

# Poverty, Christianity and Revolution<sup>1</sup>

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by Julius Nyerere

Poverty is not the real problem of the modern world. For we have the knowledge and resources which could enable us to overcome poverty. The real problem—the thing which creates misery, wars and hatred among men—is the division of mankind into rich and poor.

We can see this division at two levels. Within nation states there are a few individuals who have great wealth and whose wealth gives them great power; but the vast majority of people suffer from varying degrees of poverty and deprivation. Even in a country like the United States, this division can be seen. In countries like India, Portugal or Brazil, the contrast between the wealth of a few privileged individuals and the dire poverty of the masses is a crying scandal.

And looking at the world as a collection of nation states, we see the same pattern repeated. There are a few wealthy nations which dominate the whole world economically, and therefore politically; and a mass of smaller and poor nations whose destiny, it appears, is to be dominated.

The significance of this division between the rich and the poor is not simply that one man has more food than he can eat, more clothes than he can wear and more houses than he can live in, while others are hungry, unclad and homeless. The significant thing about the division between rich and poor nations is not simply that one has the resources to provide comfort for all its citizens, and the other cannot provide basic services. The reality and depth of the problem arises because the man who is rich has power over the lives of those who are poor, and the rich nation has power over the policies of those which are not rich. And even more important is that our social and economic system, nationally and internationally, supports these divisions and constantly increases them, so that the rich get ever richer and more powerful, while the poor get relatively poorer and less able to control their own future.

This continues despite all the talk of human equality, of the fight against poverty, and of development. Still the rich individuals within nations, and the rich nations within the world, go on getting richer very much faster than the poor overcome their poverty. Sometimes this happens through the deliberate decision of the rich, who use their wealth and their power to that end. But often—perhaps more often—it happens ‘naturally’ as a result of the normal workings of the social and economic systems men have constructed for themselves. Just as water from the driest regions of the earth ultimately flows into the oceans where water is already plentiful, so wealth flows from the poorest nations and the poorest individuals into the

<sup>1</sup>A paper read to the Congress of Maryknoll Sisters, New York, 1970.

hands of those nations and those individuals who are already wealthy. A man who can afford to buy only one loaf of bread a day contributes to the profit accruing to the owner of the bakery, despite the fact that the owner already has more money than he knows how to use. And the poor nation which sells its primary commodities on the world market in order to buy machines for development finds that the prices it obtains, and the prices it has to pay, are both determined by the 'forces of the free market' in which it is a pigmy competing with giants.

'For he that hath, to him shall be given; and he that hath not, that also which he hath shall be taken away from him.'

Both nationally and internationally this division of mankind into the tiny minority of rich, and the great majority of poor, is rapidly becoming intolerable to the majority—as it should be. The poor nations and the poor peoples of the world are already in rebellion against it; if they do not succeed in securing change which leads towards greater justice, then that rebellion will become an explosion. Injustice and peace are in the long run incompatible; stability in a changing world must mean ordered change towards justice, not mechanical respect for the *status quo*.

It is in this context that development has been called another name for peace.

#### *Man is the Purpose*

The purpose of development is man. It is the creation of conditions, both material and spiritual, which enables man the individual, and man the species, to become his best. That is easy for Christians to understand because Christianity demands that every man should aspire towards union with God through Christ. But although the Church—as a consequence of its concentration upon man—avoids the error of identifying development with new factories, increased output, or greater national income statistics, experience shows that it all too often makes the opposite error. For the representatives of the Church, and the Church's organizations, frequently act as if man's development is a personal and 'internal' matter, which can be divorced from the society and the economy in which he lives and earns his daily bread. They preach resignation; very often they appear to accept as immutable the social, economic, and political framework of the present-day world. They seek to ameliorate intolerable conditions through acts of love and of kindness where the beneficiary of this love and kindness remains an object. But when the victims of poverty and oppression begin to behave like men and try to change those conditions, the representatives of the Church stand aside.

