

**THE MAGNIFICAT OF MARY AND CONSECRATED PERSONS:
A SOCIAL-LIBERATING AFRICAN PERSPECTIVE**

Christopher O. Asamah O.M.V.*

Abstract

The article focuses on the social-liberating dimension of the Magnificat and its message for consecrated persons. In the article, it was presented that Mary's Magnificat is an important canticle which helps us to understand Marian spirituality in its social context. Precisely because the Magnificat has had such influence on how we understand Mary in relation to social concerns, it was also fitting that a connection was made between Mary's Magnificat and consecrated persons, and how to respond to social issues in the light of the Magnificat.

Certain things were brought into the general framework of the article: the social context of African, the theological understanding of the Magnificat from a social liberating perspective, and the mission of consecrated persons in the time of upheavals in Africa in the light of the Magnificat. It was made clear that Mary's Magnificat has a social message for the people of Africa, and consecrated persons, by virtue of their consecrated lives, and called to be active participant in the social transformation of Africa, in the light of the social message of the Magnificat.

Introduction

Ours is a society wounded by the presence of endless issues of social concern. The men and women of our society are getting to be more aware of the issues of poverty, injustice, violence, economic inequalities, political instabilities and the likes. More than ever before, consequent upon the growth in technology and communications, it is easier to bring to global awareness even the remotest of social worries. This seems a providential reality, at a time when Pope Francis seeks, through pastoral charity, to awaken a more responsive spirit of global solidarity.

The great danger in today's world, pervaded as it is by consumerism, is the desolation and anguish born of a complacent yet covetous heart, the feverish pursuit of frivolous pleasures, and a blunted conscience. Whenever our interior life becomes caught up in its own interests and concerns, there is no longer room for others, no place for the poor. God's voice is no longer heard, the quiet joy of his love is no longer felt, and the desire to do good fades.

The social gospel of the Church is not something new, but the constant attention Pope Francis has given to it underlines the urgency of bringing the gospel to cast its light upon the issues of social justice in the world. The message of Pope

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Francis brings us to a deeper awareness of the realities that the joys, the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the people of today's world are those of the ecclesial community as well.

It is therefore in the light of Pope Francis's continuous message on social justice, and on the occasion of the celebration of the Year of Consecrated Persons in the universal Church, that this write-up hopes to reflect on the *Magnificat* of Mary and Consecrated Persons, from a social-liberating African perspective. And at the same time, to show some ways in which consecrated persons can respond to social concerns in the society in the light of the *Magnificat*.

Africa in its social context

Africa is a continent with her own peculiar history. It stands out for several reasons, especially with the centuries of experience of slavery, colonialism and other forms of oppression in the past. Even today, various forms of crisis, for example, famine, tribal tensions, political instability, etc., are still present. "A well-orchestrated view suggests that, in large part, certain peculiar events of Africa's history explain the continent's present predicament." Indeed, Africa is a continent with some sad past experiences. Any attempt to ignore its past, will only pave a way for the repetition of the past. "The history of any violent dispersal is the history of genocide, and genocide is the name of much of the scenario now being played out and re-enacted over and over again right on the continent."

In some ways, one is tempted to agree with Basil Davidson, that, "the actual and present condition of Africa is one of deep trouble, sometimes a deeper trouble than the worst imposed during the colonial years." In some of the countries in Africa, the endless presence of wars cannot be overlooked. The resulting effect is crisis of refugees and poverty and diseases, which often follow from war-like settings. These points are well presented by E. E. Uzukwu when he stated that,

Africa is seen today in the world community as a continent of misery. Many statistics trumpet this reality. Ecological disasters, such as flood and drought, bring agricultural production in many regions of the continent to a standstill (...). Economic depression of unparalleled proportions makes existing authoritarian regimes more repressive. Dictatorships and civil wars uproot women, men and children from ancestral homes to neighbouring countries.

The above situations have created some form of pessimism among Africans and afro-philosophers. The situation is further not helped by a media that has little or no positive news coming from the continent.

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This is the wounded face of Africa frequently portrayed in the mass media, a media controlled by Western conglomerates. Apart from sport and music, one hardly hears any positive news item in Africa. For their parts, when Africans narrate their plight in these trying times they sound even more pessimistic.

