

# Almsgiving: A Case for Pastoral Theology

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## ABSTRACT

Doing Pastoral theology as a course in the academic world has opened our understanding of the true mission of Jesus Christ to the world, a mission which has its focal point as the redemption of the human race. One very important part of this human race is the group of persons who are suffering around the world and begging for alms to make their daily living. This mission which was handed over to the Church as a continuation of the mission, and beckoning on all people of good will to get involved in this mission to ensure the common good of all.

The generality of people in the world very regularly underrate the importance of almsgiving in our daily march towards human and spiritual height. It is no doubt that every person is struggling daily to reach a certain level of perfection, whether spiritually or socially, although we make a great deal of human effort, yet no amount of this effort of ours made is enough to make us arrive at that desired height of perfect humanity. It is only by the special grace of God which is freely endowed by God and could only be obtained through our generous response to God's invitation to follow him more closely in love daily, taking up our crosses. This is by living out practically the virtues of this grace which he has freely lavished on us.

Of course, all human beings, generally do believe in love, and many still do believe in charity, however, I doubt how many of those who really understand the dimension and dynamism of almsgiving if put side-by-side their understanding of the virtue and practice of love and charity. This study is meant to help every individual to understand the place and role of almsgiving in the building up of strong societal, personal spiritual and social foundations in life. It is the only key to realize the common good. Hence, in this study we will try as much as possible to examine the meaning of almsgiving, why people misunderstand the word and its practice, comparing its cousin terms- Love and Charity. We shall discuss briefly too, the foundations and origin of almsgiving, its kinds, implication, almsgiving as a gospel of Christ preached to all and how it has affected our Pastoral theological apostolate. Towards the end of the study we bring our study to bare on our present work here as a foundation charged with the apostolate of almsgiving, and in conclusion, we shall try to bridge the gap as much as possible to be able to propose some recommendations to make a better global society. I do hope that its careful and systematic study, undemanding and application in our daily social and spiritual life would help us a great deal.

**KEYWORDS:** *Almsgiving, Love, Charity, Society, Apostolate, Theological, Social, Spiritual*

## 1. ALMSGIVING: IT'S MEANING

The word "Almsgiving" may have been defined and explained by many theorists and in various ways and at various times. It is one word which is really used in regular discussions and is very often misused or replaced with the word "charity", these words are actually inseparable, but they are not exactly the same, they also do not have the same practical implementations. For us to provide a very clear meaning to this word 'almsgiving' there could be need to reflect briefly on the meaning / differences between charity, love and almsgiving and their collaborative dimensions. Let us take them one by one, beginning with love.

### LOVE

Love is the mother of all virtues; it is the supernatural, gracious energy which God the creator has out of his

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Theological teachings have always placed the virtue of love above all other virtues and it is interpreted as the foundation of every Christian spirituality. It is only love that properly unites man more firmly to his creator. The only identifiable resemblance between God and man is hidden in the basis of love. No wonder St. John in his first epistle, says we should practice loving each other, for love comes from God and those who are loving and kind show that they are the children of God, and that they are getting to know God; for God is Love (cf. 1 John 4:7-8). And, Paul in his own teaching emphasizes that; *"Love is the answer to every one of the commandments"* (Rom 13:10).

Even those who seem not to agree with the existence of God and those who do not believe in Christ Jesus, they all have love in them. The kidnappers, armed robbers and hired assassins who take the precious *God-given* life of their fellow human beings still have love in them. The problem is that sometimes we allow this costly virtue of love which God has granted us to be clouded and overshadowed by evil, which I may say, is as a result of satanic manipulations in our lives. We have refused to pay attention to reason and the teaching of Christ through His church. Very often we hear our neighbors saying to us or to other people, 'you have no love for me' 'you do not love me or him', other times we ask; do you love me? Or do you love him? Just like our Christ asked Peter. This does not mean to say that love does not exist in the person; rather its logical interpretations could be that the person does not demonstrate that love. Most often we are carried away by negative attitudes which negate the grace of love deep down our hearts. One sure belief is that God created every existing being, and a part of God dwells in human being. Christ himself, in the Gospels, emphasized it in form of a command, as presented by John the Evangelist, saying; *"This is my commandment: Love one another just as I have loved you"* (Jn.15:12), and Christians call it the golden rule of Christ.

### CHARITY

Charity is the influence of the grace of love in persons. While love is a grace of God in person, charity could be seen as the translation of that grace into attitude. It is the manner in which one expresses the virtue of love in one. Charity is an attitudinal charm which affects the other person in a positive manner. If you have a neighbor, and you hear that he or she is ill, when you experience an empathetic feeling for that neighbor, you pray for the person, you send some get-well messages, or visit the person for consolation, that becomes a charitable act. You can see that you have succeeded in expressing the unseen love you have for that person emotionally and attitudinally. Charity is a broad way of expressing love, and it is always positive. It is totally intertwined with love. It is like a mother and child. A good child represents and portrays the mentality of the parent in the outside world, knowingly or unknowingly. God expressed his Love in charity when he took on human nature, dwelt among us and identified with us. That is an altruistic love. Love is not found in moment of high romance nearly as much as it is in times of simple sharing

Charity involves the whole person; whole self is given to it, and if the love-virtue is allowed to burn properly, then our entirety will be positively plunged into daily acts of charity. It is not the absence of love in us that causes the crises and problems of our society today; it is rather the absence of charity. Majority of our human race have failed to fan the grace of love in them into charity. It is like fanning a hot coal

into burning flame of fire. Heroic charity is the only test of holiness, that means that the person who has and shows more virtue of charity is the one who is more holy; it does not matter who that person is – Pope, Cardinal, Bishop, Priest, Brother, Sister, the poor married women with many children or without any child, being nagged by her husband, or the poor old or young man selling or pushing wheelbarrow at the village market. Every human being, is encouraged to fan up the virtue of charity, no matter what circumstance.

The gospel of charity has no limit; it is a clear message of God, to all peoples. The virtue of charity is not limited to the use of material things, that means, it is not practiced only with physical possessions, like money or other belongings, it is all embracing. In the following point of reflection, we shall discuss 'Almsgiving' which is one aspect of charity and of course the more practical aspect of charity.