My purpose today is to suggest to you that the Church should accept that the development of peoples means rebellion. At a given and decisive point in history men decide to act against those con-

ditions which restrict their freedom as men. I am suggesting that, unless we participate actively in the rebellion against those social structures and economic organizations which condemn men to poverty, humiliation and degradation, then the Church will become irrelevant to man and the Christian religion will degenerate into a set of superstitions accepted by the fearful. Unless the Church, its members and its organizations express God's love for man by involvement and leadership in constructive protest against the present conditions of man, then it will become identified with injustice and persecution. If this happens, it will die—and, humanly speaking, deserve to die—because it will then serve no purpose comprehensible to modern man.

For man lives in society. He becomes meaningful to himself and his fellows only as a member of that society. Therefore, to talk of the development of man, and to work for the development of man, must mean the development also of that kind of society which serves man, which enhances his well-being, and preserves his dignity. Thus, the development of peoples involves economic development, social development, and political development. And at this time in man's history, it must imply a divine discontent and determination for change. For the present condition of men must be unacceptable to all who think of an individual person as a unique creation of a living God. We say man was created in the image of God. I refuse to imagine a God who is poor, ignorant, superstitious, fearful, oppressed, wretched—which is the lot of the majority of those he created in his own image. Men are creators of themselves and their conditions, but under present conditions we are creatures, not of God, but of our fellow men.

Surely there can be no dispute among Christians about that. For mankind has never been so united or so disunited; has never had such power for good nor suffered under such evident injustices. Men's capacity has never been so clear, nor so obviously and deliberately denied.

The World is one in technological terms. Men have looked down on the Earth from the Moon and seen its unity. In jet planes I can travel from Tanzania to New York in a matter of hours. Radio waves enable us to talk to each other—either in love or abuse—without more than a few seconds elapsing between our speech and the hearing of it. Goods are made which include materials and skills from all over the world—and are then put up for sale thousands of miles from their place of manufacture.

Yet at the same time as the interdependence of man is increased through the advance of technology, the divisions between men also expand at an ever-increasing rate. The National Income per head in the United States is said to be more than \$3,200 a year; in Tanzania it is approximately \$80—that is, it would take a Tanzanian forty years to earn what an American earns in one year, and we

are not the poorest nation on earth. Further, it has been estimated that, while the rich countries are adding approximately 60 dollars a year to the per capita income of their citizens, the average increase of per capita income in the poor countries is less than 2 dollars per year. It has been estimated that up to 500 million people on the earth today are suffering from hunger—from never having enough to eat. Further, one out of every two of the world's peoples is suffering from malnutrition—from deficiencies of protein or other essential health-giving foods. And finally, let me remind you that even within the wealthiest countries of the world, the misery and oppression of poverty is experienced by thousands, or even millions, of individuals, families and groups.

So the world is not one. Its peoples are more divided now, and also more conscious of their divisions, than they have ever been. They are divided between those who are satiated and those who are hungry. They are divided between those with power and those without power. They are divided between those who dominate and those who are dominated; between those who exploit and those who are exploited. And it is the minority which is well fed, and the minority which has secured control over the world's wealth and over their fellow men. Further, in general that minority is distinguished by the colour of their skins and by their race. And the nations in which most of that minority of the world's people live have a further distinguishing characteristic—their adoption of the Christian religion.

These things cannot continue, and Christians, above all others, must refuse to accept them. For the development of men, and the development of peoples, demands that the world shall *become* one and that social justice shall *replace* the present oppressions and inequalities.

#### *Man is a Member of Society*

In order to achieve this, there must be economic development and equitable distribution of wealth. The poor nations, the poor areas and the poor peoples must be enabled to increase their output; through fair distribution they must be enabled to expand their consumption of the goods which are necessary for decency and for freedom.

For what is required is not simply an increase in the national income figures of the poor countries, nor a listing of huge increases in the production of this crop or that industry. New factories, roads, farms and so on, are essential; but they are not enough in themselves. The economic growth must be of such a kind, and so organized, that it benefits the nations and the peoples who are now suffering from poverty. This means that social and political development must go alongside economic development—or even precede it. For unless society is so organized that the people control their own economies

and their own economic activity, then economic growth will result in increased injustice because it will lead to increased inequality, both nationally and internationally. Those who control a man's livelihood control a man; his freedom is illusory and his equal humanity is denied when he depends upon others for the right to work and to eat. Equally, a nation is not independent if its economic resources are controlled by another nation; political independence is meaningless if a nation does not control the means by which its citizens can earn their living.