In trying to trace the problems in Africa, some have attempted to blame it on external factors or the experiences of slavery, colonialism, and neo-colonialism. However, putting the blame on the experiences of slavery, colonialism and neo-colonialism alone, is only a way of not taking responsibility of the actions of many African leaders and her people of today. For, "it does not follow that we should also subscribe to the populist opinion which exclusively and categorically imputes the blame for Africa's present malaise to outside factors or influences, such as slavery, colonialism and neo-colonialism."

Looking at the overall nature of Africa's social troubles, there is no doubt that, what we see is a continent that keeps facing real and pathetic social, economic and political predicaments. It is evident particularly to consecrated persons who are present throughout the continent in virtue of their mission and, therefore, are in a unique position to see and share "the joy and hope, the anguish of the men of our time, especially of those who are poor or afflicted in any way" (*Gaudium et Spes*, 1).

Who are Consecrated Persons?

Consecrated persons are "men and women who set out to follow Christ with greater liberty, and to imitate him more closely, by practicing the evangelical counsels." Consecrated persons live a life which is based on the Incarnate Word, who continues to shape the Consecrated Life.

The Consecrated Life, deeply rooted in the example and teaching of Christ the Lord, is a gift of God the Father to his Church through the Holy Spirit. By the profession of the evangelical counsels *the characteristic features of Jesus – the chaste, poor and obedient one – are made constantly "visible" in the midst of the world* and the eyes of the faithful are directed towards the mystery of the Kingdom of God already at work in history, even as it awaits its full realization in heaven.

Consecrated persons belong to Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life – "The direct reference to Christ and the intimate nature of a gift for the Church and the world are elements that define the identity and scope of the consecrated life. In them the consecrated life finds itself, its point of departure, God and his love, and its point of arrival, the human community and its requirements."

In the light of the goal of this work, certain questions come to mind immediately: how can consecrated persons translate their spirituality and charisms into concrete actions relevant in the important task of social transformation? What contributions can consecrated persons make to address the social realities of injustice, poverty, violence etc?

Theology of the *Magnificat*

John Paul II in *Redemptoris Mater* gave a foundation to our understanding of the *Magnificat* in its social contexts. The social contexts of the *Magnificat* and how the *Magnificat* has influenced the Church's option for the poor is brought out in *Redemptoris Mater*. The Church has always modeled her earthly journey of faith on that of the Mother of God. The Church repeats the *Magnificat* constantly as her own prayer. Not only does the Church repeat the prayer of Mary, but in this prayer, she encounters God who has done great things for Mary. "From the depths of the Virgin's faith at the Annunciation and the Visitation, the Church derives the truth about the God of the Covenant: the God who is Almighty and does "great things" for man: "holy is his name." In this very action of God, the stage is set for the liberation of humanity, by God who in Jesus Christ, the Divine Word, became incarnate in the womb of the Blessed Virgin Mary. For "In the *Magnificat* the Church sees uprooted that sin which is found at the outset of the earthly history of man and woman, the sin of disbelief and of "little faith" in God."

If we understand all the social issues in the human society in the light of the presence of sin, and also understand that only in the mystery of the incarnate Word can sin be defeated, then, we can understand the importance of the *Magnificat* of Mary in its social context. Humanity is raised to a new level when the Incarnate Word lived among us and died for our sake. It means therefore that, with the coming of Jesus Christ into human history, with his death and resurrection, the human person is not only an image and likeness of God, but a being that has been redeemed by God. Mary then becomes the first to share in this self-giving of God to humanity. "Mary is the first witness of the marvelous truth, which will be fully accomplished through "the works and words" (cf. Acts 1:1) of her Son and definitively through his Cross and Resurrection."

Living in the world amidst the many trials and tribulations surrounding humanity, the Church keeps singing the *Magnificat* of Mary, and she is sustained by God's power, even as she keeps proclaiming the liberating power of God in the world. With the truths of God, the Church sheds light on those difficult moments of human experiences. In those moments, when the weak of the human society are plagued by all forms of dehumanizing realities, it is the mission of the Church to lead them in the path to liberation. This informs the reason why the Church stands

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for the poor and defenseless. It explains the whole idea of the option for the poor in the world.