### ALMSGIVING

Almsgiving is the third dimension of love; it is that aspect of charity which is more pronounced and many are often tempted to limit charity to that. Very often people who do almsgiving in bigger dimension sees themselves as those who are more charitable, so they make those others who don't have the finances (money) to give feel that they are not charitable or that they cannot perform charitable acts. It has often led many into psychological trauma, and spiritual depression; this is because they desire to do charity but they have no money to do that, of course. A physically challenged person once told his friend that he regrets not having cash in his life. Asked why, he bemoaned that he desires so much to do charity to people but he is financially handicapped too. We must realize that our entire life is wealth meant to enrich other people, our beautiful smile alone could return many souls from grief if generally offered daily; we could return many to their glory by our encouragement and wealth of wisdom if we freely offer them to those who need them out there. Our Lord Jesus Christ in his thirty-three (33) years on earth, had no physical cash or material wealth, yet he made the entire world rich and lively with his wealth of love, wisdom and knowledge, accompanying it with healing and forgiveness. No one got money from him but so many became rich and happy through him. Jesus re-echoed in the gospel of Luke that the Spirit is upon him to set man free from suffering and pain.(cf. Lk. 4:18)

The choice of this discussion on almsgiving as an important aspect of the virtue of love is so that we could help ourselves a bit to improve and further upgrade our level of spirituality which really cannot be proved without due reference to our social personalities. We cannot qualify our level of spiritual life without relating it closely to our relationship with others. The quality of our spiritual maturity could only be properly ascertained through the quality of our human relations. The Evangelist, John, in his letter to the church of Christ remarks thus; "If anyone says, "I love God," but hates his neighbor, that one is a liar; for whoever does not love a neighbor whom is seen cannot love God who is not seen. Whoever loves God must also love neighbor." See 1Jn. 4: 20. For James, the test of our faith in God is our good deeds done in love for our neighbors. James 2.

Many writers have dwelt so much on the topics 'LOVE' and 'CHARITY' in their broad sense but we have chosen to narrow our discussion to 'ALMSGIVING' so as to help more people practice their faith and relationship harmoniously and with accomplishment.

By Almsgiving we refer to the physical and practical aspect of charity. It is when an individual or group chooses to give out money or physical goods to another person to support the progress of that person. (Definition, mine). In comparison, while charity is giving one's whole self to another, almsgiving is giving part of one's self, giving part of your belongings or possessions to improve the life and status of the other person. For the receiver, it may be a 'need' or a 'want', for the giver it could be a matter of importance, an ingredient of life. Almsgiving, unlike charity, is performed according to individual ability, that is, according to the available resources of the giver. Almsgiving is an important test of one's degree of charity, and no one is equally exempted from giving alms. Even the clerics, who are especially consecrated to God and publicly take the heroic vows of poverty, are also charged to give alms. For them it is a preaching of the poverty of Christ if they, out of great love, give little alms out of their small pocket money to those they know have none, especially the challenged ones they visit, to support the purchase of small drugs which those sick ones could not afford for themselves. A cleric, for instance, who saves part of his or her permissive monthly pocket allowances, only to offer it back to the congregation or community to assist or support the provision of drugs and / or good meal for the sick and aged in the community, is not disobedient or going against the vow of poverty, it is almsgiving proper. One may also choose to transfer an article of clothing, a clean one, but not really needed by him, to a fellow religious in the same house for charity sake, in pastoral theology, it is called 'the common good'. Same can be said of all people of God in the World, working for the common good is the duty of all of us, according to our various capacities. The neglect of this aspect of Love has led to the current poverty situation in the world today.

#### **BASIS FOR ALMSGIVING**

The practice of almsgiving may be traced back to the beginning of creation and its basis could be linked to our creator Himself (God) and a part of human tradition right from the first human generation. It is part of human living and made as such that it greatly contributed to the progressive and peaceful coexistence and development of human society. The practice of almsgiving has served as a means of unity and reconciliation of people and community with God. Socially and traditionally, it has served as a uniting force between people of diverse status. Almsgiving has helped many unfortunate people to return to their expected status.

When we reflect on the power of almsgiving based on the scriptures, we see how God has been described as model of almsgiver. David says that "*God is our refuge and strength an ever-present help in trouble*" (Psalm 46). The text explains that there is nothing we need, physically or emotionally that God cannot give to us. We all came into this world naked and empty-handed, not even food could we provide for ourselves, we could not even help ourselves or reorganize where we were, but God began to make all things needed in life available to us (cf. 1 Cor. 14: 1 ff), we continue to hope for more gifts from God until we pass on to meet with him face to face in heaven. Many of us have not really reflected on the miracle of daily life. Many are weak and have not even strength to work, they do not earn, yet they eat each day. Even when they think they had not eaten enough to sustain them, and are afraid they would die, yet they are surprised to see themselves still moving on and not dead. God is

providing for every one of us, He remains a very generous almsgiver and the originator of kindness (Rd. Is. 4:6 ff, Mt. 6:25).

Every good act is motivated by God, while a bad act is motivated by the evil passion, greed and lack of love for fellow human being, often attributed to the workings of the devil. St. Paul tells us that what is born of flesh is flesh, and what is born of the spirit is spirit. (cf. Roams 8:5). The flesh, which is weak, is generally influenced by the devil when not properly subdued under the power of the Spirit. Every good thing done by any human being is influenced by the Holy Spirit through the individual's good conscience. So, from the time of creation God endowed man with that ability to be good, and to do good to others, to help other people to survive, to share our possessions with other people. Human beings are made stewards of creation, to give proper attention to everything that exists, and to fellow human being and an account is expected by the Lord of creation. Traditionally, in the time of our fore-fathers, people do not lack, for the strong ones who could cultivate and provide enough for themselves and families, shared with others who are less-fortunate, and that made everyone have enough to eat, needs of life were shared according to each person's needs. This could also be interpreted as the traditional significance of the feeding of five thousand and four thousand respectively as presented in the gospels, even the remnants were gathered together in baskets, non-left to waste so as to make provision for those who may still need food. Even though the narrators selfishly avoided the women and children (Rd. Mt. 14: 13; 15: 32, Lk. 9:10-17 & John 6: 1 - 15). We can in like manner interpret the drama which took place in the Acts of Apostles chapter 4 and 5, where the believers in Christ brought all their possessions in a common account and had it shared among everybody according to their needs were. No one was in need whatsoever; this is because there are no needs of one person that another person does not have somewhere else, the common good. Even God was so pained when in chapter 5, Ananias and his wife Sapphira tried to be selfish, and hoarded the proceeds from their own possessions; God punished them by sudden death. Giving alms and sharing what we have with our fellow human beings have three dimensional implications; Spiritual implications, social implications and psychological implications; this we shall reflect on in subsequent chapters in details. When we perform deeds as almsgiving, we are expected to act in all kindness and humility, not only as offering to God for a return, but in the attitude that it is our duty. It is the right of the poor and needy to have from our resources. And we are not to sound a trumpet or make a public show of our almsgiving as Matthew presents it;

"But take care not to perform righteous deeds in order that people may see them; otherwise, you will have no reward from your heavenly Father. When you give alms, do not blow a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets to win the praise of others. Amen, I say to you, they have received their reward. But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right is doing. So that your almsgiving may be secret. And your Father who sees in secret will repay you" (Mt. 6: 1 - 4). Almsgiving is a natural rudiment of a peaceful and joyous living. It is only the vise of selfishness which has beclouded the minds of many, which deprives us of performing this virtue of almsgiving.



