

Talk given by Fr. Paulino Mondo at the Ecumenical Prayer Service held at St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church, Nairobi on the 19<sup>th</sup> of January 2006.

**THE GAP BETWEEN RICH AND POOR IN OUR KENYAN SOCIETY IS ONE OF THE LARGEST IN THE WORLD, COULD GREATER UNITY AMONG THE CHRISTIANS MAKE A DIFFERENCE HERE?**

***If Christ is the source of our Unity, how do we reflect Christ's love to each other in our specific Kenyan Social Context?***

**Introduction**

When one analyses the social context of this country, the conclusion is rather scaring. In a well built place like where we are praying from right now, the security and order are evident. The moment you move to our city streets and villages the news is poverty accompanied by mugging, killing, rape, AIDS, tribalism, drought, street children, devil worship, beggars, politicking, bribery and other social evils. This situation is not only challenging but traumatizing.

Christian churches preferential option for the poor, the vulnerable and the oppressed is continuation of God's plan manifested already in the Old Testament by the particular compassion and love of God for the poor, the widows, the orphans, the strangers and all those who suffer: "*I have indeed seen the misery of my people*" (Cf. Exodus .3:7ff) Jesus Christ summarized the core of his mission on earth in terms of bringing good news and hope to the poor: "*The Spirit of the Lord is on me, for he has anointed me to bring the good news to the afflicted. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to captives, sight to the blind, let the oppressed go free, to proclaim a year of favor from the Lord*" (Luke 4:18-19).

The parable of the rich and Lazarus [Cf. Luke 16:19-31] as well as the parable of the last judgment [Matthew 25:31-46] express in a dramatic way the capital importance of this preferential option not only in the message of Jesus but in the life of those who want to be his followers: At the end of our lives we shall be judged according to the measure of our love for the poor.

The long tradition of the Church, since the apostolic times through the teaching of the Fathers of the Church, has always maintained the centrality of this preferential option. In our times, the Social Teaching of the Church underlines that this option demands from all Christians not only to share their material goods with the poor but also to take up their case so as to go to the root causes of their poverty and suffering.

Solidarity with the poor, for the Church today, means to be in favor of the poor and against their poverty. It means to denounce the injustice present and acting through persons, groups and social, cultural and political structures. It means to proclaim the liberating message of Jesus Christ concerning the dignity of all human persons, the justice of the Kingdom of God, peace, reconciliation and the respect for the integrity of God's creation.

**Witness**

Christian Churches should in principle **demonstrate a people that are a family of God** where brothers and sisters; white and black live as one. The truth however is that the poor and the miserable are not all that a point of spiritual reflection but a **burden and a scandal**. The rich defend themselves from the poor as if they were the major enemy. A number of convinced Christians live in **private prisons in the pretext of security** while their brethren are at the mercy of cold, disease and hunger. The journey from home to the place of work for the majority poor has doubled not because

land is elastic but because those who own plots have fenced them off and put bill boards that declare a no through pass and no go zone. Majority **five seater cars move individuals**. They systematically block roads that the needy trek on foot to work while pumping carbon monoxide into their system. While the majority people have no electricity in their shanties, the few lucky ones use it on their fences and house alarms. Some have **no water to drink while others are busy washing their auto mobiles**. This scandal of enormous disparity between the rich and the poor with all its consequences of social marginalization and economic exploitation is a problem that should be treated carefully by the Christian community.

On many occasions, in its approach to the problem of poverty, the Christian tradition adopts a stand of **“sympathy”** by encouraging the rich to assist alleviate the situation of the poor. However, the reality proves that this kind of option for the poor is not the real solution to the problem of poverty.

God’s option for the poor is manifested in the bible prominently in the story of exodus and the covenant of Mount Sinai which aims at **creation of a new society where poverty is eliminated all together**; a society of brothers and sisters taking care of one another and being an example to other nations. This project of God is realized in the **first Christian Communities Cf Acts 2:44-47, 4:34-35**

The society proposed in the covenant law calls for as broad as possible distribution of capital. **In order to have spiritually sound human beings, one needs to take care of their “materiality”**. The inalienable ownership of the basic capital, one that both bestows privileges and imposes responsibilities, guarantees human dignity and contributes to the integrity and unity of society. This system of society calls for a **change of mentality** of the poor from dependency to sharing, from begging for life towards being a giver of life; from fatalism and self blaming towards solidarity, personal dignity and optimism as a fruit of discovery of life giving God.

