrayed in a way that signifies all his creative duties such as being a teacher, farmer, doctor, artist, scientist, among others.

In the second story, Adam's fellowship not only with the creatures of other species (animate and inanimate), he is given a companion, a woman, another of his own kind with whom to share life. Humanity is here again portrayed symbolically in its social character; bringing to birth families, nations and cultures. As the image of God and likeness, Adam is created to be with "others", and to be one who communicates, shares, and co-operates. As such, this human being is an "answerable" creature, one that exercises freedom in calling under God and to be accountable to others by reflecting and manifesting the creative power and love of God. The story of creation is, therefore, an affirmation of mankind's social, political, economic and spiritual activities: including giving service to community. Poverty alleviation is thus one of the services which men and women through the Church have the Divine mandate to perform.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This paper laid foundation to the overall understanding of preferential option for the poor by tracing it back from the Old Testament through the New Testament into contemporary times. It also considered the root of the social teaching relating to the poor from the treasures of Church documents. From the review, it is evident that the option was given an impetus in the New Testament through the person of Jesus Christ whose messianic activities fulfilled what the prophets of old had foretold. Although the Messiah suffered death on the cross, the teaching of the Catholic Catechism presents this as liberation *per se*. As such, the Biblical notion of God opting to stand on the side of the poor, right from the time of the people of Israel to latter Christianity, continues to influence the Catholic Social teaching as evidenced by major papal documents and patristic teachings. Underlying the option is the conviction that the Church cannot isolate itself from the community that it is required to transform. Therefore, the preferential option for the poor is a teaching that had been received and domesticated as shown not only by the establishment of schools in the diocese but more so the way poor students get support.

From these findings of the study, the Church must continue to emphasize that locally generated resources be used to substitute the need for foreign donors. There is a great disconnect between the teachings that believers should support the Church and ways through which they should create wealth in their homes. This calls for a deliberate and clear strategy to excite local donors to support their own people through faith formation and wealth creation. Equally, strong governance and accountability mechanism are critical if programmes for the poor are to succeed.

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