## Ways to Perform Almsgiving

Experience in our pastoral work shown that our people, especially Christians are yet to make something good out of our way of attending to the needs of those around us. Very often we observe many who give alms to boost their political ambitions, for instance, what may be the idea behind China donating health equipment and facilities to the Nigerian government to fight pandemic diseases? Of course, they need something in return; to establish a domineering economic status over Nigeria in the guise of trade relationships. Why would France continue to backup the Francophone Cameroons against the Anglophone, if not to continue to maintain her colonial leadership over the nation? All these international gestures could have been made through the United Nations' Bodies without making noise about it.

Come down to our local levels; we see wealthy individuals making huge donations to certain communities in the name of assistance, that is quite a good do, but at the end of such, those individuals would expect some kind of public acclamation of the gestures. They actually intend to gain a political or economic reward from the government or society; nothing goes for nothing. Same attitude has also grossly influenced our individual little assistance even to the poor in our neighborhood. This is affecting the works of the Non-governmental agencies, like the BEMSI foundation International which operates in Nigeria. Many rich and affluent people prefer that the NGOs organizes public shows and invite them to make public donations so their kind donations may be noticed and applauded by the crowd.

Almsgivings, in a practical sense might be the same, however, what may be different is the intentions for which it was done and the way it is done. Many people attend to the needs of other people who approach them. Some give out of their own volition; *an act of doing without being asked*. Doing because you saw and knew it was important and needed. Others give because they are asked. Some give cheerfully, while others give because they have no option. Many give for political reasons while others give for spiritual reasons, and others, still, give just for social reasons. Giving alms generally is good, but the good intention of the giver makes it better. This is the reason Jesus Christ would advise his followers not to give alms like the Scribes and Pharisees. The above therefore helps us to classify almsgiving into spiritual almsgiving, political almsgiving and social almsgiving. These three ways are generally observed in our society today.

### Spiritually motivated almsgiving

This is a very high level of Christian generosity based on scriptural belief. It always has a spiritual undertone with foundation based on so many passages of the Holy Bible, especially on the gospel of Matthew 25:31 ff. It teaches us to give help to those who are in need, many of who may not have come to meet us, but we are encouraged to seek them out ourselves, most of these needy persons are out there, somewhere crying for help, in the hospitals and many in their homes but no one



hears them or cares about them. Many may also come out to meet us as we move about or drive around the city or neighborhood, some are also around our homes, and others still may be members of our immediate or extended families. When, therefore, we have made up our minds to help them, we must make our giving an

act of piety, that is, we are to accompany the giving with a little heart to heart prayer, for the receiver and for you who give out. Those who receive are to equally accept the gift or help they receive by offering a short thank you to God and asking His blessings upon the one who is giving. The receiver could offer that gift as prayer on behalf of other people who are also suffering and need help too. A 'thank you' with a little spiritual aspiration to God on behalf of the givers. The one who is receiving help should see oneself standing for one's co-receiver. Above all, is to see oneself standing in the person of Christ the beggar, Jesus who is on crutches asking for help, while the giver imagines self as Christ who is fulfilling God's mission of feeding the hungry. The act becomes a holy act, an act of worship, and it brings great blessings upon the almsgiver. We must not be tired of being good and doing good to people, we must continue to share whatever we have with those who do not have it, globally, nationally or locally, no matter how painful it might be to us, and each one gives according to how much one has received from God. What is the joy of having wealth if it does not bring happiness to other people?

Jesus says to us always: *"If you wish to be perfect, go and sell all you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven"* (Mt. 19:20-21). So, no doubt that whatever we give out in almsgiving we receive back in return, not just the measure returned, but we inherit the kingdom of God. Giving out in a spiritually- motivated heart is usually not easy because accompanying it as it comes out of us are – merciful emotion, love, our desire, your own important need, which could have been met with what we give out, and this is the kind of sacrifice God actually desires (cf. 1Sam. 15:22, Ps. 4:5, Prov. 21:3, Hos. 6:6 and Mt. 9:13).

St. Paul says to the Christians in Corinth, *"I am perfectly willing to spend what I have and to be expended in the interests of your souls"* (2 Cor. 6:14). Proverbs 21:3 says; *"To do what is right and just is more acceptable to the Lord than sacrifice"* and Proverbs 17:1 says *"Better a dry crust with quiet than a house full of feasting with strife."* In Isaiah 43:24, the Lord rebuked us thus: *"Thou hast bought me no sweet cane with money, neither hast thou filled me with the fat of thy sacrifices; but thou hast made me to serve with thy sins, thou hast wearied me with thine iniquities"* In Hosea 6:6, the Lord says; *"For I desired mercy, and not sacrifice; and the knowledge of God more than burnt offering."* we are to give out fat alms from the hundreds of thousands we have, not out of our abundance, but from the little we think is not enough for us. At times, we sought out that which is no longer useful to us or our children, and the wear out money which may no longer be accepted in the markets, these are the type of gifts we sometimes offer to God. Prophet Malachi



warned the Jews; "... if you offer the blind for sacrifice, is it not evil? And if you offer the lame and sick, is it not evil? Offer it now to your governor; will he be pleased with you; or accept your person? Says the lord of hosts" (Mal. 1:7-8). Why then should developed nations chose to use some developing nations as dumping grounds, where those condemned items and food are dumped? No nation should seek the downfall of any nation for we are all one people of God.

We are to be careful not to offend God the more when we perform our acts of charity for Malachi Chapter 1:14 says; "cursed be the deceiver, which has in his flock a male, and vowed, and sacrifices unto the Lord a corrupt thing....."

