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## **RELIGION AS AN ESSENTIAL OPTION FOR THE POOR IN THE CATHOLIC SOCIAL TEACHING**

**OKPE, NICHOLAS OJOAJOGWU, PhD**

Department of Religious Studies  
Prince Abubakar Audu University, Anyigba Kogi State  
okpenicks@ksu.edu.ng

And

**CHUKWU GRACE HOPE OKORO (Postgraduate Student)**

Department of Religious Studies  
Prince Abubakar Audu University, Anyigba Kogi State  
gracehopechukwumezieokoro@gmail.com

### **Abstract**

In times of economic and social adversity, religion, particularly the Catholicism, has traditionally been a vital source of support for the impoverished, providing them with both practical and spiritual aid. Marginalized communities have a strong connection to the Church's teachings on justice, charity, and compassion. The Catholic Church helps people in need by running health care, education, and feeding programs, among other projects. A systemic reform that fosters justice and equity is advocated by Catholic social theology, which is founded on the ideas of human dignity and the preferred option for the poor. This study explores the role of religion, particularly the Catholic Church, in supporting the poor. Both qualitative and quantitative research methods were used. Secondary data included an analysis of Catholic social teaching, papal encyclicals, and case studies of Church-led poverty alleviation programs. The research revealed that the Catholic Church plays a significant role in providing key services such as education, healthcare, and food security to the poor. It recommends stronger collaboration between the Church and government agencies to create more sustainable poverty relief programs. It also calls for greater lay involvement in social justice efforts and for the Church to incorporate modern socio-economic tools to combat poverty more effectively. Religion, particularly the Catholic Church, remains a vital pillar for the poor, serving both as a source of social support and as an advocate for justice.

**Keywords:** Religion, Catholic, Church, Poor, Poverty

### **Introduction**

The concept of religion as an essential option for the poor, particularly within the context of the Catholic Church, has been a subject of considerable theological and sociological debate. Rooted in the principles of Catholic Social Teaching, particularly the preferential option for the poor, this idea asserts that religion, specifically Catholicism, serves as a vital resource and support system for individuals living in poverty. In his work "*Evangelii Gaudium*," Pope



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Francis emphasizes the importance of caring for the poor and marginalized, highlighting the role of religion in providing hope and sustenance to those in need (Pope Francis 185). The theological basis for viewing religion as an essential option for the poor lies in the teachings of Jesus Christ, who demonstrated a special concern for the marginalized and economically disadvantaged. This concern is encapsulated in the Gospel of Matthew, where Jesus proclaims, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 5:3 NIV). "Jesus takes the side of those most in need. As followers of Christ, we are challenged to make a fundamental 'option for the poor'--to speak for the voiceless, to defend the defenseless, to assess life styles, policies, and social institutions in terms of their impact on the poor." (U.S. Catholic Bishops No. 16).

In contemporary society, the Catholic Church continues to prioritize the needs of the poor through various initiatives and ministries. Catholic charities and organizations, such as *Caritas Internationalis* and Catholic Relief Services, operate globally to provide humanitarian assistance, disaster relief, and development programs to vulnerable communities. Moreover, local parishes and religious communities often establish outreach programs, food banks, and shelters to support individuals experiencing poverty. In addition to material assistance, religion serves as a source of hope, comfort, and resilience for many individuals living in poverty. The sacraments, prayer, and spiritual community offer solace in times of hardship and provide a sense of belonging and dignity. Furthermore, the Church's advocacy efforts, including lobbying for policy changes and addressing structural injustices, aim to address the root causes of poverty and promote systemic change. This paper examines the complexities of poverty, including its definition, root causes, and the Catholic Church's stance on alleviating poverty. It highlights the Church's commitment to serving the poor, exploring various ways it provides support and assistance.

### Conceptual Clarifications

**Religion:** Religion does not have a specific definition. However, an attempt has been made to define it by different authors. For example, According to sociologist Emile Durkheim, he defines religion as "a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden—beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community called a Church, all those who adhere to them" ( 44).

**Poor:** Charles Dickens (23) portrays the poor as victims of societal injustice and poverty, often living in squalor and struggling to survive.

**Poverty:** According to *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, it is the state of one who lacks a usual or socially acceptable amount of money or material possessions. Geremek (3) defines poverty as 'the point at which the survival of the individual and of the family became threatened'

**Catholic Church:** Pope Francis, in various encyclicals and speeches, often emphasizes the Catholic Church as a community of believers called to spread the message of love, mercy, and justice to the world (10).



