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# Africa and an Economy of Universal Human Solidarity: In the Footsteps of Pope Francis' *Evangelii Gaudium*

Laurenti Mageša

## Introduction: critique of capitalism in Francis' *Evangelii Gaudium*

In his recent Apostolic Exhortation, *Evangelii Gaudium* or *The Joy of the Gospel* (EG), Pope Francis (2013) has indicated the shortcomings of capitalism, the economic order dominant in the world today. He has enumerated the reasons for his critique of the system from the Catholic faith perspective, particularly in chapter four of the Exhortation.

Just as the 1971 Second Ordinary Synod of Bishops (1977) did in its final statement called “Justice in the World,” Francis, in this document, has intimately linked the call to preach the gospel with practical action for social justice (para.179). The synodal document just mentioned

affirmed unambiguously that “Action on behalf of justice and participation in the transformation of the world ... [are] a constitutive dimension of the preaching of the Gospel,” signifying, in its own words, that the struggle for social justice forms part and parcel of “the Church’s mission for the redemption of the human race and its liberation from every oppressive situation” (p. 391). Francis in EG has applied this same insight directly to the situation of poverty experienced globally by the majority of people today. He ultimately has faulted the structures of the contemporary capitalist economic order for it. He argues explicitly that the ideology of capitalism as it currently operates in the world disregards justice and charity, and thereby violates the human dignity of the poor (para. 186-216).

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## Impact of global capitalism on the local African economy

The inhuman social conditions Francis has attributed to global capitalism can be observed concretely in the lives of the peoples of the African continent. In the last sixty years the integral human development of African societies has been compromised in various ways by the capitalist system. As a result, there exists within Africa itself, on the one hand, and between Africa and other regions of the world, on the other, a cavernous gap between the rich and the poor classes. But, as a whole, Africa trails far behind the developed world in almost all spheres that concern aspects of decent human existence. These involve education, health, and

housing. Sadly, there is no indication as yet that the profound pauperization of Africa, facilitated and abetted by global capitalism, might soon take a different, positive turn.

Compounding the situation of appalling poverty in Africa is the basic direction that African governance itself appears to be taking. The fact is that there is as yet no “common” or “shared” economic and political strategy for all of the 54 nation-states of the African continent that comprise the African Union (AU). The AU is until now simply a loose association of countries without much centralized political, economic, social, or legal strategy or influence on one another. More than sixty years after independence for most of these nation-states, the political orientations and economic and legal practices

of each of them are still largely based on, or actually determined by, the legacy of the respective former colonial powers: namely, France, Britain, Portugal, Spain, Belgium, Germany, or Italy. Thus, apart from a few attempts in the 1960s and early 1970s in several countries to construct forms of development appropriate to their social situations – for instance, the policies of “Ujamaa” in Tanzania, “Humanism” in Zambia, “African Socialism” in Guinea Conakry, “Harambee” in Kenya, and the “Common Man’s Charter” in Uganda – no African nation, or now the AU as a whole, has been able to do so. Sadly, even these initial efforts were frustrated, partly by the conditionalities placed upon their implementation by the Bretton Woods money-lending institutions: the World Bank (WB) and the International Monetary Fund (IMF).

Since exclusively “nationalistic” or narrow regional approaches to the economy are evidently now unworkable on account of the globalization movement, the task has become even more complex and difficult. Global economies like China, India, Japan, South Korea, the United States, the oil-rich kingdoms of the Middle East, and others, continue to make profound inroads into all parts of Africa in all sectors of Africa’s life, much of which is negative because of their exploitative nature. The Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) may be cited as a glaring illustration, with the political and social problems currently being experienced there on account of this foreign involvement. The DRC situation shows how the overall effect of capitalism on Africa in terms of human flourishing is tragic. It is a result of the global capitalist ideology that underlies maximization of profit as the ideal and goal over and above all other considerations. Again, as the DRC case shows, however, the social consequences of this philosophy and course of action on the people and the ecology of Africa have generally been devastating.

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## Africa at the bottom of the global economic and social ladder

While it is not possible here to go into comprehensive details about the African economic and social condition, a few facts should help to paint a picture of the state of the continent. By all standards and accounts, the African continent is consistently ranked the economically poorest and least developed in the world. Socially, it is also rated the most underprivileged. According to available statistics from the World Bank (2017), sub-Saharan Africa suffers some of the worst health and education deprivations of any region of the world, notwithstanding the natural and human resources it possesses. Almost 41% of sub-Sahara’s population survives at, or below, US \$ 1.90 per day. This means, in real terms, that out of the region’s approximately 948.32 million inhabitants by 2013, 388.72 million live in poverty. Again, this figure stands way above any other developing part of the world. It should be clear even from these statistics alone that, far from being merely a tired cliché, the expression “extreme poverty” applied to sub-Saharan Africa is a present, palpable, sad and cruel reality.

The statistics provided by the WB (2017) for the period between 1999 and 2013 indicated that the poverty rate in sub-Saharan Africa has grown steadily compared to the general world rate. This is evidence, perhaps, that the region is not benefitting as it should from economic growth evident elsewhere.