In other words, the development of peoples follows from economic development only if this latter is achieved on the basis of the equality and human dignity of all those involved. And human dignity cannot be given to a man by the kindness of others. Indeed, it can be destroyed by kindness which emanates from an action of charity. For human dignity involves equality and freedom, and relations of mutual respect among men. Further, it depends on responsibility, and on a conscious participation in the life of the society in which a man moves and works.

The whole structure of national societies and of international society is therefore relevant to the development of peoples. And there are few societies which can now be said to serve this purpose; for there are few—if any—which both accept, and are organized to serve, social justice in what has been called the Revolution of Rising Expectations.

Certainly it is difficult to argue that the societies in which the Catholic Church operates, and has most influence, are organized for social justice; it is impossible to demonstrate that these societies serve social justice. Under capitalism the greatest advances in technology and economic growth have been achieved. But the decisions as to what goods shall be produced, and how they shall be produced, are made by a small number of people who have obtained control over land and capital. And the determining factor in all their decision-making is whether the activity will yield a monetary profit, or power, or prestige, to them as owners of the land or capital. The needs of mankind are secondary, if they are considered at all. There is 'no profit' in producing cheap houses, so they are not produced; there is 'no money' for schools and hospitals. But luxury apartments can be built, and six-lane highways; for these things money can be found. And the result is a few men living in great luxury, using the wealth produced by man for their own grandeur and to ensure their own power. At the same time masses of men, women and children are reduced to beggary, squalor, and to the humiliation of that diseased and soul-destroying insecurity which arises out of their enforced poverty.

Let us be quite clear about this. If the Church is interested in man as an individual, it must express this by its interest in the society of which those individuals are members. For men are shaped by the

circumstances in which they live. If they are treated like animals, they will act like animals. If they are denied dignity, they will act without dignity. If they are treated solely as a dispensable means of production, they will become soul-less 'hands', to whom life is a matter of doing as little work as possible and then escaping into the illusion of happiness and pride through vice.

Therefore, in order to fulfil its own purpose of bringing men to God, the Church must seek to ensure that men can have dignity in their lives and in their work. It must itself become a force of social justice and it must work with other forces of social justice wherever they are, and whatever they are called. Further, the Church must recognize that men can only progress and can only grow in dignity by working for themselves, and working together for their common good. The Church cannot uplift a man; it can only help to provide the conditions and the opportunity for him to co-operate with his fellows to uplift himself.

#### *The Meaning of Service Today*

What does this mean for those who give their lives to the service of the Church?

First, it means that kindness is not enough; piety is not enough; and charity is not enough. The men who are now suffering from poverty, whether they are in the Third World or in the developed world, need to be helped to stretch themselves; they need to be given confidence in their own ability to take control of their own lives. And they need to be helped to take this control, and use it themselves for their own purposes. They need their *uhuru*, and meaningful *uhuru*. This is important to the Church, as well as to mankind. For until men are in a position to make effective choices, few of them will become Christians in anything but name. Their membership of the Church will be simply another method by which they seek to escape from a consciousness of their misery; if you like, religion becomes a kind of opium of the people.

Everything which prevents a man from living in dignity and decency must therefore be under attack from the Church and its workers. For there is, in fact, nothing saintly in imposed poverty and, although saints may be found in slums, we cannot preserve slums in order to make them breeding grounds for saints. A man who has been demoralized by the conditions under which he is forced to live is no use to himself, to his family, or to his nation. Whether he can be of much use to God is not for me to judge.

The Church has to help men to rebel against their slums; it has to help them do this in the most effective way it can be done. But most of all the Church must be obviously and openly fighting all those institutions, and power groups, which contribute to the existence and maintenance of the physical and spiritual slums—regardless of the consequences to itself or its members. And, where-

ever and however circumstances make it possible, the Church must work with the people in the positive tasks of building a future based on social justice. It must participate actively in initiating, securing, and creating, the changes which are necessary and which will inevitably take place.