The Church's love of preference for the poor is wonderfully inscribed in Mary's *Magnificat*. The God of the Covenant, celebrated in the exultation of her spirit by the Virgin of Nazareth, is also he who "has cast down the mighty from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly, (...) filled the hungry with good things, sent the rich away empty (...) scattered the proud-hearted...and his mercy is from age to age on those who fear him" (...). Mary truly proclaims the coming of the "Messiah of the poor" (cf. Is. 11:4; 61:1). Drawing from Mary's heart, from the depth of her faith expressed in the words of the *Magnificat*, the Church renews ever more effectively in herself the awareness that the truth about God who saves, the truth about God who is the source of every gift, cannot be separated from the manifestation of his love of preference for the poor and humble, that love which, celebrated in the *Magnificat*, is later expressed in the words and works of Jesus.

There can be no true liberation independent of the salvific plan of God, which the *Magnificat* celebrates. The *Magnificat* is a celebration of God's salvific action in human history. It is a story which leads humanity to authentic freedom and holistic liberation. Thus, at the moment of Elizabeth's greeting to the Mother of God, one could say the joy that was already gathering momentum burst forth into a canticle of praise. According CDF in *Libertatis Conscientia*:

At Elizabeth's greeting, the heart of the Mother of God would burst into the song of the *Magnificat*. It tells us that it is by faith and in faith like that of Mary that the People of God express in words and translate into life the mysterious plan of salvation with its liberating effects upon individual and social existence. It is really in the light of faith that one comes to understand how salvation history is the history of liberation from evil in its most radical form and of the introduction of humanity into the true freedom of the children of God.

One other dimension that is brought out in *Libertatis Conscientia* is that the liberating presence of God is not connected to the use violence, or ideologies that are counterproductive, and anti-gospel in their methods and applications. In fact, the use of violence and ideologies that are not Christian is a sign of not being faithful to the message of the *Magnificat* of Mary. A liberation that is faithful to the values of the gospel, says the document, is a true liberation.

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Thus, a theology of freedom and liberation which faithfully echoes Mary's *Magnificat* preserved in the Church's memory is something needed by the times in which we are living. But it would be criminal to take the energies of popular piety and misdirect them toward a purely earthly plan of liberation, which would very soon be revealed as nothing more than an illusion and a cause of new forms of slavery. Those who in this way surrender to the ideologies of the world and to the alleged necessity of violence are no longer being faithful to hope, to hope's boldness and courage, as they are extolled in the hymn to the God of mercy which the Virgin teaches us.

The document shows the dangers of reducing the whole idea of liberation to a mere social liberation and forgetting the core of liberation, which is centered on the liberation from sin. And this holistic liberation is achieved by the Redeemer, Jesus Christ through his death and resurrection.

The *sensus fidei* grasps the very core of the liberation accomplished by the Redeemer. It is from the most radical evil, from sin and the power of death, that he has delivered us in order to restore freedom to itself and to show it the right path. This path is marked out by the supreme commandment, which is the commandment of love. Liberation, in its primary meaning which is salvific, thus extends into a liberating task, as an ethical requirement. Here is to be found the social doctrine of the Church, which illustrates Christian practice on the level of society.

The *Magnificat* is a canticle of liberation, of the victory of the people of God, because with the Easter victory of Jesus Christ, the prince of this world was defeated. In the theology of A. Valentini, the *Magnificat* of the Blessed Virgin Mary, is a memorial of the great interventions of the God of Israel, and also, of the definitive salvation of Jesus Christ, and a radical prophesy of what would happen in the future, when the victory of God will transform all things. The *Magnificat* is a celebration of the entrance of the reign of God that bursts forth into the story of humanity, but right now, it still awaits its final fulfillment.

The *Magnificat* anticipated and celebrated what God, who has visited his people and redeemed them will definitively accomplish in the Paschal mystery of Jesus Christ. It is also eschatological because it speaks of the perfection of the Kingdom of God.

