

**TRADITIONAL VALUES:  
FACILITATING OR OBSTRUCTING HUMAN RIGHTS?**

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**Human Dignity: The Understanding of Human Rights  
in the Social Teaching of the Church**

by

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## 1. PREAMBLE

Hon. Chairperson, Your Excellencies, Distinguished Invited Guests, Beloved Participants and Colleagues,

I bring you joyful greetings from SECAM and the CARITAS Family in my humble capacity as Vice President for both Institutions. We express deepest sentiments of gratitude to the Organising Instance of this Conference for the choice of Zambia, in Africa, after that of last year in The Hague, The Netherlands.

From the onset, I blend my voice with earlier ones to affirm that this Conference which seeks, *inter alia*, to clarify *the foundation of human rights in human dignity* is both timely and timeless. It is timely because it will contribute its quota in promoting Human Rights so much under attack, abuse and obstruction these days. It is equally timeless since it affects human dignity from its very origins.

The concept résumé to this Conference says it all: *A substantial motivation for the attempt to relate human rights to traditional values and convictions derives from the expectation of a growing ownership of human rights if they could be recognised and acknowledged as living expressions of diverse cultural traditions. Supporting this we aim to counteract monopolisation of human rights approach by a “western culture” which signifies a delegitimisation of the human rights claim to universality. Furthermore we get sight of those traditions which are not compatible with human rights entitlements to freedom and equality – some traditions*

*virtually impede the realisation of a society based on equal participation. Those traditions can be misused for political purposes in Europe and Africa alike. Finally it has to be examined how recourse to traditions can serve to protect human rights – or how traditional values can reveal “blind spots” of the established human rights framework. To better understand the respective relations of human rights and traditions it can be useful to start by clarifying the foundation of human rights in human dignity.*

Hon. Chair, the above prolegomenon, so to speak, will guide my little reflection in seeking out the values which impede the realisation of Human Rights as well as have “recourse to traditions” and values that “can serve to protect these same Human Rights”. Given the fact that time is of the essence in this 20 minute presentation, I will crave your indulgence, Hon. Chair, to briefly contextualise Human Rights in the Social Teaching of the Church, in the first place. Then in the second part of this presentation, I will speak as a simple Pastor, not as a Human Rights expert, on issues affecting Human Rights in Africa, since I am in charge of SECAM’s Justice and Peace, Good Governance, Advocacy and Development issues.

## **2. PART I: Human Rights in the Social Teachings of the Church**

Last year, at The Hague, Rev. Fr. Joseph Komakoma, Secretary General of SECAM, offered some reflections on this topic. Let me refresh our minds quickly.

*What we have codified as the CST has been a product of the Church’s self-reflection or self-understanding over a long period of time, using the*

*Scriptures as the motivation and basis for reflection and social intervention. The Church's position in the world, for want of a better term, is the fundamental question that the (Catholic) Church faced some 50 years ago (1963-1965) during the Second Vatican Council. The result of this reflection was the production of a Document called **The Pastoral Constitution of the Church in the Modern World (Gaudium et Spes)**. The famous opening words to this document are well known.*

***The joy and hope, the grief and anguish of the men (and women) of our time, especially of those who are poor or afflicted in any way, are the joy and hope, the grief and anguish of the followers of Christ as well<sup>1</sup>.***

*Without belabouring the point, it is clear that the Church cannot disengage from the world. The Church sees itself as being part of the world and shares in the day to day life of the world through the lives of individual Christians. In engaging with the world in the various spheres of human activity, the Church does not come with blueprints, or in other words, its own versions of political, economic, cultural or development models.*

*The Church only plays her rightful role of being the “conscience of society”. In other words, the Church applies biblically motivated moral principles to the various spheres of life (political, economic, social, cultural ...) with the sole interest of ensuring that the human person and*

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<sup>1</sup> GS, No. 1

*the protection of the dignity of human life is at the centre of all social endeavours.*

*To be called a Christian means to be identified as one who leads a particular way of life, a life of full commitment to Christ's own mission. This is the mission that human rights defenders ought to embrace. It means always working to:*

