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Dominic C. Okoye
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HUMAN DIGNITY AT THE CROSSROADS OF POVERTY, CORRUPTION AND TERRORISM: THE NIGERIAN EXPERIENCE

Abstract
The socio-economic and political turmoil that has rocked Nigeria, especially in recent times, does not only unleash a multiple wave of affliction and agony on a great majority of her citizens, it also engenders the torturous trident bearing prongs of poverty, corruption and terrorism, which menaces against the dignity of the human person, posing severe threats to human life and self-preservation. This article defends the inviolability of the dignity of the human person and the right of every Nigerian to a better quality of life in the hope of building a country where justice, truth and peace prevail. Although Nigeria is the principal focus, the scope of reference is extended to include Africa and the whole world, especially as the demand for upholding the dignity of the human person applies to all human beings, irrespective of age, gender, race, religion or culture.

Keywords: Human Dignity, Equality, Justice, Truth and Peace.

Introduction
Despite the remarkable advancements in technology and communication which have effectuated the ease of contact between peoples through various media, the world’s population today is afflicted by intense crises – the crisis of identity, crisis of faith, crisis of values, crisis of placement and even the crisis of belongingness. We are living in an era that is beset with grave contradictions. As the world gets more and more transformed into a global village, the quest for harmony and better integration among peoples of diverse backgrounds, race and culture is severely punctured by extreme socio-political, economic, religious and cultural upheavals, which tend to aggravate discrimination, division and conflict among people in both local and international space.

The deepening level of the crises is manifest in the flagrant disregard for human rights and time-honoured socio-cultural values which continue to yield an increasing rate of injustice, abuse and violence, spreading across the world like wildfires in the harmattan. Terrorism now casts a dark shadow of despair over individuals and
communities, and the feeling of insecurity which it brings along gives rise to untold fear and mutual suspicion. Amidst the incessant peace-talks, peace processes and peace road-maps between nations and militant groups, the world itself has become a daily theatre of war – psychological, verbal and armed – expressed also in boasts of military capability and nuclear superiority.

With the need to channel more financial investments towards defence and military readiness along with the manipulation of the world’s economy by greedy capitalists, the economic and material resources are no longer equitably distributed among the people, resulting in increasing levels of poverty, hunger, malnutrition, diseases and high mortality rate. The ensuing disenchantment and frustration force many into a life of crime – such as armed robbery, financial scam, drug dealing, rape, militancy, etc. – making an already volatile society further unsafe for its citizens. Indeed, the sorry situation is a vicious circle, and holed up in the centre is the dignity of the human person which is essentially abused and violated by the perpetuation of various forms of injustice and threats to human life.

In this article, we shall examine the dangers which the problems of poverty, corruption and terrorism pose to human life and the negative impact they constitute to the dignity of the human person. Condemning these misdeeds is inseparably linked with advocating the cause of justice, truth, and peace, because a society where these virtues thrive can hardly ever give room for the perpetration of life-threatening misdeeds. Using Nigeria as a case-study, we shall be making a case for the advancement of justice, truth and peace globally, in the hope of building a world where human rights are everywhere respected and the culture of respect for the human person abundantly sustained.

1. The Dignity of the Human Person

By the gift of freedom and possession of rationality, bodily incarnated as male and female, and animated by a spiritual principle – the soul, the human person is qualitatively different from all other living beings.1 In the beginning, God created the Heavens and the earth, and all that they contain (cf. Gen 1:1-2:4). Then “God created man in his own image and likeness” (cf. Gen1:27), bestowed upon him a special dignity, crowned him with glory and honour, and gave him power over all other creatures (cf. Psa 8:6-10). This illustrious gift bestows a special dignity on every human being,

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irrespective of age, tribe, gender, nationality or race, and is meant to be held sacrosanct by all. The Church in her teachings articulates the uniqueness of the human person in clear terms: “Endowed with ‘a spiritual and immortal’ soul, the human person is ‘the only creature on earth that God has willed for its own sake’. From his conception, he is destined for eternal beatitude.”

From the doctrine of the Blessed Trinity, we know that God is a person in relationship. Being created in the image of God, human beings are also persons in relationships – with God, with other people and with nature. This means that every human person is to be treated with dignity and respect as a person and not as a thing or an animal. This is the foundation of the notion of equality between all human beings. The Fathers of the Second Vatican Council express this succinctly in the following words: “All men are endowed with a rational soul and are created in God’s image; they have the same nature and origin, and being redeemed by Christ, they enjoy the same divine call and destiny; there is here a basic equality between all men and it must be given ever greater recognition.”