It is the truth of the mystery of salvation at work today in order to lead redeemed humanity towards the perfection of the Kingdom which gives true meaning to the necessary efforts for liberation in the economic, social and political orders and which keeps them from falling into new forms of slavery.

C. Boff provides two key ways of understanding the *Magnificat*. The first is in the light of the exodus experience of the people of God, while the second is in the light of Easter. Thus, both refer specifically to the people of Israel, and by way of analogy to the social conditions of the people of today. The second refers specifically to the Church, in her spiritual sense and eschatological reality. It is also a messianic song, in an integral sense, which is open to touch also on other areas of human existence, in our context, the social-political reality of a people. In fact, the door of liberation is open only when it is fixed on and hinges on spiritual salvation and eschatology. C. Boff sees all the liberations of the Old Testaments, as the prophetic and literal backgrounds from which Mary sang the song of humanity's liberation from sin and death.

In the light of its social message of the *Magnificat*, M. A. Getty-Sullivan, writes, "Mary sings of the justice of God, who reverses the standards of this world and supplements them with the justice of God's own kingdom. Mary epitomizes the lessons of the Beatitudes: the poor, the hungry, the weeping, those hated, excluded, and insulted are blessed." While for K. Coyle the meeting of Elizabeth and Mary is one of prayerful meeting, and in this meeting their hope for changing the unjust structures in the human society is what is woven into a song by Mary. In the meeting of these two women:

There were engaged in radical, subversive conversation and prayer that expressed their hope of changing the unjust structures of their society. This could only be achieved by putting down the powerful, raising up the lowly, the poor and the marginalized of their world, and filling the hungry with good things.

M. C. Nolan, places the different reversals that we have in the *Magnificat* as God's own action in the world. It depicts the reign of God in the world.

The upside-down nature of the kingdom of God is revealed once again, as the proud who put their trust in princes and powerful ones are confused in their hearts by God's action for the lowly. In a leveling of the social situation, God has deprived the powerful of their base of oppressive power and drawn the marginalized, powerless, and oppressed into the realm of control over their own lives.

M. C. Nolan presents a very vivid picture of how the *Magnificat* can lead us to appreciate better not only the spiritual dimension of the canticle, but also the social and ethical dimension of the canticle. For, God is a God who is not only interested in the soul of the human Person, but also interested in everything that holds the human person in captivity: sin and all its consequences.

Mary's words depicting the action of God in lowering the proud and exalting the humble, dethroning the powerful and empowering the lowly, feeding the hungry and sending the rich away empty are dramatic. The appeal to our sense of distributive justice....A *Magnificat* spirituality holds strong conviction that God is at work bringing about the final victory over all forces that oppress and diminish those he loves. A sign of the presence of the reign of God, that is, where God is acting, is wherever people are striving to establish a political and social situation of just relationships in keeping with God's will.

The *Magnificat* is not a call to a violent approach to address the social inconsistencies and injustices in the world. It has no place for the use of violence in dealing with the social issues present in the world. It is a song of hope in the God of justice, peace and love. E. L. Johnson, puts it:

The language of this canticle makes it clear that divine love is particular on the side of those whose dignity must be recovered. God protects the poor, noticing their tears, while challenging the comfortable and the proud to conversion, to genuine discipleship, even at the loss of their own comfort. The divine intent is not to take revenge and to create a new order of injustice but to build up a community of sisters and brothers marked by human dignity and mutual regard.

The *Magnificat* and Consecrated Persons

The connection between consecrated persons and the *Magnificat* is such that, consecrated persons, in their own way and within the context of their particular charisms, and also because of their own call to live out the message of justice, peace and love in the society in which they live and express their faith, have a strong connection with the *Magnificat*. If the Church is called to represent the incarnate word, who chose to be born and embraced human dignity and poverty, in order to liberate humanity from the shackles of sin, reflected in the unjust systems and economic social stratifications, and the untold unjust situations of the many people of our time, such message of bringing the gospel of hope to the poor, and of standing with the poor is even more urgent task for consecrated persons.

The consecrated life is inspired by love, just as the mystery of the incarnation is inspired by God's love for us. "Christ the eternal Son of God (...) sets aside his glory and emptied himself so that he could be like us in all things (...) But the reason for all this is his love, a love which is grace, generosity, a desire to draw near, a love which does not hesitates to offer itself in sacrifice for the beloved."