- *Protect, promote, and defend the fundamental dignity of the human person and the equality of all human beings*
- *Bring about Social Justice and Peace, and the integrity of creation*
- *Defend and build Solidarity particularly with those that are on the margins of society, the underprivileged and vulnerable.*

***Respect for the fundamental dignity of the human person and the quality of all human beings***

*The United Nations holds that fundamental human rights are inviolable, inalienable, and universal (Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 1948). This is a recognition that these rights are not gifts we get from the state but birth rights. By virtue of being born human, every person enjoys these rights regardless of race, tribe, nationality, religious affiliation, gender or physical outlook.*

*However, beyond what the United Nations recognises, we Christians take an interest in fundamental human rights because we believe that these*

*rights emanate from the fact that each and everyone of us is made in the image and likeness of God (Genesis 1:26ff).*

*To violate these rights means we are going against God's own design for the wellbeing of the person. Hence the everlasting fight to promote, defend and protect them.*

*It is this which makes it imperative for Christians to see to it that the right to life, shelter, education, food, and various freedoms are safeguarded at all times. We even go to the political arena to defend and promote these rights.*

Hon. Chair, Dear Friends, you know as well as I do that the Social Teaching of the Church (STC) underscores, encapsulates and authenticates the Church's engagement with the socio-political, economic, cultural and religious situation in the world. Needless to say, it is incumbent upon us all, Pastors and faith-driven activists in the sphere of Human Rights to have a constant recourse to the STC to guide our understanding and defence of Human Rights issues. In the second part of this piece, I wish to look at the Human Rights and/or Human Dignity from a Pastor's optical lens.

### **3. PART II: The Parameters of Human Rights as seen by a Pastor<sup>2</sup>**

I believe that there are three parameters of human rights. Human rights can be described in very simple terms as doing to others what you would

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<sup>2</sup> This segment is inspired by the reflections of Most Rev. Peter K. Sarpong, my predecessor and Archbishop Emeritus of Kumasi (Ghana)

want them to do to you. When we treat others in a way we would not want to be treated, we are encroaching on their human rights. We all know when we are being badly treated and we often know too when we are treating others badly. We do not need a doctorate in Sociology or Political Science to know all this. As a Pastor, I know these on the ground.

However, there have been many efforts to put together in a codified fashion what are the contents of human rights. Perhaps the most famous of such codification is the Universal Declaration of Human Rights adopted by the United Nations and to which almost all the countries of Africa are signatories. Although almost all African countries have signed this Declaration, governments often do not respect its provisions and they sometimes seek excuses for doing so.

There have been other Declarations on human rights. For example, we have the African Declaration of Human and Peoples' Rights, the emphasis being on "Peoples". We also know that the Islamic community worldwide has tried to produce an "Islamic Declaration of Human Rights", as they see it.

In Africa, another important parameter for identifying human rights is our own traditions. There are many values in these traditions which help in the promotion of respect for human rights, both on the individual and social levels. Our sense of community, the fact that the individual is never allowed to live alone as if others do not exist, and the sense of solidarity in African life as a whole, go a long way to promote and protect the human rights of each individual as well as the good of the community.

On the level of civil authority, the traditional-political structures based on very deep spiritual foundations tend to be quite clear on a few things that must absolutely be respected. There are certain things that are just never done. The chief and the ruler should never tell a lie. Even though the chief may appear to have absolute powers, there are always checks and balances which should prevent him from misuse of power. The tragedy of Africa today is that very often our political rulers usurp prerogatives of the traditional African rulers while ignoring the checks and balances that kept the system on an even keel. A greater attention of the authentic values of the African social mores will go a long way to improve the situation of human rights on the continent even today. Two aspects jump to mind. First, the importance of society and community as the proper context for the enjoyment of individual rights and obligations. Secondly, the spiritual underpinning of the rules and norms that guide the society.

Speaking as a Catholic priest, I can say that in the general confusion that seems to have overtaken our continent on the social level, we have found the social teachings of the Catholic Church a great and effective point of reference. In many ways these teachings respond to and address in an effective fashion the dilemma and the difficulties through which we are going.

