

WHAT IS THE CHURCH'S SOCIAL TEACHING SAYING ABOUT POVERTY?

“The joys and hopes, the sorrows and anxieties of women and men of our time, especially those who are poor or afflicted in anyway, these are the joys and hopes, the sorrows and anxieties of the followers of Jesus Christ.” *The Church in the Modern World, #1*

This pamphlet has been prepared to assist Christian groups in Zambia (e.g., Small Christian Communities, Justice and Peace groups, Bible Study groups, etc.) to learn more about the Church's Social Teaching (CST), especially in relationship to the issue of *poverty*.

It is designed as a study guide for four sessions, but it can be used for more than four sessions – we should not rush through the process of study! The process follows the “Pastoral Circle,” encouraging us to begin with *contact* with our experiences, then move on to an *analysis* of why the situation exists. Then we do some *theological reflection* (guided by the CST), and finally move to an appropriate *response* of action.

JESUIT CENTRE FOR THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION
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SESSION ONE: EXPERIENCE

Amai Banda and her tomatoes

Selina Banda wakes up every Monday morning at 03:00 hrs. After throwing some water on her face she joins some of her neighbours in New Kanyama to go and search for a box of tomatoes from Soweto Market in downtown Lusaka for resell at the roadside near her home.

Many women converge at Soweto Market looking for the same goods. A 20kg box of tomatoes cost K15,000. Amai Banda looks around for the best tomatoes she can find, moving away from the rowdy boys who push, shove and hurl insults. She then heads back to New Kanyama, having paid a mini-bus an extra fare to allow her to take the box on board.

For the rest of the week, including Sunday, Amai Banda braves the scorching sun, the biting winter winds and sometimes the pouring rains for 10 hours each day, in efforts to sell her tomatoes, in bundles of half a dozen, at K2000. There are six other women on the same roadside selling the same commodity, in addition to a well-stocked supermarket nearby that sells green vegetables -- including tomatoes. Competition is always tough, and many times she is very discouraged indeed!

On a good day she might make K4000. This makes her at least a bit happy. The money can go towards the purchase of food for her six-member family, a husband (unemployed after being retrenched from the Lusaka City Council workers) and four girls. On a bad day, when she sells very little, she knows that she will hear some cries from the hungry children!

At the end of the week Amai Banda might finish selling all her tomatoes and realise K15,000 in profits. She then goes back to Soweto Market for more tomatoes and the week's business starts all over again.

In this way, day in and day out, with little or no rest, she somehow manages to place two meals a day on the table for her family and also to send two of her children to school. Each of her daughters requires K85,000 in school expenses (e.g., uniforms, books, pencils, etc.) at the beginning of each school year. And there are always the unexpected expenses when someone comes to visit from the village, or someone falls sick because of malaria or even the very serious sickness of HIV/AIDS.

When she can spare some time, she takes a few hours off on Sunday morning to go to church. She prays that God will bless her family and will help her continue to work.

Questions for Reflection

1. Do you know or see many people like Amai Banda in your neighbourhood?
2. What do you think she feels about her situation?
3. Why do you think people like Amai Banda are forced to survive in such a way?
4. In our traditional African culture is it a good thing to see some people struggling like that to find the basic necessities of life?

SESSION TWO: SOCIAL ANALYSIS

Poverty in Zambia today

Zambia is a rich country (abundant natural resources, good agricultural land, etc.) but has a very poor economy, with many poor people like Amai Banda.

Yes, Zambia is poor compared to what it was 30 years ago. At least that is the way many people feel about their situation, in both urban and rural settings.

Some of the reasons why poverty levels have worsened are low copper prices and lack of development in agriculture, manufacturing and tourism. For a long time the country depended mainly on copper for its foreign exchange earnings. The increasingly high expense of bringing oil into the country has also contributed to the high cost of living and to the widespread situations of serious poverty.

Sometimes the Zambian Government has not responded well to the challenge of poverty. Its *priorities* have not been on improving education and health care services for all the people or improving the infrastructure (that is, water, sanitation, roads) that makes development possible.

Another reason why the country is poorer today than it was in the early 1970s is because of its huge external debt that the country has been struggling to pay back in regular servicing. Today the external debt is over US\$ 7.0 billion – that is US\$ 700 for every woman, and child in the country! Zambia spends millions of US dollars every year just to “service” that debt – paying interest to countries and institutions (like the World Bank and the IMF) that loaned Zambia money.

Still another reason why the country is poor is the fact that Zambia spent a lot of money helping countries in the region that were fighting for independence. Remember the “Freedom Fighters” that were based here in Lusaka, coming from South Africa, Rhodesia, Mozambique, Angola, Namibia. These are the reasons why the majority of Zambians are so poor.

Today four out of every five Zambians live on less than K5000 (US\$1) a day. That is the basic money figure that tells who is poor in this country. The great majority of these poor people in Zambia are women and children. Many of the poor people are found in rural areas. There are many orphans too. And the HIV/AIDS pandemic simply makes the suffering of poverty all the greater!

