

COMMON GOOD ADVOCACY AGAINST SYSTEMATIC MARGINALIZATION IN AFRICA

BY

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Introduction

In my opinion, as a Christian, advocacy against systems of marginalization to advance the course of Common Good (CG) begins with an experience of the injustice of some sort and a sincere effort to respond to the situation in the light of Christian principles, ethos, and values. It suddenly dawned on me at the early stages of my advocacy activities that most injustices that people live with are products of social structures and the powers that benefit from such set-ups. In re-evaluating series of unjust systems through the prism of my Christian Faith, I have been compelled by the reality of my findings to re-assess my previous perception of such Christian concepts as the Church, the Kingdom of God and, ultimately, God. Concretely, the result has been a paradigm shift from a preoccupation with the 'Holy Altar of God' to the 'Holy People of God'. The former is truly encapsulated in the latter. Thus, for me, the ministry has become a lived commitment to interrogating the unjust systems that force human beings to live below their innate dignity.

Outstandingly, one of the greatest upheavals so far in my quest is my inquiry into the concept of the Common Good in the light Catholic Social Teachings (CST). The result has been a harmonization that has greatly enhanced both my understanding and application of the social teachings of the Catholic Church in my work of advocacy. This article examines the meaning of the concepts and the implications in for the African continent which is a major focus of attentions because of the conflicts of economic interests that often leave the African people at the mercy of exploitative systems. The article also explores my personal struggle with the concepts of the CG and the CST and the realities of the African poverty situation. The last part of the write-up suggests how concepts can be used to interrogate the unjust systems in Africa, the shortcomings that may militate against the pursuits, and how they can be improved for optimal results.

An overview of the Common Good and Advocacy

Though the common good may not have been expressly itemized as one of the themes of the Catholic Social Teachings; it is such a transversal concept in the *corpus*, that the whole conversation on the CST appears to be a conversation on the ethical principle for the global governance of the common good. Indeed, as a person on the frontline of advocacy, it has been my daily pursuit to make sense of the common good and bring it down from its high theological parlance in CST to the average woman or man on the street so that s/he may be motivated and long to contribute to it.

The common good is a vision of what will make for our flourishing as God's creation; the individuals as well as the community. The vision has both moral and social dimensions. The moral vision underscores the obligations that human beings have towards one another, the society and the natural world in realizing the common good. As a moral vision, the common good underlines that God seeks the well-being of the whole creation and creatures. It insists on the presence of a good that simultaneously transcends and includes the well-being of the individual good. Each person has a responsibility to contribute to the common good. It is weakened and the good of the person is impaired when someone takes a good that belongs to the whole and appropriates it to himself. The preservation of this common good is a prerequisite for maintaining peace and the social equilibrium¹.

The common good, therefore, offers two important principles for advocacy:

- (i) A vision of wholeness and the interconnectedness and interdependence of life. We are all connected because we all participate in God's love. We derive our being from God because "*It is in God that we live and move and have our being*". Acts 19:27).
- (ii) The common good is an ethical principle that guides individual behavior on behalf of the community. It, therefore, motivates action to safeguard this good but also it mirrors God's love for all people and God's desire for us to dwell in unity².

The social vision of Common Good seeks to bring about the social condition necessary for the flourishing of all God creatures. The common good is simultaneously a good for the community in common (communal) as well as the space for the specific good of each member of the community to be realized. It is always both and, and never either or at any moment³. *Gaudium et Spes* defines common good as the sum of a social condition that allows all people in a community to realize their human potential and fulfill their dignity⁴. The common good is **not** the '*most good*' for the most people which would suggest that some might be left out or might have to live under unjust conditions for the good of the majority. It is that which serves the interest of everybody even when only a few will be responsible for its management and distribution. Thus, working effectively for the common good implies paying special attention to groups and individuals that are excluded from the benefits experienced by the rest of the society⁵.

¹ The Cosmic Common Good: Religious Grounds for Ecological Ethics" Oxford Press 2016, P. 17.)