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## Causes of Poverty

Poverty can be attributed to diverse causes like, economic factor, social factor, environmental factor; political factor etc. in support of this, Okpe, said poverty destroys individuals and the social fabrics of the society. In order words, poverty deals with an individual physically, emotionally and psychologically as well as the social institutions (2).

### Economic Factors

**Lack of Economic Growth:** Economic stagnation or decline is a significant cause of poverty. Nations with poor economic growth struggle to provide employment and adequate wages, leading to widespread poverty. Ravallion and Datt demonstrated that in India, states with higher economic growth had lower poverty rates (57). Stressing on this, Okpe states:

One of the major causes of poverty in Nigeria can be said to be economic. There is a high economic disparity existing between the poor and the rich, irrespective of the fact that they are both subjected to the inflationary system. For example, some workers are not well rated and their pay does not come regularly and sometimes at all. Furthermore, the turn of attention to the oil boom and the total neglect of the agricultural sector, which led to the rural-urban migration and wasteful spending of money in public finance management, are economic scenarios causing poverty in Nigeria (3).

**Unemployment:** Unemployment is a direct cause of poverty, as individuals without jobs cannot earn an income. Blanchflower and Oswald (1994) found that higher unemployment rates correlate with increased poverty levels (382).

### Social Factors

**Education:** Lack of access to quality education is a major cause of poverty. Education enhances skills and opportunities for better employment. Psacharopoulos and Patrinos highlighted that each additional year of schooling reduces the probability of falling into poverty by 9% (122). Research by Heckman highlights the importance of education in breaking the cycle of poverty, as individuals with higher levels of education are more likely to secure well-paying jobs (112).

**Healthcare:** Poor health and lack of access to healthcare can trap individuals in poverty. Illness can prevent people from working and incur high medical costs. Sachs (2001) emphasised that regions with poor health infrastructure, like Sub-Saharan Africa, have persistent poverty levels (p. 46). Studies by Case and Deaton suggest that healthcare costs and lack of access to quality healthcare services can push individuals and families into poverty, particularly in countries with inadequate social safety nets (77).

**Family Structure:** Single-parent families are more vulnerable to poverty due to a single income source. McLanahan and Sandefur showed that children from single-parent families are more likely to experience poverty compared to those from two-parent families (65).



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## **Political Factors**

**Governance and Corruption:** Poor governance and corruption divert resources from public goods and services, contributing to poverty. Mauro found that corruption reduces economic growth and increases poverty levels (683). Also, political instability disrupts economic activities and discourages investment, leading to poverty. Alesina et al. observed that countries with frequent political upheavals have lower economic growth and higher poverty rates (190). Okpe (4) added:

Harsh business environment has contributed to the causes of poverty as industries and businesses have not fared well in recent years. They are therefore not able to generate employment and create wealth. The problem plaguing the industries includes poor infrastructure, high cost of operations, policy instability, multiplicity of regulations and regulators and multiple taxes. Due to these economic situations, the poor are not only made to bear the brunt of its effects, but to also wallow in their pains. Base on this, more people are falling out of the survival line thereby swelling the numbers of the indigents. By this, unemployment continues to rise; food and housing are getting out of the reach of ordinary people.

**Policy Failures:** Ineffective or harmful economic policies can exacerbate poverty. For instance, structural adjustment programs imposed by international financial institutions in the 1980s often led to increased poverty in developing countries (Stiglitz 90).

## **Projects of the Catholic Church for the Poor**

After establishing that religion and the Catholic Church in particular have historically provided a means of support for the impoverished, it is imperative to understand the several ways that the Catholic Church has assisted the poor and disadvantaged in the past and the present. Here are a few programs the Catholic Church has implemented to aid the underprivileged in the community.

### **It serves as an option for the poor in various ways:**

**Charitable Services:** Through institutions like Catholic Charities and St. Vincent de Paul, the Catholic Church offers food, clothing, shelter, and other necessities. All people, even the impoverished, require the aforementioned. People who lack the resources to maintain their own lives and are thus dependent on the help of others are referred to as the poor. The Catholic Church has long been recognised for its charitable efforts, which include feeding the impoverished and providing other essentials for their survival in society. The Catholic Church established a philanthropic organization dedicated to serving the needs of the impoverished to address their needs. Caritas, The Church in Need, is one such group. The Sant' Sant'Egidio community, Christ in the city, and numerous others. This demonstrates the careful attention to the impoverished within the Catholic Church. According to Jesus' description of the last judgment in the Gospel of Matthew (25:31-46), our treatment of the most vulnerable and