Consecrated Persons in Solidarity

In the light of what we have mentioned in this work, Mary through her *Magnificat* stands in complete solidarity with the marginalized, the poor, those who hunger for justice, and liberation. For her, the incarnation of the Divine Word, was a fulfillment of God's solidarity with his people. In the words of John Paul II, "solidarity involves committing oneself to the good of the other seen as one's neighbour; and a readiness to sacrifice oneself in the service of the other instead of exploiting or oppressing him for one's own advantage." "The Church's witness must be accompanied by a firm commitment to justice and solidarity by each member of God's People." The Church's commitment to social justice is not

something reserved for a small group of experts; it is about us, all of us, as we live out our lives and make choices in relation to one another. It is about how we order our relationships in society, the kind of structures we set up, and how they either promote or impede the full realisation of the free and equal dignity of all women, men and children.

In solidarity consecrated persons are able to collaborate with others as well for the social transformation of the society. "The fruit of solidarity is peace, an inestimable good for peoples and nations in every part of the world. For it is precisely by means of fostering and strengthening solidarity that the Church can make a specific and decisive contribution to a true culture of peace." The desired intention of solidarity is always to create a more just society where everything works together for the good of the human person, who is created in the image of God. "The individual wishing to be in solidarity with the poor - and so become an agent of change - must "immerse" him/herself in the life and environment of the poor and oppressed. It demands a firsthand knowledge of the situation in which he or she wishes to operate."

Consecrated Persons and Prophetic Witnessing

Consecrated persons are also to be the new voice singing and celebrating the tenets of the *Magnificat* in the social situations they find themselves. Consecrated persons are first of all to be good witnesses in a wounded society by their life style and by their vocation. They are to be clear signs of the values of the gospel in a secularized and unjust society. In the light of their prophetic presence in the world, they are able to prophetically testify to the mercy of God, and of his justice. Through a life rooted in Christ, they make the *Magnificat* meaningful.

The Church must always seek to *make her presence visible in everyday life*, especially in contemporary culture, which is often very secularized and yet sensitive to the language of signs. In this regard the Church has a right to expect a significant contribution from consecrated persons, called as they are in every situation to bear clear witness that they belong to Christ.

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In a time of upheavals, where the idolatry of wealth has eaten deep into the marrows of the people of our time, and created untold countless economic, political and social crisis, consecrated persons have to awaken in the consciences of people to the need to counteract the said idolatry. "When power, luxury and money become idols, they take priority over the need for a fair distribution of wealth. Our consciences thus need to be converted to justice, equality, simplicity and sharing." This mission in itself, requires authentic faithfulness of the values of the gospel for the much needed conversion of the hearts and the change of mentality of the people of our time. "Genuine witness by believers is essential to the authentic proclamation of the faith in Africa today. In particular they should show the witness of sincere mutual love." Through their commitment to cause of the values of the gospel, and in solidarity with the poor, consecrated persons, show to the world that "inordinate love of money or its equivalent...as the root of all evil."

Within the social context of the message of the *Magnificat*, and the prophetic mission of consecrated persons, the need to renew the social mission of the church in the society becomes an urgent task. Together with the Christian people, consecrated persons share in the prophetic mission of the Church for the social transformation of the society, with a special place for the poor.

Taking up the Lord's mission as her own, the Church proclaims the Gospel to every man and woman, committing herself to their integral salvation. But with special attention, in a true "preferential option", she turns to those who are *in situations of greater weakness*, and therefore in greater need. "The poor", in varied states of affliction, are the oppressed, those on the margin of society, the elderly, the sick, the young, any and all who are considered and treated as "the least."

For "option for the poor is inherent in the very structure of love lived in Christ. All of Christ's disciples are therefore held to this option; but those who wish to follow the Lord more closely, imitating his attitudes, cannot but feel involved in a very special way." And option for the poor "is not an attempt to create divisions within society: poor against the rich, those who are disadvantaged against the advantaged. Rather, it is an awareness that the whole society is the Body of Christ and that every part of the body has to be in good health for the whole body to be healthy."