² Ibid Daniel Scheid

³ Ibid, Daniel P.Scheid

⁴ Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et Spes* (1965)

http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html.

⁵ Ibid, Daniel P. Scheid

The communal dimension of the common good can be compared to the notion of public goods in economic theory which has two important qualities: It is *non-rivalrous* in consumption which means that one person's use does not reduce another's use e.g. education. It is also *non-excludable* which means that persons cannot reasonably be prevented from using it e.g. access to culture⁶.

Both dimensions of the common good seek to bring into resonance the dynamic of the worlds of the society (social justice), economics (distribution of resources) and preserving the integrity of God's creation (ecological justice). The principles of the CST are geared toward the promotion of the common good. The truth of the Gospel values is that our life here is not about preparation for an extraterrestrial living but about the enjoyment of life here and now in its fullness (Jn10:10). So the common good has a vision that wants to ensure the fullness of life for all God's creation (human and non-human) on this earth.

However, for the Christians, there is an important aspect of the common good which may not be explicit but provides a very important principle for Christian advocacy. It is the dimension of exploring the mystery of God. The mystery of *who God is* has always been poorly explained to Christians so much so that in practice; that God is totally removed from human activity. Michael J Himes⁷ looks to *1 Jn 4:8* for a better and practical appreciation of the reality. There we read that **God is love**. According to John, God is not the lover, or the one loved, but the **LOVE** itself. God is not what we feel when we love, not something associated with love, not a thing given in love, not a reward for loving. **God is love!** God is equal to the experience of love and love is what we experience when our needs are met and when we contribute to meeting the needs of the others out of compassion. The common good is, therefore, the social condition in which everyone continually experiences God and to evangelize is to make this condition present in our world. This social condition is the practical meaning of the Kingdom of God or heaven (CCC 2793). As Christians therefore, our concern must be the building of common good through influence on societal and national life, bearing in mind that as children of God, the world is created for the enjoyment of everyone (1 Tim 6:17)⁸.

Common Good advocacy then means speaking up against economic and social structures or policies that work against the realization of the Common Good but when it becomes necessary, the tool of lobbying is employed for it. Lobbying begins where advocacy ends. Lobbying is undertaken within the process of political decision making in order to influence the decision and the legislation that flows from it in favor of Common Good. It involves targeting the right persons at the right time and at the right level using appropriate communications effectively.

⁶ Ibid, Daniel P. Scheid

⁷ Michael J Himes, *“Doing the Truth in Love: Conversation about God, Relationships and Service”* Paulist Press, NJ 1995.

⁸ Pope Francis, *“Evangelium Gaudium*

Lobbying can be either proactive or reactive. Proactive lobbying is practiced to encourage the Government or Parliament to produce a proposal concerning a specific issue. Reactive lobbying is necessary when the Government, a party or Parliament produces a “*green paper*” or discussion paper or holds a public hearing. These frequently anticipate a future law. They provide an opportunity to respond with reactions, ideas, and suggestions.

A Sense of Systemic Marginalization in Africa

Africa is an integral part of the global social, economic and political systems. In this vein, we can understand systematic marginalization in Africa to mean a tacit and sometimes intentional exclusion of Africa from the enjoyment of the global Common Good as against their counterpart in the global north through global policies. The marginalization is reinforced by the global and regional political and financial institutions such as the World Bank (WB), the International Monetary Fund (IMF), World Trade Organization (WTO), Direct Foreign Investments (DFI) etc and the governments of the global north. Some of the systems of marginalization in Africa created by the above include:

- (i) **Systemic corruption in the Polity:** Most Africa’s tools of governance are infested with corruption virus. It ranges from the looting of resources by those charged with managing them to the acceptance of bribes by top government officials and community leaders to enable the transnational corporations to bypass national laws to access her resources. The symposium for ecclesiastical provinces of Africa and Madagascar (SECAM) has underlined corruption as the cankerworm in the development of Africa⁹. It is the same global corrupt system that makes the European countries, the US and now UAE to keep the looted resources using legal instruments. The one that steals and the one that keeps stolen resources are both thieves. The lack of strong and value based democratic institutions in Africa continues to be a hindrance in challenging this system of marginalization.
- (ii) **Negative African Narrative:** The propaganda marketed by the global north that Africa is equal to poverty and most live on aids; that Africa’s socio-cultural value systems must be westernized to be acceptable is the height of the systemic marginalization. This western hypnosis and the lack of motivational and visional leadership in Africa have created Africans who seemed to have lost their self-confidence and collective identities as peoples. Consequently, we have governments

⁹ SECAM, “*Pastoral on governance, common good and democratic transitions in Africa*”. No 29, 5-7.

- that react according to whims and caprices of their masters in the global north rather than respond to the real challenges of Africa.
- (iii) Systematic Financial Haemorrhage in Africa: The continent is losing \$50billion/year through systemic illicit financial flows (UN commission for Africa) and the manipulation of international legal instruments. This includes profit repatriation by big companies, tax evasion using official legal instrument, Race to the bottom by African countries occasioned by the World Bank ease of doing business rankings, Lopsided bilateral and multilateral trade agreements (EPAs).
 - (iv) Western Capitalism and the Africa Resource based economy has put the African economy in the hands of few so that they are easily controlled by the global north. Most wars in Africa are wars of resource control
 - (v) Offer of global and regional international economic programs that are not helpful to Africa: G7/New Alliance, World bank program of Enabling the business of Agriculture(EBA), WTO pressure on African governments to relinquish control of their economy, the use of Foreign Direct Investment (DFI) to buy state-owned enterprises, the focusing of development programs on large-scale projects like industrial agricultures, mining and infrastructures that systematically put development squarely in the hands of the Transnational Corporations to the exclusion of the small entrepreneurs are all aspects of the same systemic marginalization in Africa.
 - (vi) Lack of commitment to business ethical behaviours and business decisions that ask questions beyond the logic of profit and legality, but also what is most helpful to humanity, the planet, and serves the common good.
 - (vii) Globalization is the new name for the system. Globalization has led to global economy without global governance¹⁰. Behind the so-called global economy is a global shadow economy and global poverty driven by the special interests of Transnational Corporations (TNCs) for profits, the unbridled appetite of the global north for economic domination of the south, and the ego of northern supremacy.

Personal Inner Struggles with Common Good Advocacy and CST

It took me a long period of discernment to anchor Common Good advocacy on the CST. On one hand, the *compendium* of CST underlines the dignity of the human person as the central theme of the CST and the other principles are inadvertently developed in such a way as to give support to this centrality. On the other hand, my passion for ecological justice and the connectedness of all things tend to challenge this notion. Furthermore, anchoring the themes of CST on the dignity of the human person appears to give credence to the western philosophies of detached

¹⁰ Joseph E Stiglitz and Mark Pieth, “*Overcoming the Shadow Economy*” International Policy analysis (2016):1-6.

individuals from the community¹¹ in contrast to the African philosophy of Ubuntu¹² which resonates very strongly in my African blood.

Besides, the human person is fundamentally social and lives in a world of increasing interdependence and a consideration of the human dignity makes sense to me only in the context of the community¹³.

The dignity of the human person is based on the fact that human beings are made in the image and likeness of God (Gen 1:27), consequently, human beings are intrinsically and fundamentally good. In other words; goodness is the natural state of human beings. Unfortunately, this goodness is masked by so much evil in the world. However, the truth remains that though, the human social conditioning may eclipse this goodness from being realized, this essential goodness is never destroyed. Nevertheless, the human goodness can never be expressed or realized except in the context of a relationship.