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impoverished people of society will determine how we are regarded. Jesus shows his unique affection for those in need by spending time with the ill and misfits throughout the Scriptures. As stated in the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops' Option for the Poor and Vulnerable, the Church teaches that "those who are oppressed by poverty are the object of a preferential love on the part of the Church which, since her origin and despite the failings of many of her members, has not ceased to work for their relief, defense and liberation through numerous works of charity which remain indispensable always and everywhere" (Catechism of the Catholic Church, no. 2448). This principle encourages us to follow Christ's love for the poor by trying to create a society where the needs of the poor are always considered first.

Living according to the Catholic principle of "preferential option for the poor and vulnerable" is a calling. Simply expressed, that means that as a society, we ought to prioritize the needs of those who are impoverished and in vulnerable situations. The Catholic Church does not use the word "optional" when it refers to this; rather, it means that we must decide to act on behalf of those who are impoverished. Taking care of the underprivileged has always been an integral element of what it means to be a Christian. When determining the Christian response to poverty, the church has taken inspiration from Old Testament prophets and none other than Jesus himself since its inception. When Jesus started his public ministry, according to the Gospel of Luke, he was given a scroll by the Prophet Isaiah and read these passages aloud in the synagogue. The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring glad tidings to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim a year acceptable to the Lord" (Luke 4:18-19).

**Healthcare:** The Catholic Church is taking a significant step in favour of the underprivileged and impoverished with this initiative. Affordable healthcare services, such as hospitals, clinics, and nursing homes, are provided by the Catholic Church; the impoverished can frequently receive free or reduced-cost care. It is impossible to overstate the value of leading a healthy lifestyle. However, you may find it interesting to learn that many people are dealing with a variety of health issues that require urgent care. However, it appears that the government has fallen short in this regard, since the church, particularly the Catholic Church, has become the last resort. Following the teachings of Jesus Christ as they are documented in the four gospels, the Catholic Church considers it her mission to offer necessary healthcare services to people who are unable to pay for them. To achieve this aim, the Catholic Church has established hospitals and clinics in some rural communities to enable the poor people to get access to quality healthcare services at a subsidized rate. It might occasionally be free. Furthermore, the World Day of the Poor is observed by the Catholic Church on November 19, 2023, according to a story published in *Omnes magazine*. Francis has asked that the Vatican medical facility be open later on November 13 and 18. In observance of the World Day of the Poor on November 13, medical professionals gave the underprivileged free medical attention. This includes providing routine and specialized medical checkups, immunizations, and prescriptions, according to the Zenith news agency. Furthermore, the Dicastery for Evangelization paid some low-income families' medical expenses.



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**Education:** As part of the Catholic Church's care for the poor, the church provides affordable education through Catholic schools, scholarships, and literacy programs, aiming to break the cycle of poverty. The Catholic Church's involvement in education can be traced back centuries. Religious orders such as the Jesuits, Dominicans, and Franciscans have been at the forefront of establishing schools and universities around the world. These institutions were often aimed at providing education to both the elite and the marginalized, with a special emphasis on moral and spiritual formation. The Church has made efforts to provide access to education for the poor, often establishing schools in underserved areas. This effort is grounded in the belief that education is a basic human right and a pathway to breaking the cycle of poverty. Catholic-run schools in impoverished areas often provide free or subsidized education to ensure that children from low-income families can attend.

It is crucial to address the underlying causes of poverty in addition to providing aid to the impoverished. Studies have indicated that one of the main causes of poverty in our society is a poor level of education. If so, then access to high-quality education becomes a critical resource for assisting the impoverished in escaping poverty. It's commonly said that ignorance is a sickness, and it is true. When there is no chance for formal education, ignorance sets in and causes poverty since the necessary information is lacking. The Church still places a high priority on education for the underprivileged in the modern era, and Pope Francis has frequently emphasized the need to overcome worldwide educational disparities. Catholic schools in underdeveloped nations continue to assist the most vulnerable, and many are working to solve issues like illiteracy, child labour, and gender imbalances in education.