And so, in a pastoral letter by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB), we are reminded that, “when we deal with each other, we do so with the sense of awe that arises in the presence of something holy and sacred; for that is what human beings are …”

By some unfortunate twists of fate however, man has failed to live up to his special vocation as Imago Dei (Image of God). The deep gulf of inequality that exists between people, extreme levels of class difference and oppression, discrimination and marginalization, and the countless numbers of peoples suffering from severe poverty amidst the world’s riches, are a clear statement of how much modern man has distanced himself from his ultimate roots, only to continue to hurl attacks against the norms of human dignity.

A closer look at the imbalance that characterizes the world’s economic and developmental structure, even in this our age of rapid scientific technological advancements, strikes us with a sense of horror. According to the Council Fathers, “in no other age has mankind enjoyed such an abundance of wealth, resources and economic wellbeing; and yet a huge proportion of the people of the world is plagued by hunger and extreme need while countless numbers are totally illiterate. At no time have men had such a huge sense of freedom, only to be faced with new forms of slavery in living and thinking.”

This anomaly, for some reason or the other, continues to...
exacerbate with every passing day. Poverty is on the increase as a vast number of people continues to slump under the yoke of servitude. In spite of the human face that some rich countries and aid organizations try to bestow on the phenomenon of servitude through donor and charity initiatives, corruption in high places constitutes a serious impediment to the judicious spread of resources. As frustration leads many into crime, they become ready instruments for terrorist organizations to exploit. This constant circle of crisis rubs the human society of its serenity and wholeness, intensifying the situation of *homo homini lupus* (man’s inhumanity to man; not lit.).

Towards the end of the 19th Century as the dignity and worth of the human person suffered devaluation under the wave of the Industrial revolution, Pope Leo XIII spoke out boldly not only against the dehumanizing manipulations of Labour (employees) by the Capitalists (employers), but also against the disregard of the human person as a sacrosanct entity. In his encyclical, *Rerum Novarum*, the Pope declared:

The momentous gravity on the state of things now obtaining fills every mind with painful apprehension .... We clearly see, and on this there is general agreement, that some opportune remedy must be found quickly for the misery and wretchedness pressing so unjustly on the majority of the working class. Working men have been surrendered, isolated and helpless, to the hard heartedness of the employers and the greed of unchecked competition. This mischief has been increased by rapacious usury, which is practiced by covetous and grasping men ... so that a small number of very rich men have been able to lay upon the teaming masses of the labouring poor, a yoke little better than that of slavery itself.⁶

A century and three decades after *Rerum Novarum*, it is quite saddening to note that the situation, rather than change for the better, has further deteriorated to what may be called “neo-slavery”, despite the gigantic strides in the scientific and technological progress of mankind. Painfully, many are the injustices which people suffer and so intense are the burdens they bear in this new dispensation which we term “peinocracy” (extreme poverty and neo-slavery).⁷ Feeling helpless and denied of their rights and dignity, human beings – persons created in the image and likeness of God – are left to wander in the abyss of despair by fellow humans.

⁷ Like ‘democracy’ and ‘autocracy’, “peinocracy” is our combination of two Greek words, πεινάω (peináō, meaning ‘to be hungry’) or πείνα (peína, meaning “hunger”) and -κρατία (-kratía, meaning “rule” or “government”), derived from κράτος (krátos, meaning “strength”, “power”). By peinocracy, we mean the “reign of penury”, that is, a world characterized by extreme poverty, indigence, destitution and pain.
2. The Nigerian Experience

The greatest percentage of poverty-stricken nations of the world are in Africa. The pace and direction of Africa’s political evolution since the “Independence Revolution” have been extremely slow, shadowy and unyielding. What most of the respective countries have experienced are unending stretches of military and civilian dictatorships, the sort of repressive neo-imperialism under which the citizens are subjugated and denied of their fundamental rights. Decades of successive bloody military coup d’état, inordinate mismanagement and whopping irresponsibility have led to the entrenchment of indiscipline, distrust, materialism, corruption, violence, terrorism, tribalism, lack of patriotism, low economic productivity and regress. The combined effect of these adversities is enough to hinder growth and development in all ramifications.