Only by doing these things can the Church hope to reduce hatred and promote its doctrine of love to all men. Its love must be expressed in action against evil, and for good. For if the Church acquiesces in established evils, it is identifying itself and the Christian religion with injustice by its continuing presence.

Secondly, the members of the Church must work with the people. We should stress the working with, not the working for. For it is not the task of Religious leaders to try to tell people what they should do. What is necessary is sharing on the basis of equality and common humanity. Only by sharing work, hardships, knowledge, persecution, and progress, can the Church contribute to our growth. And this means sharing in every sense as 'members one of another'. For if the Church is not part of our poverty, and part of our struggle against poverty and injustice, then it is not part of us.

I think another changing function of Religious members is in relation to the social services. In many areas of the world—and particularly in Africa—the Catholic Church has built its own schools and its own hospitals. These have been invaluable; they have provided education and medical care when there would otherwise have been none. But I believe that such provision should be an interim measure, and that, wherever possible, the Church members should be working with, and through, the organizations owned and controlled by the people themselves. Nuns and Brothers should be working in State schools and nursing in State hospitals; they should be District Nurses in a national, regional or city structure. By adopting this kind of policy wherever it is possible, the Church will be showing that its purpose is service to the people, and not control of them. By separating the provision of service from its evangelical activities, the Church will make clear that it desires men's conversion to Christianity to come from conviction, not from gratitude or from the compulsion of indebtedness.

Finally, I believe that members of Religious organizations must encourage and help the people to co-operate together in whatever action is necessary for their development. What this will mean in practice will vary from one country to another, and from one part of a country to another part. Sometimes it will mean helping the people to form and to run their own co-operative villages. Sometimes it will mean helping the people to form their own trade unions—and not Catholic trade unions, but trade unions of workers regardless of religion. Sometimes it will mean the Church leaders involving themselves in nationalist freedom movements and being part of those movements. Sometimes it will mean co-operating with local Govern-

ments or other authorities; sometimes it will mean working in opposition to established authorities and powers. Always it means the Church being on the side of social justice and helping men to live together and work together for their common good.

Let us admit that, up to now, the record of the Church in these matters has not been a good one. The countries which we immediately think of as Catholic countries are not those in which the people enjoy human dignity, and in which social justice prevails. Nor are they countries in which there has been great economic progress. The Church is not without influence in Latin America; and I am told that one-third of all the Catholics of the world live in that sub-continent. Yet we do not associate that part of the world with progress and social justice. On the contrary, the conditions of poverty, of exploitation, and misery, in Latin American countries are too well known to require comment from me. Spain, where the Church is powerful, is not a paragon of freedom and justice. It may not be completely irrelevant to mention also that Italy and France have the largest Communist Parties in the Western World. All these things are a reflection of failure on the part of the Catholic Church, its leaders, and its workers.

There are priests (and sometimes bishops) in many countries of Latin America, Jesuit priests and lay brothers in Spain, priests and bishops in Rhodesia and South Africa, and some in other countries of the world, who work with the people and speak for them. Some of these priests have been assassinated, some have been imprisoned, some have been tortured; some, unfortunately, have been dismissed or re-located by the Church hierarchy. But all of them are redeeming the reputation of Catholicism and organized Christianity, and are showing what can be done and what must be done, even if it is at the cost of great sacrifice. Their work is invaluable; but we have to admit that they are too few and have much leeway to make up.

For until quite recently the Church was silent on the great issues of man in society, or even sided with those whose exclusive concern was their own power and the accumulation of riches. Even now, despite the teachings of Pope John and Pope Paul, and the deliberations of the Second Vatican Council, the most usual practice of the Church is the upholding of the established order—regardless of its implications. It is this practice which we have now to change. For these individual Churchmen and women who are working for social justice need the comfort and support of the whole Church in their suffering for the teachings of Christ. They are acting according to the dictates of their conscience and, in doing so, they are showing us the way forward. But all too often they find that they have to work in isolation from their Catholic brethren. They find that the whole Church has not yet committed itself to justice here on earth.