Consecrated Persons in defense of Justice

The defense of justice is always directly connected with the mission of the Church. This mission requires "the preaching of the gospel" which necessarily includes demands for justice." Consecrated persons cannot ignore the sublime vocation to stand for and defend the cause of justice in the society in which they live out their consecrated life. What this entails in the light of the *Magnificat* is that, issues of justice are an essential part of the Christian vocation of Consecrated persons. "The Church

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as the Family of God in Africa must bear witness to Christ also by promoting justice and peace on the Continent and throughout the world.”

The gospel invites the followers of Christ to stand for the cause of justice and in defense of the poor and marginalized. “If the proclamation of justice and peace is an integral part of the task of evangelization, it follows that the promotion of these values should also be a part of the pastoral program of each Christian community.” In like manner, consecrated persons should take active roles in the pastoral plans for the promotion of justice in their local communities. This of course should be done always in the light of the social mission of the Church, and in communion with the ecclesial community.

Consecrated persons “cannot rest content until all structural and residual forms of these basic violations of the rights of people created in the image of God, are eradicated from the statute books, as well as from the basic fabric of society.” Together with the Christian people (the Church-as-family), consecrated persons have “the right and duty to be present wherever man is and the right to intervene wherever and whenever man’s dignity is threatened or offended. In fact, the Church’s involvement in the world enables her to be an effective agent for social agent for change.” Consecrated persons are invited to be antithesis of a materialistic society. “Another challenge today is that of a *materialism which craves possessions*, heedless of the needs and sufferings of the weakest, and lacking any concern for the balance of natural resources.”

Consecrated Persons as voice of the voiceless

To speak for the voiceless in the society is to enter into solidarity with them, and to give them a voice in the promotion of liberation and transformation. Africa needs more radical witnessing from consecrated men and women, more than ever before. Precisely because, the men and women of our time look up to us for so many answers to their many social, political and economic questions. Consecrated persons need to enter into more solidarity with the poor like the Blessed Virgin Mary, who through her *Magnificat* entered into an eternal solidarity with the poor and made their case and story her own. The Blessed Virgin Mary sang on behalf of the poor to Yahweh, who has brought down the mighty and raised the humble, and who continues to have a special place for the poor in the society. “To abandon the poor would amount to a betrayal of Christ present in the poor people.” Solidarity becomes a call and a mission with the poor and the marginalized in the society. For, “before the tragedies and total indigence and need, in which so many of our brothers and sisters are living, it is the Lord Jesus himself who comes to question us.”

Conclusion

Actions in favour of social justice must take into consideration the principles of love, justice and peace. Such actions should flow from the concept of justice, human solidarity with the poor and oppressed in the society. From what we have seen thus far in this work, Consecrated persons have much to learn from the social message of the *Magnificat*.

As a woman of liberation, Mary has proclaimed the great acts of God and his presence in the lives of the poor, the oppressed, and those who hunger for justice. Thus, "Mary's proclamation that God has "filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty" is a prophetic call to awareness." More than ever before, the world needs to hear the *Magnificat* again and again. Consecrated persons by virtue of their consecration should be at the forefront of proclaiming the social message of the *Magnificat* with Mary. If the world is going to be a better place, there is a need to join Mary, our Mother of liberation in echoing the *Magnificat*. For, "God is a believer, a firm believer in the promises and possibilities of social justice." The hope expressed in the *Magnificat* can become the driving force for consecrated persons.

If the message of justice and peace within Catholic social teaching takes root in the hearts of many believers, these people would work energetically for a better world, a world characterized by not only acts of individual *charity* but also structures of *justice* and equity for all people. Discrimination and unfair barriers to progress would be eliminated.

Whenever consecrated persons intervene in the social realities of the people of our time, they are living the values of the *Magnificat* of Mary, and also "following the great traditions of the prophets of Israel for whom justice was a sacred trust." Thus, through the *Magnificat* Consecrated persons are eternally united with Mary for the social transformation of Africa.

* Fr. Christopher Oshiofa Asamah, is member of the Oblates of the Virgin Mary. A theologian, specialized in Mariology, he presently works in the Archdiocese of Messina, Sicily, Italy.