For Nigeria, the situation is most disheartening. For a nation that has every potential, both natural and human, to rank among the richest countries in the world, or by now be the country with the fastest growing economy in the world, the present state of affairs is difficult to comprehend. With all her natural resources and rich potentials, Nigeria has one of the world’s poorest living indexes in proportion to population. The reason is not far-fetched. In spite of Nigeria’s natural resources and “abundant wealth”, a large percentage of Nigerians live in want and poverty. Fifty-seven years have gone by since Independence, yet the country remains holed up in slavish “dependency” – on foreign loans, on foreign workers and on foreign products – to satisfy her economic and commercial needs.

At the local level, many individuals and families depend on their relatives abroad for survival. Others who don’t have relatives in Europe, America and other overseas countries engage in all kinds of menial jobs some of which are below the standards of human dignity, just to make ends meet. The mass rate of fleeing the country by all means, no matter how illegal, to seek greener pastures overseas has become all too alarming despite the attendant dangers involved.

While a large number of the population looks beyond the shores of this country for any hope in the future, many have taken to crime – kidnapping, armed robbery, thuggery, and fraud – all of which are aimed again at the innocent and suffering populace. At the moment, the menace of Boko Haram and other forms of terrorism, including ethnic militancy, Fulani herdsmen on rampage, armed robbery and kidnapping, continue to threaten, not only the talk about national unity, but also the survival of Nigeria as a nation and the common hope of her citizens. Countless souls have been lost already and many more people live in fear and despair.

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The privileged few who lobby their way into power or other political offices continue to pillage and swindle the nation’s economy. All these problems, coupled with the high rate of unemployment have yielded a fractured nation where insecurity and threat to life are now what characterize the present order. As many Nigerians, having lost hope in the system, look to foreign lands for better living, the brain-drain that the Exodus leaves in its wake further dampens the chances of effective restoration and rebuilding if, and when, the country shall rediscover the right track and make bold efforts to follow the trail of true progress.

3. Towards the Reign of Justice, Truth and Peace

For Nigeria, for Africa, and for the rest of the world, where can we seek solutions to these adversities? The complexity of the situation can make one suppose that it also requires a complex solution. We however, believe that the solutions we seek to the problems at hand can be realized by the conscious and collective efforts of everyone, both the rich countries and the poor countries, the financially secure individuals and the struggling ones, both the so-called ‘lords’ and the perceived ‘slaves’, as well as every human person alike, in the world, in Africa, and in Nigeria.

Amid the sorry situation where fellow human beings are deprived of life or liberty, denied of rights and basic needs, or condemned to suffering, fear or disenchantment, it is imperative to safely embark upon the voyage to redefine and to rediscover the values necessary for better living conditions all over the world. On this, we revert to the ideal of Justice, which is a fundamental human right of every human person irrespective of age, gender, nationality, placement, race, colour or religion. Talking about human rights, they are fundamental and necessary entitlements of people and not what society is willing to give. Expressed plainly, justice is a basic presupposition of human nature and belongs to everybody because everybody is somebody, and it is valid against Government, the State, military rule, or inter-states legislation.9

The Church teaches that socio-political anomalies and inequalities can be gotten rid of through the awareness and appreciation of the fundamental dignity which accrues to every person. By the same token, we believe that the society must “ensure the provision of the conditions that allow associations or individuals to obtain what is their due, according to their nature and vocation.”10 If everyone recognizes and appreciates the fact that every other person is one like himself with equal rights, he would respect

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10 Catechism of the Catholic Church, n. 1928.
and uphold the other person as he would do himself. This is in fact what the Golden
Rule states: “Do unto others as you would want done to you” (Matt 7:12); or expressed
the other way: “Do not do to others as you would not want done to you” (Sir 4:15).

God himself entrusted to us the defence and promotion of the dignity of the human
person, and we are expected to uphold it inviolably. In truth, it is by respecting the
transcendent dignity of the human person that Social Justice may be realized. For this,
the clarion call goes out to Governments and peoples around the world to liberate their
fellowmen from the dehumanizing agonies and “indignity” of poverty and slavery. In
this, true and conscientious zeal is required on the part of every right-thinking leader to
be a force for good and an instrument of peace and justice. The ‘noble’ zeal is expected
to spread through hearts within nations and around the world for both Cooperative Justice
(between nations) and Distributive Justice (within nations) to each take its due course.

A nation can attain a good order when it encourages progress and the drive for
perfection among its citizens. Such an achievement requires a solid foundation
sustained by the pillars of truth and justice. According to St. John XXIII, Pope, “Before
a society can be considered well-ordered, creative, and consonant with human dignity,
it must be based on truth … And so will it be, if each man acknowledges sincerely his
own rights and his own duties toward others.”