We won't have to offer a sacrifice that would cost us nothing (*Cui respondens rex, ait: Nequaquam ut vis, sed emam pretio a te, et non offeram Domino Deo meo holocausta gratuita*) 2Sam. 24:24. We must give for love for those who failed to love and share their God-giving blessings with others brings pain and sorrow to them, and they shall in return be visited with unbearable tears we must also learn from the lesson of Lazarus and Dives in the gospels of St. Luke 16:20ff, we are to give always with devotion and in cheerfulness, for God loves a cheerful giver (2Cor. 9: 6 – 7).

### Politically Motivated almsgiving

This is another dimension in which many people in our society today practice their own almsgiving. This has become so popular in African politics. It is a practice through which most politicians advertise their political ambitions and attract supporters, especially in a nation where poverty has taken over the people's economy. A society where the very few advantaged persons have hijacked the national treasury while the many at the margin are struggling to have at least a meal each day. We often observe that at elections campaign time, many politicians begin to donate huge monies to communities, embark on projects (not often functional), donate to churches and other institutions, many embark on all kinds of charity donations such as, cash and food donations to less-privileged homes, bags of rice and cash are seen distributed to widows and other poor families in certain communities within the campaign zone of the individual candidates. A funny scenario was when certain politician donated wheelbarrow to truck pushers in Nigeria; what a horrible mentality? Instead of helping the people to get better self-employment or into petty trade or farming at least for self-reliance, he further wished them suffering by encouraging them to continue pushing truck for survival, was the father of this politician a truck pusher, how would he feel? Certain individuals have often benefitted from this kind of 'charity' anyway, and at that point in time. Political candidates also dish out money and other gifts to be distributed to those who would come out to vote for them on election day and at the polling units, money is seen secretly or publicly shared to voters; illegal practices, buying the consciences of the vulnerable ones. As soon as such candidates are elected, they stop their "charity", they rather begin to recover the money expended during the campaign, to the detriment of the masses. They get richer while the poor people get poorer. They forget that the poor exist.

The interesting thing is that this kind of almsgiving practice ends as soon as the elections are over, many promises also made are not fulfilled, to crown it all, it is always difficult to approach those politicians once they get into offices. Many people who have political interests at heart, begin by floating some kind of charity foundations to make themselves much

popular in the minds of the people earlier before they come into the political scene, that, at least makes it easier to get the people's interest and mandates, and they are given all kinds of nick-names and chieftaincy titles. This kind of almsgiving is always having an agenda attached, which if not rechanneled, becomes its immediate and temporal reward. This, most often, does not have any spiritual undertone or benefit, because, as the case may be, if such candidate finds himself or herself into the elected office, he or she would often be tempted to siphon all our treasury in order to get back all that has been given out during the campaigns, and even take more. The public must be very careful not to be deceived by this kind of almsgiving in the name of charity works.

### Socially motivated almsgiving

In this kind of almsgiving practice, no spiritual or political undertone may be attached. It is generally almsgiving done by friends, groups or clubs among themselves. One may ask a companion walking together to offer one a hundred naira to buy something and one receives it immediately if it is available. It is a kindness done, but without any political or spiritual notion attached to it. For instance, a social group such as club may choose to do a general collection among themselves at a meeting to assist a bereaved colleague or married colleague, this is a social obligation. It is very common in the African society. It is a kind of social solidarity among peer groups.

### IMPLICATIONS FOR AMSGIVING

Everything one does on earth definitely has one implication or the other, positive or negative implications, it is important to know that there is nothing one does on earth that has no reward, such reward may be pleasant or unpleasant and it is usually according to one's deed. The implications for almsgiving could as well be classified into two, vis: SOCIOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS AND THEOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS. We shall discuss these two one by one and briefly too. By implication we mean the after effect of an action, the end-result and /or benefit thereafter an action is performed such implication may be short-term ore long term, or both.

#### Sociological implications

By this we refer to the implications attached to almsgiving done on social or political grounds. It means that whatever almsgiving one performs on social or political bases, one expects a social reward or political reward respectively. Since a socially motivated almsgiving is performed by an individual so as to please his peers and done at a point in time, such individual is expected to receive a social reward, such reward could be short-lived if it is just given within a particular occasion. Such gifts as wedding gifts and birthday gifts, etc. It could be long-lived if done in order to maintain relationship, or done for political reason, the giver may get the people's admiration and mandate in return or still may get disappointment as the case may be. It is usually done with the hope of 'one good turn deserves another'.

#### Theological implications

This is the one we are much more concerned about. It is an almsgiving which has a theological/spiritual undertone and always has a theological/spiritual reward in return. It has a long-term positive implication. As the title indicates, it is linked to God himself. This is when almsgiving is done out of charity, according to the mind of God and for the sake of the kingdom. Examples of this abound in the scriptures.



Like the Holy Bible, the Holy Quran, instructing Muslims on mankind and its abundance, condemns those who refuse to supply neighborly needs. Talking further on neighborly needs, (Al-mā'uñ) from verse 1, says thus: *"In the name of Allah, most merciful, - seest thou one who denies the judgment to come? Then such is the one who repulses the orphans and encourages not the feeding of the indigent"* (Holy Quran, part 30, no. 7.)

This is just a very small quote of the Quran where the leader of the Islam religion warms his followers and gave them this powerful message of Allah. Every Religion that believes and worship God actually preaches the spiritual importance of almsgiving. The church of Jesus Christ also holds this tenet as a key to unlocking the heart of God. There is urgent need for Justice, Reconciliation and Peace in our society today so that there could be spiritual and social development. On this important gospel of help to the poor and needy, Pope Francis comments thus in his Apostolic Exhortation encourages each Christian and community to be God's instrument for the liberation and promotion of the poor. To see that the poor are properly incorporated into the society. He calls each one to be docile and be attentive to the cry of the poor people. (see Francis, 2013). Pope Francis Re-echoes the words of Sirach 4:6, which says that, *"A lack of solidarity towards his or her needs will directly affect our relationship with God"* *"for if in bitterness of soul he calls down a cure upon you, his creator will hear his prayer"* (Sir. 4:6). *"The old question always returns: 'How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods, and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help?'"* 1 Jn. 3:17(Ibid). There is therefore need to be empathic and at the same time be sympathetic towards those who ask us for help. Our compassion for people who need our help would build up our agape love for others.