Taking it further, the God in whose image we are made is intrinsically relational. This gives social relationship even a deeper theological underpinning¹⁴. The implication is that since the common good is essentially social; God and the human person are essentially social, relationality becomes a defining element among the three¹⁵. In this vein, the common good serves as a better anchor for the CST than the principle of pure individual dignity¹⁶. Nevertheless, the relationship between the common good and the dignity of the human person is like asking the question: the egg and the hen which one comes first? It is not so much a theological argument for the priority of the common good over human dignity as a practical theological anchor for my ministry of advocacy.

CST as a Tool for Good Governance and Strengthening of the Common Good in Africa

Catholic social teaching provides the right tools that can help the African States build much healthier societies and achieve better governance just as it provided similar tools and social principles to western society at the cradle of its civilization.

It needs to be understood that the Catholic Social Teachings (CST) do not provide ideologies or methods, that is, a “How to do it” kit for good governance but rather it promotes values and principles that will enhance the wellbeing of both the individual and society.

¹¹ Daniel P. Scheid, *“The Cosmic Common Good: Religious Grounds for Ecological Ethics”* Oxford Press 2016, P. 17.

¹² Wikipedia: A Nguni Bantu term meaning “humanity”. It is often translated as “humanity towards others” but is often used in a more philosophical sense to mean “the belief in a universal bond that connects all humanity.

¹³ Ibid, Daniel P. Scheid.

¹⁴ Ibid, Daniel P. Scheid.

¹⁵ Ibid, Daniel P. Scheid.

¹⁶ Ibid, Daniel P. Scheid

To be more specific, we can take a look at a few of these social teachings of the church in order to see how these teachings can enhance the better organization of society, i.e. good governance and the common good in Africa.

It is very instructive that at the heart of the Church's social teaching is the good of the human person. Without a proper understanding of the human person, i.e. his/her origin, dignity and destiny, no society can attain good governance. Pope St. John XXIII In his encyclical, *Pacem in Terris*, clearly lays down this norm. According to him, "*Any human society, if it is to be well-ordered and productive, must lay down as a foundation this principle, namely, that all human beings are persons, that is, their nature is endowed with intelligence and free will. Indeed, precisely because they are persons they have rights and obligations flowing directly and simultaneously from their very nature. And as these rights and obligations are universal and inviolable so they cannot in any way be surrendered.*" (*Pacem in Terris* no. 9).

Although this principle laid down by Pope St. John XXIII may appear so obvious to many in the western societies, there are indices that suggest that most African States are still struggling to establish this principle as a social norm. It may not be too farfetched to state that parts of the crises we find in many African countries are largely indicative of the non-normalization of this basic principle. Good governance can hardly take place when fundamental human rights are not established or respected. In many African societies, there are many internal and external factors that pose serious threats to the rights and dignity of the human person. Recurrent decimals include violence and wars (ethnoreligious), undemocratic and despotic governments, etc.

Alongside this important principle, in her social teachings, the Church has severally highlighted the value of the family. Particularly today that the family unit is threatened, the Church more than ever before insists that the integrity and sustainability of any human society and of the common good are largely dependent on the integrity and viability of the family. Although many African societies have always promoted the good and value of the family, it is now being threatened not only by socio-economic pressures but also pressures from western financial donors which tie their financial aids and assistance to the adoption by African countries of policies which are oftentimes inimical to the integrity of family values. Thus, the church's social teachings become very crucial in assisting African nations in preserving important traditional values that are essential in promoting better societies and the common good in general.

Another specific example of how the Church's social teachings can provide African nations with the tools to attain better governance and the promotion of common good is her social teachings on development. The African continent is largely known for its underdevelopment in relation to the western world. A significant percentage of the African population falls below the poverty line. The grave inequalities in virtually all African societies often constitute time-bombs

that often ignite ethnoreligious conflicts such as recently witnessed in the North-eastern part of Nigeria with the emergence of the Boko Haram terrorists. The various militia groups in the Niger-Delta region of Nigeria also points to the deadly consequence of a society that is largely polarized between the few super-rich and the overwhelming number of poor people. Also at heart of the Church's social teachings is the church's preferential option for the poor and the principles of solidarity which seeks that the richer and stronger nations/individuals must be in solidarity with the weaker and poorer neighbours. Pope Paul VI's encyclical *Populorum Progressio* succinctly articulates the church's teaching on development. Indeed, this encyclical should be read by all African leaders and policy makers.