In the Portuguese colonies in Africa we see the same thing. For centuries the Church has, without protest, accepted forced labour,



torture, exploitation and alien domination. Even now the Church refuses to speak up against the colonialism and oppression in Mozambique, Angola and Guinea Bissau. It is true that in recent months His Holiness has received in audience three of the nationalist leaders; but this is only a beginning. Unless it is followed up by open speech and by action, the identification of the Catholic Church with Portuguese tyranny will continue.

I am not asking that the Church should surrender its functions or allow itself to be identified with particular political parties or political doctrines. On the contrary, what I am saying amounts to a demand that it should stop allowing itself to be identified with unjust political and economic power groups. For the Church should want to be identified with the pursuit of social justice. And that is what I am asking you to promote. The poor and the oppressed should come to you not for alms, but for support against injustice.

#### *Co-operation with Non-Catholics*

It is necessary to recognize, however, that others—non-Catholics and non-Christians—will also be working to promote social justice; we have no monopoly of virtue! We must not be afraid of this. On the contrary, we should welcome other workers for justice. It is not necessary to agree with everything a man believes, or says, in order to work with him on particular projects or in particular areas of activity. The Church must stand up for what it believes to be right; that is its justification and purpose. But it should welcome all who stand on the same side, and continue regardless of which individuals or groups it is then opposing.

A good does not become evil if a communist says it is a good; and evil does not become good if a fascist supports it. Exploiting the poor does not become a right thing to do because communists call it a wrong thing; production for profit rather than meeting human needs does not become more just because communists say it leads to injustice. Organizing the society in such a manner that people live together and work together for their common good does not become an evil because it is called socialism. A system based on greed and selfishness does not become good because it is labelled free enterprise. Let the Church choose for itself what is right and what is wrong in accordance with Christian principles, and let it not be affected by what other groups or individuals do or say. But let it welcome co-operation from all those who agree with its judgments.

‘Then shall the King say to them that shall be on his right hand: Come, ye blessed of my Father, possess you the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.’

‘For I was hungry, and you gave me to eat; I was thirsty, and you gave me to drink; I was a stranger, and you took me in; naked, and you cover me; sick, and you visited me; I was in prison, and you came to me.’

‘Then shall the just answer him, saying: Lord, when did we see thee hungry and fed thee; thirsty and gave thee drink? And when did we see thee a stranger and took thee in? Or naked and covered thee? Or when did we see thee sick or in prison and came to thee?’

‘And the King answering shall say to them: Amen, I say to you, as long as you did it to one of these my least brethren, you did it to me.’

We know that we are fallible men and that our task is to serve, not to judge. Yet we accept into the Church (provided only that they come to Mass every Sunday and pay their dues or contribute to missionary activities) those who create and maintain the present political and economic system. But it is this system which has led to millions being hungry, thirsty and naked; it is this system which makes men strangers in their own countries because they are poor, powerless and oppressed; it is this system which condemns millions to preventable sickness, and which makes prisoners of men who have the courage to protest. What right, then, have we to reject those who serve mankind, simply because they refuse to accept the leadership of the Church, or refuse to acknowledge the divinity of Jesus or the existence of God? What right have we to presume that God Almighty takes no notice of those who give dedicated service to those millions of his children who hunger and thirst after justice, just because they do not do it in his name? If God were to ask the wretched of the earth who are their friends, are we so sure that we know their answer? And is that answer irrelevant to those who seek to serve God?

Not every one that saith to me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the Kingdom of Heaven; but he that doth the will of my Father who is in heaven, he shall enter into the Kingdom of Heaven.

Many will say to me in that day: Lord, Lord, have not we prophesied in thy name and cast out devils in thy name and done many miracles in thy name?

‘And then will I profess unto them: I never knew you; depart from me, you that work iniquity.’

Yet this is not all. Just as we must not be afraid of working with men of different religious convictions or of none, nor must we allow ourselves to be frightened by new ideas, new plans, or new projects. The world needs new ideas, new organizations, as much as it needs to apply the truths of Christianity; indeed, we need new ways of applying these truths in the technological world of the twentieth century. It is the job of the Church to find these new paths forward, and recognize them when they are pointed out by others. Fear of the future, and of the needs of the future, is no part of Christianity. Ours is a living Faith: if you like, a Revolutionary Faith, for faith without action is sterile, and action without faith is meaningless.