There was a woman who nags and never allowed her husband (a good man) to help the poor widows and orphans in his community as he desired. This woman was always nagging and her only daughter took after her and supported her wicked acts, while her two sons took after their father and did not welcome the attitude of their mother and only sister. The woman succeeded in sending her husband who was wealthy to an early grave, when the man's will was read, he divided a whole lot of his wealth among the two sons only and a part to one of his good and close uncles, but no dime was willed to his wife and daughter. Eventually, the woman and daughter were thrown out of their house by the two sons, and had them return to their village so poor and even, they begged for food but many people ran away from them knowing the woman to be a wicked woman.

When she heard of her two sons' generosity towards the widows in the village and never cared about her and her daughter, the woman decided to visit a witch doctor for a charm to harm her own children, to impoverish them perpetually, unfortunately, while about to do what the witch doctor told her to do at the shrine, she mysteriously got blind. As a remedy for her survival, the witch doctor demanded that her two sons, whom he said were innocent and were protected by their generosity, must have to return to the village to forgive her within two days and before noon. She ran back to the late husband's good brother through the same widow she once detested and punished for receiving help from her family. It was only those widows who could pacify her sons to forgive them. Seeing the cry of those widows on their mother and sister's behalf, on arrival, they

decided to forgive her but it was already exactly 12 noon, and the woman still died as soon as she was pardoned.

This story confirms the saying that the wages of wickedness and selfishness is wickedness too. Every act has repercussion. First, she maltreated the widows and suddenly she became a widow herself, she denied the widows food from her table, so she was also denied food when she became a widow, she maltreated her husband, so she was also maltreated, not by those she ill-treated, but by providence, yet she died.

However, God spared those widows and allowed them to live, but took away the life of their wicked terrorist. Every wicked and selfish act towards the poor and needy persons always go with repercussions. We must not keep away the ladder with which we climbed for we might need it to come down. God loves cheerful givers and would provide for them in their own time of needs. God puts into your store-bank every help you render in almsgiving; from that bank he will provide more for you whenever you are in need. This theological type of almsgiving must be our dream. We must sow our seeds and then God will make them grow like trees planted by the running water. It is the joy associated with the golden rule. Our social acts must have roots on divine graces.

#### How can we change the paradigm?

By renewing the face of the earth. *"God's spirit is upon me, he has called me and sent me afar, to bring good news to the poor, to set the prisoners free, and to preach, recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor"* (Luke 4:18-19).

Christ lived this out in his life time and Mathew the Evangelist in his Gospel, testifies to this when he reminded us of the prophecy of Isaiah about Jesus Christ: *"He took up our infirmities and carried our diseases"* (Mt. 8:17).

Furthermore, our Lord Jesus, model of good almsgiver, encourages almsgivers to be more religious when they give to the poor and not to sound the trumpet, like the Pharisees does, (see Mt 6:1-4).

This is why it is encouraged that people can send their donations to the needy people through established foundations such as 'BEMSI charity foundation' and other organizations engaged in advocacy and care-giving, where the end receivers and your friends may not really know that you did such. Only your father in heaven and the NGO representing the needy client knows all you had done. This may be why some NGOs honor some personalities with awards in appreciation, on behalf of the needy receivers.



Proper spirit of almsgiving helps to renew the face of the earth; which would become a continuation of the mission of God which Christ began as pointed out above in the Gospel of Luke chapter Four. We can better our society when we begin to think of changing the lives and situations of the needy and poor people in our various communities by sharing our little

resources with our fellow community members and those we meet outside - the less-privileged ones especially. Many writers have argued that there is nobody who is poor, or better put, that everybody is poor. Instead of trying to find solution to eradicating poverty on the border line (cf. Cecillano, J., 2014). This essay is not to debate or context such claims.

Cecillano identifies classes of the poor to include: farmers, fishermen, drivers, security guards, vendors, the indigenous people, the unemployed, those in slums, the physically handicapped, and those in prison, scavengers, alms-seekers, and the homeless who make the street their abode. The less-privileged persons are our brethren who are not endowed with certain necessities of life. They are not able at some point in time, to provide such things needed for themselves when they are most needed to forge ahead in life. They undertake the most undignified jobs and yet make nothing out of it. They can hardly make a meal a day despite their efforts and struggles. There are classifications of less-privileges, some are more impaired than others, some are less-privileged by medical, biological or natural accidents, while some are made less-privileged by fellow human beings.

There are also various physical disabilities that could make an individual less-privileged and needy, such disabilities as - leprosy, mental cases and tramps, hearing and speech impairments, sight impairment, crippled or deformed. Others are the aged, the sickly, oppressed widows, the orphans, prisoners, detained but not charged persons and the hungry, these people are less-privileged and handicapped, they can also contribute to make our society a better place if given adequate attention and assistance according to how their disabilities permit them. Those who cannot perform at all could be given adequate rehabilitation and support for livelihood.

Jesus began his mission by reacting against the alarming rate of greed which has led many into untold hardship and has made many to turn away from God. When Jesus reacted at his first homily in the Synagogue of Nazareth as recorded by Luke the evangelist, he read aloud:

*"The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."* (Lk. 4: 18 - 19). This proclamation formed the basis of the life and times of Jesus. He gave the detailed interpretation of the above proclamation in the following words:

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the Kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy.

Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God.

Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the Kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you (Mt. 5: 3 - 11).

Only the above beatitudes can change the earth, it is a complete life reforming message for our nations and encouragement for those who are on the right part, making effort to re-create and renew the face of the earth. Because of greed Jesus rebuked some of his disciples, at a point rebuking the satan (greed) which tries to manipulate Peter against the will of God. Jesus warned a rich young man, a ruler, against greed when he asked him to sell all he had so as to make life better for the poor and suffering (Lk. 18: 18 - 30). The story of the rich man and Lazarus reflects the implication of greediness (Lk. 16: 19 - 31). Again, in Luke 11: 37 - 52, Jesus pronounced six woes upon the Pharisees because of their greediness and lack of love for the poor. There are so many instances in the scriptures which portray the greediness of this world at that time. The culmination of it all is the dramatic performance of Judas Iscariot betraying and selling his friend for a few pieces of coins (Jn. 18: 1 - 10). A clear representation of what greed can do in our lives. Greed is the root of all failures to share our lives and resources with others in love and charity especially with the poor needy ones around us.