The Pope emphasizes the need to spread the outreach across nations. He notes that the relations between States (nations) themselves, “must likewise be harmonized in accordance with the dictates of truth, justice, willing cooperation, and freedom. The same law of nature that governs the life
and conduct of individuals must also regulate the relations of political communities
with one another.”

His point is that when governance within a State, and mutual ties between States, are governed by truth, every trace of prejudice or racial discrimination
would be eliminated. This would bring about the recognition of the inviolable principle
that all individuals and all States are by nature equal in dignity. The recognition allows
each one to accord the other the right to exist, the right to develop and the right to
possess the necessary means for their development, including their legitimate
entitlement to good name and respect.

In this way, peace would flourish in the society
and universal brotherhood would blossom.

In the ensuing relationship of peace, nurtured by truth and justice, the rich nations
of the world should be humane and fair in their dealings with the poor nations. The Governments of poor nations on their part should shun corruption and apply all

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11 Pope John XXIII, *Pacem in Terris* (Encyclical on Establishing Universal Peace in Truth, Justice,
Charity and Liberty, 1963), n. 35
13 Pope John XXIII, *Pacem in Terris*, n. 86.
resources, both from within and from foreign aid, to the alleviation of poverty and the development of their State. For these Governments, sincerity, love, transparency and authentic patriotism should be the watchword, so that they can work hard to see that the resources of the state are magnanimously and equitably distributed. This applies to Nigeria too in a profound way. We call on all elected and appointed officials to work for the common good of all with open hearts, sincerity and truth. Individuals on their part must see in every other person, an “other” self who is specially dignified (in fact, ‘sacred’) to be held in high esteem.

Given all that we have said, it is pertinent to admit that even though the quest for Justice, whether global or local, has been very challenging and elusive, it is achievable. It amounts to acknowledging that Justice is not some “thing” which can be captured in a once-and-for-all formula, for it is a process, a complex and shifting balance between many factors including equality. That notwithstanding, the process, no matter how complex, is to be embarked upon with utmost urgency and speedy application. The aim in view is the abundance of liberty, equality, fraternity and peaceability, permeating every human settlement on the face of the earth. Such a vision is well expressed in the words of St. John Paul II, *Pope*:

To construct a more just world means, among other things making every effort in order that there will be no children without sufficient food, without education, without instruction; that there will be no young people without suitable preparation; that, in order to live and develop in a worthy way, there will be no peasants without land; there will be no workers ill-treated or deprived of their rights; there will be no systems that permit exploitation of man by man or by the State; there will be no corruption; there will be no persons living in super-abundance while others, through no fault of theirs, lack everything; there will be no injustice and inequality in the administration of justice; there will be no one without the protection of the law; that truth and law would prevail, and that economic and political matters will never prevail over human matters.

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14 J. Moniz, 1999

The saintly Pope, John Paul II, during his lifetime, continued to reaffirm the “continuity” and “constant renewal” of this social vision, which not only ensures prevalence of justice, but also guarantees the reign of peace in the world. ‘Continuity’ is necessary, because of the explicit mandate of Jesus Christ and the nature of His Mission. In effect, “it is constant because it remains identical in its ‘fundamental aspiration’, in its ‘principles of reflection’, in its ‘criteria of judgment’, in its basic ‘directives for action’, and above all, its vital link with the Gospel of the Lord.” 16

The emphasis here is on the fact that the social vision is divinely derived. Therein lies the hope of peace for each individual and for the world, and so should be upheld by everyone. Let us be reminded therefore, in the words of St. John XXIII that, “the world will never be the dwelling place of peace, till peace has found a home in the heart of each and every man, till every man preserves in himself the order ordained by God to be preserved.” 17 In this, everyone is called to actively participate in the mission to build a more humane world, a world of integral development, a non-violent world, a just and moral world, a world of peace, and a world of universal brotherhood.

Conclusion

In this paper, we have discussed the problems affecting the dignity and rights of the human person in Nigeria and in the world at large. We proposed a panacea for our ailing world based on the principles of justice, truth and peace. Our submission, in a nutshell is that, for Nigeria, for Africa and for the world at large, it should be the ultimate concern of everyone to embrace the fundamental project revolving around the unity of peoples, respect for the dignity and rights of the person; to aim at the realization of a new world order where truth, love, justice, peace and progress prevail and flourish.

16 JOHN PAUL II, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* (Encyclical on the Social Concern of the Church, 1987) n.3.
17 POPE JOHN XXIII, *Pacem in Terris*, n.165.