### **Economic Justice**

The biblical teaching on economic justice is not a business venture for the church but an effort to proclaim the Gospel of Jesus Christ in the midst of a complex and confusing economy. This analysis insists that the measure of our economy is not only what it produces, but also how it touches human life, whether it protects or undermines the dignity of the human person, and how it promotes the common good. As Christians we emphasize that economic decisions have human consequences and moral content; they help or hurt people, strengthen or weaken family life, advance or diminish the quality of peaceful living on earth. This discussion is not an economic blueprint, but a moral challenge and a call to action. Two thousand years after the message of Jesus in Capernaum Lk, 4:16-20 and Forty years after Vatican II insisted on economic justice for all people of God, Many countries including Kenya still needs to hear the message once again.

At a time of amazing international debates on money and its power, the Christian community must continue to speak for poor, the needy and the underpaid working people and propose an alternative plan. How can poor nations reduce their deficits, reform welfare, reshape their international borrowing and reorder national priorities? The fundamental moral measure of these policy choices is how they touch the poor of the poorest who struggle against economic, social and moral pressures which leave them humiliated and defenseless.

The poor may not have the most powerful lobbies, but they have the greatest needs. Its time for a broader debate on economic life and in no way can we support a retreat

in the fight against poverty and economic injustice. This is the time to ask the Christian community's cooperation in assessing how far we have come and where we need to go to realize an economic justice for us as a messianic vision. Much is changing especially after the 2000 Jubilee message on economy and our world but much remains the same. There is still too much poverty and not enough economic opportunity for the majority of us.

We are living in a world of contradictions where one part of humanity is prospering and producing in a new information age, coping well with new economic challenges and dictating through globalization on every one else. The other world called the third world is squeezed by declining incomes and global economic competition. In this world of the wise one wonders whether the majority of the citizens will have a piece of bread on the table, keep their badly paying jobs, get medical care, whether they can afford college education for their children and have a place to be buried when the eventually die. Majority of people are not known by name but by numbers.

As people of faith, we believe we are one family, not competing classes. We are sisters and brothers, not economic units or statistics. We must come together around the values of our faith to shape economic and social policies that protect human life, promote strong families, expand a stable middle class, create decent jobs, reduce the level of poverty and need in our society. We need to strengthen our sense of community and our pursuit of the common good.

### **New strategy**

Two millenniums after the message of the gospel and decades of ecumenical convictions, it remains clear that the moral test of our society is how the poor, the weak and the vulnerable are faring. And by this standard we are falling far short. The best way to prepare a way forward is not to develop major new document to provoke endless discussions, but to offer an urgent call to renewed Christian dialogue and action in pursuit of a more just, productive human economy, given the fact the Christian majority nations are the money and political power brokers of this planet earth.

Elimination of poverty and misery is a work of faith and an imperative of the Gospel. For some Christians this message is an affirmation of long held principle. For others, it was a jarring exposure to part of the Christian tradition they have never encountered. The call to live a decent life is not a political preference or ideological choice, but a response to the Scriptures and a requirement of Christian teaching (Cf Matthew 25 when I was naked you dressed me, hungry you fed me, sick you healed me, homeless you sheltered me, in prison you visited me; now enter into the home of my father). We have to provide a time of increased focus on dignified living in our parishes, institutions, families, businesses and society. A brief discussion cannot communicate the full substance of a business and political policy, but its central message might be summarized in this way:

The economy exists to serve the human person, not the other way around.

Economic life should be shaped by moral principles and ethical norms.

Economic choices should be measured by whether they enhance or threaten human life, human dignity and human rights.

### **The truth however is**

We have exploited the poor and called it capacity building.

We have rewarded laziness and called it welfare.

We have killed our unborn and called it choice.  
We have shot thieves and called it justifiable.  
We have neglected to discipline our children and called it building self esteem.  
We have abused power and called it politics.  
We have coveted our neighbor's possessions and called it ambition.  
We have polluted the air with profanity and pornography and called it freedom of expression.  
We have ridiculed the time-honored values of our forefathers and called it enlightenment.  
We have misinterpreted the Holy Bible and called it freedom of worship.  
We have worshiped satan and called it liberty of religion. Imagine!!!