It is certainly true that a lot of people in Zambia are suffering as a result of the high levels of poverty that exist in the nation.

Questions for Reflection

1. In your opinion, what causes so much poverty in Zambia?
2. From your experience, do you think that the poverty situation is getting better or getting worse in the country?
3. Why is poverty such a bad thing? Is it something that can be done away with?
4. Do people in Zambia know a lot about the economic situation? Do they care about it? Can they make any difference in the situation?

SESSION THREE: THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION

Church's Social Teaching (CST)

When we Christians reflect on the situation of Amai Banda and then look at the poverty in Zambia today, we can feel very frustrated and angry. Sometimes Christians just give up trying to deal with these challenges. Some Christians quote Jesus, saying: "Didn't Jesus say that we will always have the poor with us? We really can't do anything!"

But giving up in the face of the poverty challenges is not a Christian response! We Christians have a very good help available to us to understand the problems and to learn the ways in which we can respond to them. This help is what we call the *Church's Social Teaching* (CST).

The Church's Social Teaching is a body of social wisdom (touching our heads and our hearts) that comes from the Scriptures, the reflections of theologians, the statements of the Church and the witness of many holy people.

This CST is a light shining on the difficulties and challenges we face every day as individuals, communities and nation. It contains good principles and authentic values which, if faithfully applied in our personal, social and public lives, can assist us to deal with the challenges of poverty in this country.

One way that the CST helps us is to focus us so that we will ask relevant questions in order to understand what is happening around us. Then it can guide us to develop effective ways of responding in a Christian manner to these challenges.

This questioning attitude that comes from the CST involves looking at the decisions that are made on important matters (*politics*), exploring how business practices are benefiting or not benefiting people (*economics*), finding out how people relate to each other as individuals or communities (*social*), and evaluating how traditional ideas and values guide our behaviour in society (*culture*).

As we know, these different *political, economic, social and cultural* issues contribute to the current situation of poverty in our country. The CST opens our eyes, touches our heart, and strengthens our hands in the face of the challenges of poverty!

Questions for Reflection

1. Have you ever heard of this thing called the Church's Social Teaching (CST)? If you answer yes, where and when and how?
2. If you have not heard about CST before, why not? Do many Christians know about CST?
3. Should something be done to make CST better known in Zambia? How can this be done?
4. Do you think CST could be an important help in responding to the problem of poverty in the country? Why?

A. Some Scripture teaching about poverty

It is very clear from reading the Bible that the Christian Church must pay special attention to the conditions of poor people. This is because God has a very special concern (an option) for the poor.

“The Lord will judge the poor fairly and defend the rights of the oppressed.” (Isaiah 11: 5)
Moreover, Jesus always takes the side of the poor in his ministry.

“The spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has chosen me to bring the good news to the poor.” (Luke 4:18)

Both the Old Testament and the New Testament strongly condemn situations of poverty and injustice.

“You people hate anyone who challenges injustice and speaks the whole truth in court. You have oppressed the poor and robbed them of their grain. And so you will not live in the fine stone houses you build or drink the wine from beautiful vineyards you plant. I know how terrible your sins are and how many crimes you have committed. You persecute good people, take bribes, and prevent the poor from getting justice in the courts. And so, keeping quiet in such evil times is the smart thing to do. (Amos 5:11-13)

We are reminded that if we do not pay attention to the plight of the poor, our prayers will not be heard, but if we do, we will be blessed.

“If you refuse to hear the cry of the poor, your own cry for help will not be heard.” (Proverbs 21:13)

“Happy are those who are concerned for the poor; the Lord will help them when they are in trouble.” (Psalms 41:1)

In the New Testament, Jesus encouraged us to respond to the needs of those in difficulties.

“Then the King will say to the people on his right, ‘Come, you that are blessed by my Father! Come and possess the kingdom which has been prepared for you ever since the creation of the world. I was hungry and you fed me, thirsty and you gave me a drink; I was a stranger and you received me in your homes, naked and you clothed me; I was sick and you took care of me, in prison and you visited me.’” (Matthew 25: 34-37)

This is because his mission and that of the Church are to ensure that every human being enjoys a full life.

“The thief comes only in order to steal, kill, and destroy. I have come in order that you may have life -- life in all its fullness.” (John 10:10)

B. Some Church statements about poverty

Reflecting the emphasis of the Scripture, in the documents of the Church's social teaching the poor are given special treatment.

The poor must be a primary focus in our faithful following of Jesus Christ.

“The joys and hopes, the sorrows and anxieties of women and men of our time, *especially those who are poor or afflicted in anyway*, these are the joys and hopes, the sorrows and anxieties of the followers of Jesus Christ.” (*The Church in the Modern World, #1*)

Through its social teaching, the Church proclaims that the goods of the earth are to be enjoyed by all.

“God intended the earth and all that it contains for the use of every human being and people.” (*The Church in the Modern World, #69*)

“Every person has the right to find in the world what is necessary for themselves.” (*The Development of the Peoples, #22*)

Our own Bishops here in Zambia have also made strong statements about poverty and the situation of the poor.