**Disaster Relief:** Provides immediate, temporary housing, and long-term assistance in the wake of natural disasters and crises. Driven by its fundamental purpose of mercy, compassion, and service to humanity, especially the impoverished and disenfranchised, disaster relief is a major endeavour of the Catholic Church. The Church's commitment to the common good and its social justice teachings are in line with this mission. Solidarity is the foundation of the Catholic Church's disaster relief initiatives. The teachings of the Church assert that all people are members of one family and that these shared familial ties generate a moral obligation to help those in need, especially in times of crisis such as natural disasters. Jesus, the personification of the Gospel and the ultimate evangelist, particularly connects with the young (cf. Mt 25:40). This serves as a reminder to Christians that we must protect the earth's most vulnerable people. However, the current model does not seem to favour investing in attempts to help the weak, the sluggish, or the less skilled find opportunities in life because it places so much stress on achievement and self-reliance.

The preference for the poor is one of the most important social doctrines of the Catholic Church. The needs of the poor and vulnerable are given priority under this principle, which emphasizes that they should receive special attention, particularly during disasters when they are most likely to be impacted. One of the biggest Catholic relief groups, Caritas Internationalis, is essential to the global response to natural disasters. Caritas strives to reconstruct communities following natural disasters by offering emergency relief, food, shelter, medical treatment, and other necessities to those in need. Their strategy combines short-term





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assistance with long-term growth to increase the resilience of underprivileged communities. Comparably, another well-known Catholic organization that assists in responding to natural and man-made disasters worldwide is Catholic Relief Services (CRS). In addition to offering emergency assistance, their goal is to deal with the underlying reasons of poverty that put communities at risk of natural disasters. Dioceses and parishes frequently play a key role in providing disaster relief locally, rapidly mobilizing volunteers and resources in the event of an emergency. These regional initiatives can be quite important, particularly in places where bigger NGOs or the government are slow to act.

**Spiritual support:** The Catholic Church recognizes each person's intrinsic dignity and worth and provides spiritual direction, consolation, and fellowship as part of its outreach to the impoverished. The Church must play a major role in providing for the financial and spiritual needs of the destitute. Acts 9:36 and Proverbs 29:7 state that Christ commands Christians to "defend the rights of the poor and needy" (Proverbs 31:9), and that people who uphold this commandment are regarded as upright and noble. Furthermore, the Bible records Christ sharing the message with the poor (Matthew 11:15, Luke 4:18). One of the best examples of someone who helps the poor both materially and spiritually is Jesus. The bible also makes it clear that Jesus, who was rich because poor because of humanity (2 Corinthians 8:9), shows the extent to which Christ himself values and cares for the poor. We ought to all strive to be like him. In the words of Pope Francis in "*Evangelii Gaudium*"

Since this Exhortation is addressed to members of the Catholic Church, I want to say, with regret, that the worst discrimination which the poor suffer is the lack of spiritual care. The great majority of the poor have a special openness to the faith; they need God and we must not fail to offer them his friendship, his blessing, his word, the celebration of the sacraments and a journey of growth and maturity in the faith. Our preferential option for the poor must mainly translate into a privileged and preferential religious care (200).

Given the emotional and spiritual toll that natural catastrophes have on people and communities, the Church offers spiritual support and mental health services in addition to material relief. In order to help people deal with trauma and loss, priests, nuns, and lay volunteers frequently provide pastoral care and counseling.

### **Recommendations**

Religion, particularly the Catholic Church should partner with the government to be able to address the needs of the poor in their midst through provision of basics needs of the poor.

The Catholic Church should focus on empowering to enable them live independently in society. This can be achieved via empowerment programme like skills acquisition, to help the poor learn hands-on work skills.

The Church should improve on teaching its members about caring for the poor as commanded by God and Jesus Christ during his earthly ministry. This way, it will make everyone to be aware and also engage in this service to the poor.



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The Church should engage in social justice activities to help address the issue of inequality in the society and the unequal distribution of economic resources in the society. Since this has been seen as one of the causes of poverty, it becomes imperative to address this if poverty must be eradicated and the poor must be attended to like every other person in the society.

## Conclusion

Due to its role in reducing poverty, religion, particularly the Catholic Church, continues to be an alternative for the poor in society. Even so, some scholars contend that attempts to aid the impoverished miss the mark since religion treats aiding the poor as a humanitarian endeavour rather than one grounded on biblical principles. While others think that religion, particularly the Catholic Church, can help the poor in certain situations, they also think that, over time, Calvinism has contributed to the causes of poverty. Nonetheless, the researcher believes that the importance of religion in reducing poverty cannot be overstated. Through a variety of means, including the provision of healthcare services, educational initiatives, disaster relief in general, and spiritual support and guidance, the Catholic Church acts as a preferable option for the poor.

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