We have discovered that on many occasions non-Catholics do appreciate the clarity and the logic of many of the positions which our Catholic social teachings have taken. They are teachings directed to societies as such and not only to Catholics. In this regard, the social teachings of Pope Leo

XIII, Pope John XXIII, Pope Paul VI, Pope John Paul II, Pope Emeritus Benedict and the current Pope Francis, to name just these very few, are classical monuments in the global effort to promote human rights.

### **Dimensions of Human Rights**

There are many dimensions of human rights which we have to attend to as we look at our continent Africa. First, there is the person-to-person dimension. Vast inequalities have made it possible for man's inhumanity to man to go wild. People tend to oppress one another; the big man deals with the small man, often ruthlessly, and the small man may have no access to any recourse. Might, in such a situation, becomes right. The treatment meted out by masters to their houseboys or housemaids, the relationship of employers and employees; these are all frequent areas of gross human rights violations on our continent. And the fact that they go undetected and unattended to makes them all the worse still.

On the level of civil society, many countries in Africa are in deep political crises. Good order can no longer be ensured; there is misuse of state power as dictators cling on to power, misusing it and abusing it with impunity. Some elections are rigged. As someone has put it clearly, in Africa we often vote but we rarely choose. There is neglect of the poor and the weak, a scandalous lack of concern for distributive justice; the poor are left to remain poor while the rich can continue to grow richer. Poverty then becomes itself an instrument for further oppression.

Where there is no good government, discriminations of all sorts become the order of the day. Africa has suffered a lot from ethnic and religious

discriminations. There is hardly any country on this continent that has not got its fair share of ethnic upheavals. Religious intolerance and hostilities abound. Senseless imprisonments are the order of the day. Torture is resorted to with glee; human beings are slaughtered on the altar of political expediency.

On the international level, Africa is fast becoming an irrelevant appendix which interests no one, as the problems of the continent are neglected by the rest of the International Community. The rules and laws that govern International Trade and Exchange are all heavily loaded against the continent. Add on to this a continent riddled with corrupt rulers who are always eager to make deals with people of questionable character from all over the world and we can then understand why it is difficult to have a way out.

The present miseries of Africa are certainly not unconnected with the negative legacies of the past, beginning with slavery and including also the periods of colonialism and neo-colonialism. Millions of Africans perished in the slave trade and many were uprooted and remain, even today, uprooted. The Lampedusa saga is a serious Human Rights issue today.

### **Promoting Human Rights**

One of the things that many of us have learnt in our struggles against injustice on our continent is that human beings are not naturally nice. There will always be people who will try to press others down. They deny others their rights and seek to continue to oppress their fellow human beings. We, therefore, cannot take it for granted that human rights will be

promoted positively. There must be a conscious and conscientious effort to do this on different levels.

First, there is the level of Self-assertion - standing up to my own rights and insisting that they be respected. Too many people are too apathetic to what happens to them. They patiently or timidly endure whatever is done to them. The principle of defence of one's own rights becomes an important dimension in the promotion of human rights. The more this is done convincingly and vigorously, the more difficult it would be for others to press us down.

On the second level, we have Conscientisation - raising the awareness of others to defend their own rights. So many are not even aware that they have a right to say no. Conscientisation is necessary if people are to be mobilised to work in solidarity towards creating a just society around themselves and, especially, in situations where dictators and bad rulers have taken control.

Finally, there is the dimension of Advocacy, namely, fighting for the rights of others in whatever capacity that we can do so, especially the rights of those who are unable to fight for themselves.

This is where the work of this Conference and all of us come in. In the name of God who created all of us and gave us all an equal dignity, endowing us with our inalienable rights, in the name of my Church, the Catholic Church, in the name of humanity at large, in the name of Africa,

my beloved continent, I would like to thank this Conference for what it is doing for humanity.

Our little encounter here today is evidence of the tremendous attention we are giving to human rights. Let us never lose hope; let us never think that what we are doing is insignificant. Nothing in favour of the human rights of other people, even if it is one human person, can be insignificant.

Thank you for your attention.