'I am come that they may have life and may have it more abundantly.'

### *The Role of the Church*

What all this amounts to is a call to the Church to recognize the need for social revolution, and to play a leading role in it. For it is a fact of history that almost all the successful revolutions which have taken place in the world have been led by people who were themselves beneficiaries under the system they sought to replace. Time and again members of the privileged classes have joined, and often led, the poor or oppressed in their revolts against injustice. The same thing must happen now.

Within the rich countries of the world the beneficiaries of educational opportunity, of good health, and of security, must be prepared to stand up and demand justice for those who have up to now been denied these things. Where the poor have already begun to demand a just society, at least some members of the privileged classes must help them and encourage them. Where they have not begun to do so, it is the responsibility of those who have had greater opportunities for development to arouse the poor out of their poverty-induced apathy. And I am saying that Christians should be prominent among those who do this, and that the Church should seek to increase the numbers and the power of those who refuse to acquiesce in established injustices.

The same is true also as regards the international scene. The poor and backward countries are beginning to speak up, and to protest against their condition. But they gain strength and effectiveness because of countries like the Scandinavian nations and Canada, which are beginning to recognize the insecurity and the injustice of their wealth in a world of poverty, and which are beginning to take a leading part in urging change.

I am saying that the Church should join with these nations and, if possible, help to increase their number. I am saying that it should be one of the group of nations and institutions which reject domination by the rich for the benefit of the rich. And it should be the function of Church members in wealthy countries to enlarge the group opposed to international exploitation of the poor and oppression of the weak.

Only by its activities in these fields can the Church justify its relevance in the modern world. For the purpose of the Church is Man—his human dignity, and his right to develop himself in freedom. To the service of Man's development, any or all of the institutions of any particular society must be sacrificed if this should be necessary. For all human institutions, including the Church, are established in order to serve Man. And it is the institution of the Church, through its members, which should be leading the attack on any organization, or any economic, social, or political structure

which oppresses men, and which denies to them the right and power to live as the sons of a loving God.

In the poor countries the Church has this same role to play. It has to be consistently and actively on the side of the poor and unprivileged. It has to lead men towards Godliness by joining with them in the attack against the injustices and deprivation from which they suffer. It must co-operate with all those who are involved in this work; it must reject alliances with those who represent Mammon, and co-operate with all those who are working for Man. Its members must go out as servants of the world, as men and women who wish to share their knowledge and their abilities with those whom they recognize as their brothers and their sisters in Christ.

There was a time when the Christian Church was persecuted and its members held in contempt and derision. Are the societies in which the Catholic Church now operates so just, or so organized for the service of God and Man, that it is unnecessary to risk a similar rejection in the pursuit of social justice? I do not believe so. I believe with Teilhard de Chardin that: 'A Christian can joyfully suffer persecution in order that the world may grow greater. He can no longer accept death on the charge that he is blocking mankind's road.'

## The Focussing of God by Geoffrey Preston, O.P.

The renewal of sacramental theology in the past fifty years or so has depended considerably on a recovery and development of the primitive insight that the primary and primordial sacrament is Christ himself, whose sacramentality is the ground and the culmination of all human existence in the world in time. It is because we are as we are (and it is good, 'very good', that we are as we are), because basically if not most interestingly we are men in virtue of a shared flesh and blood, unable to communicate or be men except as such, even with and before God, that we enact our human and our Christian existence sacramentally. We interpret ourselves to ourselves, discover what it means to be who we are and so find how to become who we are, by projecting ourselves on and realizing ourselves in external nature. By our bodily creativity, in words and symbols and the extraordinary variety of human art-forms we are able to *make* sense of our life in the world, to make its flux and chaos precisely meaningful, to focus the whole in a perceptible sign which in contracting the immensities allows us to live amongst them as those who are at home there. And the Jewish-Christian tradition