African Contexts for Developing and Passing on the Catholic Social Teachings

Much of the African society is still largely rural and traditional, although the process of urbanization and the impacts of globalization are evident. A lot of African societies still preserve their rich cultural heritage. All these constitute important contexts for developing social teachings that are peculiar or unique to the African States.

In several African States, the Catholic Church operates and manages many institutions such as schools (Primary, Secondary, and University) and hospitals as her own establishments. In some other cases, pastoral care is available through chaplaincy works in schools, hospitals, the armed forces and public institutions like the Federal and State Government secretariats etc. Over the years, these have remained veritable points for both the development and passing on of values enshrined in the CST. A lot more can still be done at the concrete points of contact with the people in the listed establishment like the periodic Eucharistic celebrations, Catecheses, and seminars. Truly, these could serve as important contexts for passing on Catholic social teachings.

The Impact of African Contexts and Notions on Form and Content of CST.

It's without a doubt that serious attempts have been made towards developing Catholic social teachings in several African societies. This attempts or efforts vary from one African country to another depending on the capacity and resources of the Catholic Church in that place. We must bear in mind that in some African countries the Catholic Church constitutes only a very insignificant percentage of the overall population. In these cases, the impact of the Catholic Social Teaching is often not noticeable. In a country like Nigeria, however, the Catholic Church is very vibrant and has vast resources. The challenge is still there! It must be admitted that there is still more room to develop a more comprehensive Catholic Social Teaching apparatus that will take into consideration the local contexts.

The challenges vary from country to country. Some countries are more affected by certain social ills than others. For instance, Rwanda is trying to build the links destroyed by its

experience of genocide; Nigeria is battling with her longstanding problems of ethnicity, religious segregation, and resource control while South Sudan is faced with an abysmally low level of literacy among its population. The emphasis on the CST in each country must seek to purposefully address the deep-seated malaise of the society.

The Shortcomings and How They can be Improved upon.

A major shortcoming is the limited knowledge of CST both amongst Catholics and non-Catholics in general. The consequence of this is that what could have served as major contributions in national policies and nation building have been largely consigned to the archives. It does, therefore, appear that the Catholic Social Teachings are only known among the few clergymen who may have studied it during their seminary days or the lay people who may have studied theology as an academic exercise. Even at that, the knowledge of CST among those who studied it is an intellectual enterprise. Indeed, People hear more what we embody than what we tell them. As Pope Paul VI succinctly puts it, “Modern man listens more willingly to witnesses than to teachers, and if he does listen to teachers, it is because they are witnesses.”¹⁷ More emphasis needs to be laid on living out the values of the CST in the day to day dealings of the Church.

In the same vein, there is a need to create more structures for the diffusion of CST. In this regards, volunteers can be co-opted and trained from the different ranks of the lay faithful. This will help to swell the number of people who are versed in the CST and, subsequently, the number of people reached. To make the CST more relevant and impactful, the Church in Africa must develop an easy-to-understand form of social catechesis that would complement the intensely doctrinal approach that presently dominates the pastoral formation of the church. This can be undertaken and tailored to the needs of the countries by the National Episcopal Conferences.

Finally, research centres which have the primary goal of helping to articulate public policies in the light of these social teachings could be established. These can be integrated into the existing Catholic Theological Institutes in the Anglophone, the Francophone, and the Lusophone regions. The centres, by their structures, possess what is required to train experts that would help to carry the CST to the people at the grassroots. This will ensure that the CST, in the African Church, serves as a twenty-first-century rendition of the time-tested, scripturally rooted values of the Catholic Church

¹⁷ Pope Paul VI, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (1975)