### Poverty and economic stress

Family and social factors continue to contribute to poverty and economic stress. It is reported that a child born to a mother who is married with a high school diploma, whose husband works or has a job herself has a 30% chance of growing up in poverty. A child born to a mother who is not married, without a high school education and without a job in the family has an 80% chance of growing up in poverty. Clearly, the disintegration of families, the absence of fathers, high divorce rates, the failures of education and the reality of joblessness are crucial factors in our economic problems. It is clearly that strong families contribute to the economic, social and moral health of any nation and the Church thereafter.

### **Long way from economic justice for all**

There is no consensus on what explains these trends. The decline of manufacturing jobs, rapid technological change, the globalization of the economy, the diminished influence of labour and trade unions, the erosion of the minimum wage, and the costs of health insurance all have contributed to the declining real poor person's income. A growing income gap is fed by economic decisions that put profits ahead of people and lead to inadequate wages, reduced benefits, fewer jobs, and less job security. Meanwhile, individual choices and immoral behavior that contribute to increasing out-of-wedlock births, violence, drug use and the changing family structure are having a significant impact on both human persons and the economy.

We know poverty and economic injustice results from discrimination and destructive personal behavior, from unwise decisions of corporations and the unresponsive behavior of the public sector.

The smart challenge from the churches is to encourage those with economic power to shape their decisions by how they affect the stability of communities and the opportunities of people who are poor, while at the same time calling on all individuals to make personal choices that strengthen their contribution to the common good.

### **Questions for the future**

How can countries and churches work together to overcome the scandal of so much poverty in our midst?

How can the Church take a leadership role in calling those in positions of power to promote economic growth, job security, decent wages, and greater opportunities?

How can our society make concern for the "least among us" and the common good the central consideration in the development of budget, environmental and other national policies?

There are many more questions that could be raised, but these are examples of issues where we may apply the Church's teaching, share our experience and voice our hopes

in civil dialogue and principled action on economic justice and common cause with the poor.

We ought to be advocates of a renewed social contract between employers and employees, between recipients and providers of assistance, between investors and managers that seeks long term progress over short term gains, that offers respect and security in exchange for responsibility and hard work, and that protects the vulnerable.

### **A call to commitment**

Economic justice begins in our homes, in our individual choices and household priorities. Unless we teach ourselves basic values of honesty, compassion and initiative we will not be equipped to deal with the "counter values" of selfishness, consumerism and materialism so prevalent in our society.

Christian publications have to focus on economic issues and their moral and human implications. Educational institutions have to redouble their efforts to share this social teaching, to help their students develop concern for the poor and for justice, and to contribute to the common good by their research and educational activities. National and diocesan organizations have to integrate themes of economic justice in their ongoing formation programs, publications, advocacy and other activities. The parishes ought to continue to intertwine the teaching on economic life into their prayer and preaching, their education and formation, their outreach and advocacy.

### **Conclusion**

Poverty and human suffering hit our African Continent in a particular way. Therefore, a program of ecumenism for a deeper evangelization cannot be conceived without having as a spiritual foundation the preferential option for the poor of our own African land. There cannot be a sincere image of Church without a deep spiritual conversion to Christ, present in the person of the poor. He is constantly reminding us of his own words: " *I was hungry...I was in prison...I was a stranger...*" (Cf. Matthew 25:35-36).

Our role as Christian marching in ecumenism is:

To read and live the gospel

To share our food with friends and strangers alike

To clean the streets of street children and families by sheltering them

To be honest in politics and government

To protect the family from breaking up

To live the commandments of God

To know that every person is your neighbor **Lk: 10: 25-3.** In as far as the social context is concerned, every Christian is called to be "The Good Samaritan".

Every Christian is called to follow Jesus in his mission and ours is of bringing "good news to the poor, new sight to the blind, liberty to captives and to set the downtrodden free." The challenge of this discussion is not merely to think differently, but also to act differently. A renewal of economic life depends on the conscious choices and commitments of individual believers who practice their faith in the world. We call everyone to conversion and common action, to new forms of stewardship, service, and citizenship. The discussion of such situation is but the beginning of a long process of education, discussion, and action in favour of the poor in this indifferent human society.

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