It is greed which makes one to kill one's relative for a piece of land, it is greed that makes one lay false accusation against one's neighbor so as to have everything to one's self. It is greed that makes us love money and material things more than our fellow human beings. Greed makes us commit all kinds of atrocities against our neighbor. It is also greed that makes us not to love ourselves in the proper manner. When we are not satisfied with are and have, we want to get more and more, we form cliques, fight for positions and even kill to get the positions. Greed, though highly overlooked, is the worse vice that manipulates humanity, it has made men to perpetually marginalize women and dominate them, use them for selfish interests, tribes colonizing and imperializing smaller tribes. Wealthier people manipulating the lives of the poor ones, using their children as slaves and servants. Today we can observe marginalization and domination even in the Church of Christ, many have lost their vocations due to greed and jealousy by their colleagues in the vineyard. Members of same family fighting themselves over properties, men poisoning themselves over women in the name of "love", husbands abandoning their wives for other women, the atrocities and uncountable.

## **BRIDGING THE GAP**

### **Nigeria in Focus**

Nigeria is abundantly blessed with a lot of material and natural resources. It is quite obvious that most other countries in the world depend much on Nigeria for their survival, yet the suffering in Nigeria is so alarming that one begins to wonder what is actually happening. In Nigeria, the eye-sore is that only very few are privileged to benefit from and enjoy all these resources. Only the few influential men and women who have something "to offer", in cash or kind, and are able to swallow from the wealth of the Nation so endowed naturally by God.

The question now is, who is to bridge this big gap between these well-with-all and the poor? Yet they co-habit! This problem of marginalization between the rich and the poor



has crept into all facts of our country. Even some members of the church seem to have fallen grievously into this temptation. Let us look at few instances: in Nigeria, only those children of the rich people or of close relatives of the stake holders in Government and companies are easily offered jobs in the government offices and the companies. This is because they know how to 'tap the backs of those in charge of such offices even though they do not perform well in interviews organized for such appointments.

Again, talk of contracts award system in the country today; contracts are kept for the rich people who are able to provide at least 25% of the total charge. This is usually called 'application fee' which is paid in cash before on is considered. Yet, that is not a guarantee that the contract will be awarded. It is non-refundable deposit. Then it is quite clear that the poor cannot benefit from it unless he or she robs to get such funds. The fees collected before release of such jobs are not in any way paid to the treasury but for the satisfaction of the individual officer who implements such projects in the offices.

Even in education industry today, School fees have become so exorbitant for poor Nigerians to afford. Unless one is a child of a very rich person one cannot get admission into the universities because it is not affordable. Even to get admitted into some special courses now one has to pay heavy sums, such courses like medicine and Law are reserved for not really intelligent ones or those who merit admission, but most often for those who can afford the huge amount attached to it by the University authorities; government universities inclusive. It is alarming that even some mission schools, expected to be the remedy and option for the poor, by providing alternatives for them, even charge more fees.

Very often, we hear of monthly provision of certain funds and materials to be distributed to the poor in States and local Governments. Do these allocations actually get to those they are meant for? We sometimes hear of some States providing agricultural facilities such as Tractors and Fertilizers to the poor farmers, but how many poor farmers actually benefits from it? In my researches and experiences for the past ten years, I observed that it is the poor in our society who feed their fellow poor ones. Watch those who come out to donate food and money for the upkeep of the less-privileged in your area often, you will understand my point. They do this unnoticed, but the proud rich would want their little presentations announced in the television and radio, and all the national dailies invited. These are not actually necessary though not totally bad, but bear in mind that your intention matters only to your God who observes all in secret.

The poor and the rich are children of God, we all share in the same Love, same Lord and same salvation. That we are not equally endowed becomes a good avenue to serve God better by being available to those who are not privileged as we are. A good steward distributes the food accordingly for the satisfaction of all, and according to as one's needs requires, then the good masters and provider provides more when it is finished. All of us are stewards in God's vineyard, all we hold is given to us for service to all God's children. Sometimes, we are tempted to attribute our wealth and successes to our human efforts, hence, we hear many say "my hard-earned money", forgetting that if the Lord does not build the house, in vain do the laborers busy. Our appreciation to God for blessing our handiwork, our proper thanksgiving is giving relief to those who could not rise to

their height due to certain circumstances of failure and disabilities.

If all were 'equally privileged', then there would be no way of expressing among ourselves that aspect of love which God has for us all, and if all were 'less-privileged', then there would be so much despair, nobody to help anybody. All fingers were not made equal, their condition is not because they are sinners, but that through this, greater glory will be given to God the Almighty Father. We must therefore learn to live with poor and needy in their pathetic condition and especially when they come to us for assistance. Proverbs 22:2 says that the rich and the poor have to rub shoulders, for *"the Lord is the maker of them all."* If we take note of that, then we could avoid realizing the picture Proverb 22:7 painted, when it says; *"the rich man lords it over the poor, the borrower is the moneylender's slave"*.

*"Do not refuse a kindness to anyone who begs it, if it is in your power to perform it"* (see prov. 3:27). No one is exempted from this great virtue of love; it is the basis of all we have been addressing in this book. Almsgiving must be based on love, the agape love. Even the less-privileged themselves in their own capacity are also expected to practice acts of charity with true love. There is no pretense about it. That one is poor is not an excuse, there must be something you can offer to another in love. Not even religious or priests are exempted. Even if you are the most obedient and holy religious or priest in the church, your actual salvation, without doubt, lies in the extent of love and charity you show, and how you help others to live life of charity. This is the entire life and mission of Christ and the Church which everybody is called to follow more closely. Our level of holiness or spiritual growth assessed by our care and relationship with the less-privileged ones in all spheres. *"Let us consider how we may spur one another to love and good works"* (Heb. 10:24). It is the test of our faith in God.

The apostle James, tells us that; *"Pure unsoiled religion, in the eyes of God our father, is this: coming to the help of orphans and widows in their hardship, and keeping oneself uncontaminated by the world"* (James 1:27).

We must always remember that we are made to be our brother's keepers. Remember that Cain had to answer for the life of his brother, Abel. In the gospel of Mathew, Christ gave us an 'expo' about the judgement day, which will qualify us to have eternal happiness. It is a prerequisite for being true children of the Most High God. Jesus says; *For I was hungry and you never gave me food, I was thirsty and you never gave me drink, I was a stranger and yet never made me welcome; lacking clothes and you never clothed me, sick and in prison and you never visited me* (cf. Mt. 25:42-44). You may add to it those things you refused to do – I was blind, you did not lead my way, I was crippled, you did not help me to walk, deaf, you did not hear for me, dumb, you did not speak for me and so on.