“The suffering of the poor increases daily. This is not only a moral scandal but also a dangerous threat to our democratic stability.” (*Hear the Cry of the Poor, #28*)

“The Zambian family is today confronted with numerous and complex traditional social, political and economic problems.” (*Called to be the Family of God, #24*)

Our Bishops have emphasised that the government has a special responsibility to be sensitive to the needs of the poor. For that reason, they have challenged how the Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) has been affecting the poor.

“The manner in which the poor have been expected to bear the burden of our economic restructuring programme raises questions about democratic procedures and political systems.” (*Economics, Politics and Justice, #13*)

Questions for Reflection

1. Do you think it is important for Christians to use scripture and the social teaching of the church in reflecting over such issues as poverty, economics and politics? Why?
2. Do you know of other passages in the Bible that speak about the poor and the situations of poverty?
3. Some people would say that the CST is not very realistic in the real world of economics and politics here in Zambia. Do you agree or disagree with this statement?
4. Can people in Zambia belong to different political parties and still follow closely the Church's social teaching?

SESSION FOUR: RESPONSE

Church's Social Action

When faced with facts like the situation of Amai Banda, the Church cannot remain silent or inactive. To do so would not be faithful to the teaching and example of Jesus Christ, our Lord and Leader. We cannot simply analyse the poverty in Zambia, and then only reflect on what our Scripture and the statements of the Church tell us. *We must move towards action!*

But when we talk about the "Church," we must remember *that we all are the Church!* The Church is not only the Pope, or the Bishops, or the priests and sisters and brothers. It is not simply the members of the Parish Council or those who wear the uniforms of different groups like the Legion of Mary or St. Anne's or the Tertiari. No, the church is all of the baptised, all of us who are called to follow Jesus in his teaching and in his actions!

The CST helps us plan what *actions* we should take as Christians in order to resolve the challenging issues in our community and in our nation. CST can be used in Small Christian Communities, Justice and Peace groups, Bible Study meetings and other occasions to examine the social, political, economic and cultural situations prevailing in the country.

This will help us to arrive at a better understanding of what causes the injustice that is poverty today in Zambia. Then we can plan together to take the most effective action to bring about a change for the better.

This process of moving into action takes three steps, as explained in the following statement from a very important CST document.

"The teachings in regard to social matters for the most part are put into effect in the following three stages: *first*, the actual situation is examined; *second*, the situation is evaluated carefully in relation to these teachings; *third*, only then is it decided what can and should be done in order that the traditional norms maybe adapted to circumstances of time and place. The three steps are at times expressed by the three words *see, judge and act.*" (*Christianity and Social Progress*, # 236)

By following the steps of *see, judge and act*, we Christians can, guided by the Church's Social Teaching, work for a better Zambia. We will be doing something not only for Amai Banda and others who suffer from great poverty, but also improving the lives of all Zambians. *We truly will be bringing the Good News of Jesus into our midst!*

Questions for Reflection

1. When we speak about responding to the sufferings of the poor, won't this activity involve the Church in *politics*? Is that a good thing or a bad thing?
2. Is our government doing enough to eradicate poverty in Zambia? If not, why not?
3. Do the rich Christians have any special duty of helping the great majority of people in Zambia, the poor?
4. As an individual and as a community, what do you think we can do together to improve the situation in our country, to help poor people like Amai Banda?

Concluding Prayer

God, our Gracious Creator, you so loved the world that you sent your beloved Son, Jesus our Lord, to show us how to relate to one another and to our world. You have taught us through the prophets that it is our duty to attend to the needs of the poor, weak and vulnerable in our communities. Through the Gospel you have encouraged us to have compassion for those suffering and to work to transform our societies into communities of justice. In recent times, through the teachings of our Church leaders, you continue to remind us that our duty to love one another means that we must work for social justice.

Help us, we pray, to recognise our responsibility of responding in solidarity to the needs of the poor today. Encourage us through Gospel values of love, justice and compassion to rise above our own limitations and imperfections in order to come to the aid of those in need.

We also pray that through your Holy Spirit you will call to conversion all those who contribute to the injustices in our society. Give them the light and strength to change their lives and contribute to the common good of all of Zambia.

We make this prayer through Christ our Lord. Amen.

This pamphlet has been prepared by the staff of the Jesuit Centre for Theological Reflection (JCTR) to assist Christians in Zambia to live more fully the Gospel of Jesus Christ. For more information about the Church's Social Teaching (CST), please contact our office.

We encourage you to send in your comments and suggestions for improving our instructions about the CST. We are very interested to hear how you have used this pamphlet to move toward action for social justice and a greater concern for the poor in Zambia today.

Thank you!

JESUIT CENTRE FOR THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION

"Promoting Faith and Justice"

P.O. Box 37774 10101 Lusaka, Zambia

Tel: 260-1-290410 Fax: 260-1-290759

E-mail: jctr@zamnet.zm Web: www.jctr.org.zm