Some people who are in authority are sometimes tempted to become obstacles to those under their authority who would love to practice this virtue by creating unnecessary rules which render them incapacitated, exerting authority over their subjects most often, out of envy, jealousy and or greed, they often act with the pretext of protecting their subordinates. They would insinuate all kinds of unfounded notions and rumour so they could be supported and applauded. People in authority are to be careful not to stampede the works of the Holy Spirit thinking they are

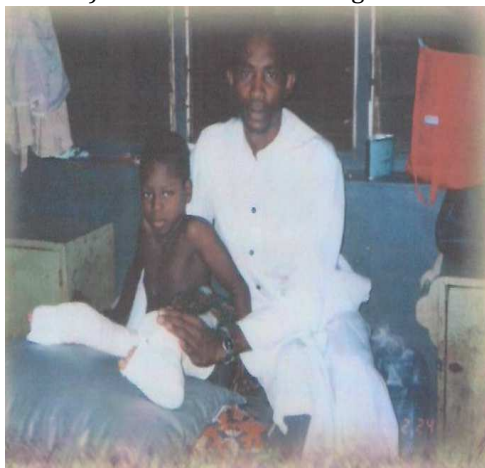


working for God, like the case of Saul in the Acts of Apostles, especially when they try to demand unnecessary obedience from their subordinates, that is the reason Christ says; *“Alas, for you lawyers who have taken away the key of knowledge, you have not gone in yourselves, and hence prevented others going in who wanted to,”* (Lk 11:52). *“Nobody should be looking his own advantage but everybody for the other man’s”* (cf. 1 cor. 10:24).

Paul says to the Philippians, *“Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others. Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus, ....”* (Phil. 2: 3 – 5).

John the apostle says too that if a man who was rich enough in this world’s possessions and sees his brother in need but closes his heart to him, how can the love of God be remains in him? (cf. 1Jn. 3:17). This is the Theological based almsgiving

which is recommended for every child of God. Let us not be weary of doing good deeds, by so doing, every member of our society (village and nation) would have a share in the



common good. Like the believers in acts of the Apostles, everyone had according to his needs and were happy (cf. Acts 4: 32 – 37). May God open our hearts to one another so that we could contribute in building a better relationship and a better society. Amen.

The gospel of almsgiving is a gospel preached to everyone created by God and has been redeemed through Christ Jesus. ‘God is love and anyone who lives in love, lives in God and God lives in him’ cf. 1Jn. 4: 7 – 21. Anyone who hates his neighbor is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life. This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our neighbors. If anyone has material possessions and sees his neighbor in need but has no pity, how can the love of God be on the person? ... let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth. This then is how we know that we belong to the truth, and how we set our hearts at rest in his presence whenever our hearts condemn us. For God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything... (3: 15 – 24). Almsgiving is never optional to any person or persons, it is an obligation to everybody, as a matter of fact, it is the only gateway to heaven as confirmed in Mathew chapter 25, verse 43ff.

### Conclusion/Recommendation

In our own apostolate as missionaries, we have done our best to ensure that this mission to the poor is effectively emphasized and propagated, all though the level of understanding of the subject matter and general involvement by the people have not been so encouraging. In the year 2010, we introduced Better Education and Medical Support Initiative (BEMSI) to encourage and enlighten the

people of Nigeria and enviros to extend kindness to all and sundry. BEMSI is an N.G.O. that promotes quality Education, counselling and medical support for disabled and indigent people. We provide educational materials to youngsters from Nursery to Secondary Schools and fees to those abandoned through Scholarships. We equally pay regular visits to hospitals and medical centers to help those patients discharged but are not able to afford their medical bills due to abject poverty.

The world continues to multiply and fill its banks like a river which at every rainy season swells to its brims and overcome its bounds and overflows its neighborhood. As it swells, it finds various outlets through which it runs to form further collections of streams and rivers irrespective of the obstacles encounters as it travels on its parts. The more of its waters used by humans, birds and other animals, the earth and sunlight, the more its waters increases by the seasons. The more deaths recorded in the world today, if properly examined, the people are born into the same world daily, more pluses or minuses. This testifies to the truth that no amount of wickedness and craftiness of man that can out-do the supernatural powers and wisdom of God.

The craziness of man and his decisions to checkmate the essence and wisdom of God has only but succeeded in increasing the pains and suffering of the same man whom God, in His infinite love and kindness prepared a beautiful earth for ab-initio. Today, the more our Nations, especially in the second and third world Nations, are discovering more and more of God’s natural endowments for a better world, the more human family is suffering lack of daily necessities for good living.

Nigeria especially, and her surrounding sister-nations are generally blessed with human and natural resources to make lives more meaningful and progressive, but few continue to make life unbearable for the majority of the citizenry. The syndrome of the very few opportunists getting richer and well placed, while the major percentage gets poorer, sick, displaced and abandoned is becoming so alarming, and more confusing.



The proverbial alarm of our hero-Chinua Achebe- in his “Things Fall Apart, the center cannot Hold”, which was predicted many years ago, has become an unimaginable reality. Take an excursion around our Hospitals, schools, Towns and Villages, you would need no literature teacher to interpret the “Things Fall Apart”. Really, can the center still hold?

Imagine (under-aged) children roaming around our major roads, streets, motor-parks, market areas, tight traffic areas etc. half-naked, some with pans on their heads filled with one type of articles for sale or the other, and all these done during school hours, a pathetic sight indeed. Why? Could they not be in the school and study? Are there no more

teachers in schools? Have they no parents to cater for their academic needs? Are there no government agencies to check what these problems are? Are these children really nuisance? Could some of them, if helped not become our governors, Doctors, Lawyers, Priests/Religious, Teachers, Kings and Queens of our society tomorrow?

Has any of these questions actually crossed our minds at one point in time when we saw them hawking and begging? Many of those youngsters were actually sent out of school, not because they are not intelligent, and not because they do not pass tests, but for school fees. Their parents may be so poor to afford the termly financial demands of the school.

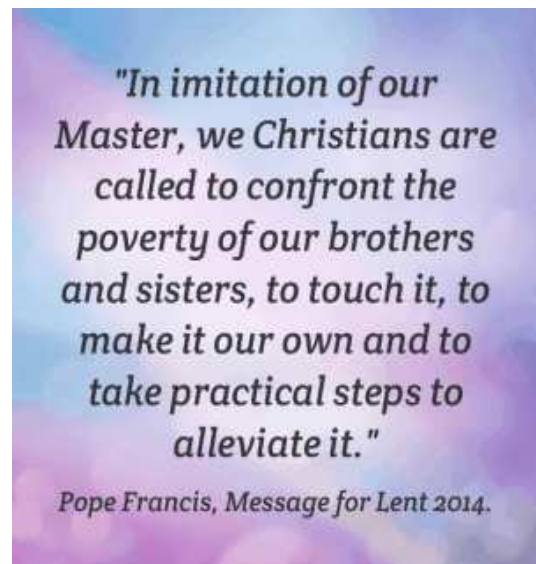
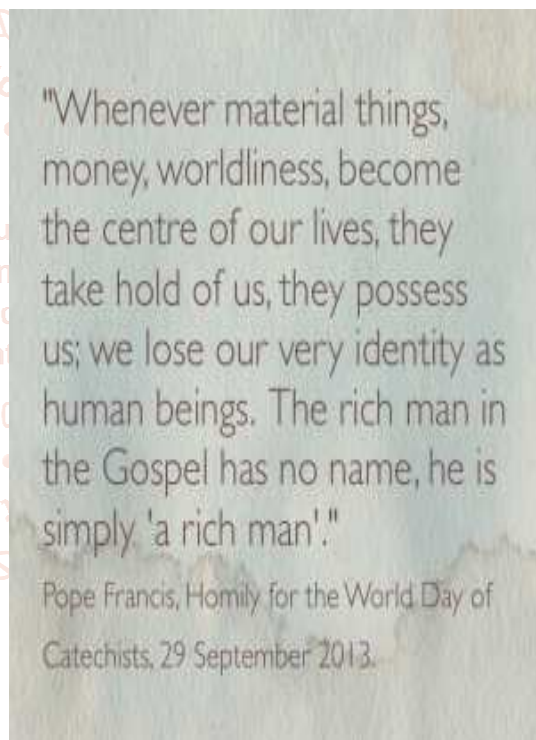
What about those you meet in most of our teaching and general Hospitals, and Government health facilities, roaming about the Hospital corridors and premises, begging for help? 85% of them treated in the hospitals, billed and discharged, but are held back by the hospital authority because they could not afford the huge bills given to them, and no one to bail them out. They move around the hospital premise begging for even the little they could get to eat while they remain in the hospital custody. Some people who try to give help end up giving only the little they could, not up to the required amount, and the victim may choose to use it to get his/her stomach filled first, what a situation? All effort of the central and state governments to provide accessible and affordable/free health facilities quite appreciated, but, wait a minute! Who benefits from these and where, and how? This situation, this pandemic, has driven the founder and collaborators of **Better Education and Medical Support Initiative (BEMSI)** to embark on this advocacy/support project since 2010, back home in Nigeria, to beckon on our government officials, good spirited individuals and corporate institutions who are touched by the phenomenon, to help reach out to our brothers and sisters, in whatever way we can to reduce their torment to the barest minimum. This is the situation in Nigeria, Africa and so many other parts of the globe today, and it requires adequate attention. This is the time to **act** the gospel of redemption.

**Recommendation**

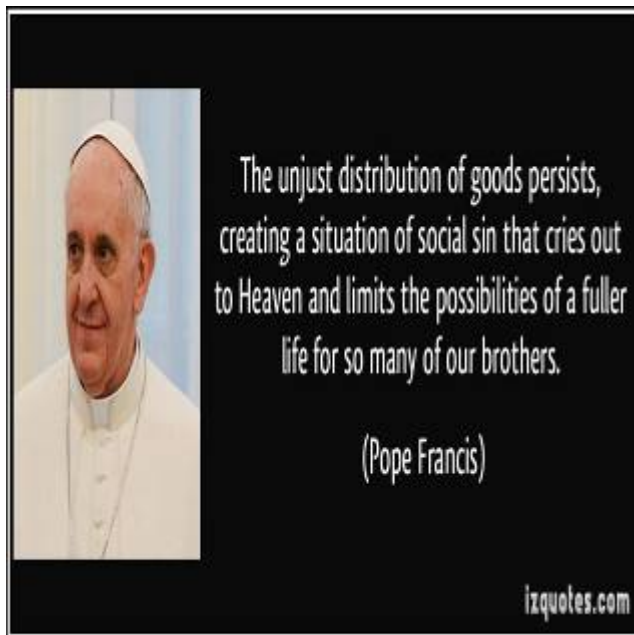
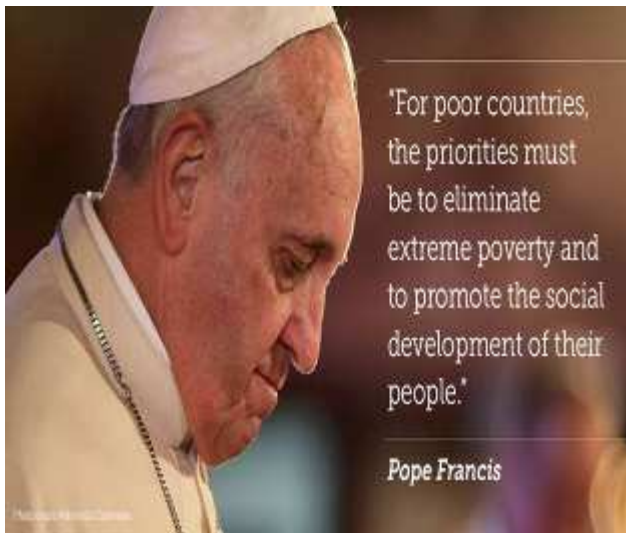
I wish to recommend that both the government and Church leaders sit back and make this issue a case study in Nigeria; these are important matters for discussion in executive and general meetings of both the Government and Church leaders, with implementations guaranteed. The UNESCO is encouraged to be much more proactive in her drive to achieve a global home, a home for all to feel belonged and free. UNESCO is to break all protocols to reach to the poorest of the poor in remotest areas of the globe. Trusted NGOs around the world are to be consulted and used as avenues to get to those who are truly in need of assistance.

NGOs could be trained and empowered by the United Nations to embark on an independent Census of the poorest of the poor in their various communities, cases that are verifiable, and see that they are given better life. Governments should supervise and not to be the front liners in the distribution of common good of the rural areas of the society.

The UNESCO is encouraged to invite and sponsor Chief Executives and Secretaries of Registered NGOs for summits and training workshops in various countries to discuss and share experiences on the state of events around their localities, in order to produce a good working documents on the way forward.







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