But the situation of poverty resulting from the structures of the capitalist economic system extends elsewhere; it applies as well to some other poor areas of the globe, even if in different ways. Oxfam International (2017, January 16), the global confederation of charity organizations, recently exposed a shocking portrait of the state of poverty worldwide. In its report, called “An Economy for the 99%,” at the annual World Economic Forum in Davos, (Switzerland), Oxfam

revealed that a mere 1% of the world's population owns 99% of the current wealth of the entire world. In its Briefing Paper of January 2017, Oxfam again highlighted the rapidly worsening gravity of the situation between the extremes of wealth and poverty in the world. It noted that "just eight men own the same wealth as the poorest half of the world" (Oxfam Briefing Paper, 2017 January). Of this poorest half, though, Africa forms the biggest part.

Oxfam's investigations attribute this state of affairs to "The very design of our economies and the principles of our economics [that] have taken us to this extreme, unsustainable and unjust point" (Oxfam Briefing Paper, 2017 January). The system structurally operates to reward the already rich and powerful at the expense of the poor and vulnerable. Although observations such as these by Oxfam may appear exaggerated, and even attract ridicule from some observers and commentators like Worstall (2017, January 16). Oxfam is not the only organization to advance them. As an example of global acute disparity in the use of essential commodities of life, some United Nations' agencies have pointed out that there is an imbalance in the use of water resources around the world. As a concrete illustration, a survey published by the United Nations in 2010 indicated that in the United States, for instance, the average person uses over 400 litres of water per day as compared to a total of less than 10 litres in Mozambique and in many other African countries (2010). Additionally, the United Nations noted that of the 25 nations of the world where there is no easy access to clean and safe water, 19 are in Africa (2015). The same is true where decent housing, clothing, and food are concerned. According to a report by CNBC, 870 million people living in the poor regions of the world have to go daily without sufficient food, while obesity among the rich from overeating is at a crisis point (Ferris, 2017, June 12). The analysis of the international associations of Catholic faithful witnessing to a simple, justice-based style of life in the world, also known as the Focolare Movement (2017, February 4), has drawn a pretty much similar picture.

The marginalization of the African continent is aggravated by its governments' weak and corrupt supervision over its proven immense natural resources, which leaves them open to exploitation by global capitalism, thus rendering the continent perpetually impoverished. We have already cited the case of the DRC, but there many others. It is obviously partly the consequences of this negligence and, often, the African elite's criminal collusion with the exploiters, that has led researchers like Collier (2007) to place the people of Africa into the economic "bottom billion" bracket of the current world population of seven billion people. On account of the persistent poverty "trap" the population of Africa lives under, brought about by gross mismanagement of resources, the continent is also benighted by ignorance, the presence of preventable disease, hunger, corruption, civil wars, and low life expectancy. The poisoning of the soil and pollution of lakes and rivers by chemicals employed in extractive industries, as well as the deforestation of the land predominantly by foreign firms, are not altogether unrelated to the prevailing political neglect.

The international response to the crisis of Africa has often taken the approach of aid. But according to Moyo (2009), an economist specializing on the African situation, this classical approach to forestall the effects of poverty is not working in Africa. Instead, the continent is growing poorer. Aid cannot be a solution to the reality of poverty. As Francis (2013) has pointed out, even at the best of times, "Welfare projects, which meet certain urgent needs, should be considered merely temporary responses" (para. 202). He has argued:

As long as the problems of the poor are not radically resolved by rejecting the absolute autonomy of markets and financial speculation and by attacking the structural causes of inequality, no solution will be found for the world's problems or, for that matter, to any problems. Inequality is the root of social ills." (para. 202).

It is important to note that more of the wealth of Africa flows out of the continent each year as so-

called “debt repayments” than trickles in through “aid.” Unfortunately, what has been termed “the rape of Africa” is, once again, often facilitated by the willful collusion and collaboration of the local political and business elites who have bought into and personally benefit from the capitalist economic system.

### **The Catholic tradition on the economy**

The capitalist ideology is not unquestionable. Christianity – Catholicism in particular – has a long and discernible history of theoretical and practical social concern. Although at certain periods in history – notably, from the 8th to the 19th century – the practice of the church in general did not place much emphasis on this aspect of its teaching, the church’s fundamental principle in defence of the disadvantaged has been a consistent part of its belief across time (Dorr, 1983). The church’s position on the protection of the marginalized essentially draws from biblical sources, where the prophetic literature enjoys pre-eminence in setting the theological tone in this regard. For the Prophets, as Micah (6:8) summarizes their theological position, “to act justly,” “to love mercy,” and “to walk humbly before God” (New International Version translation) constitute the only divine imperative for humanity. Through Isaiah, God instructs that true religion consists of doing justice.

Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke? Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter – when you see the naked, to clothe them, and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood?” (Is. 58:6-7).

This resolve by the Prophets is taken in Catholic theological tradition to be an expression of the original intent of God from the beginning of the history of salvation. Its exclusive motivation was the freedom of the oppressed people of Israel, the prototypical “Chosen Race,” a symbol of the entire human race, from the experience of social

alienation and violence. Francis (2013) has cited the following passage from the Book of Exodus (3:7-8) to show that God looks with compassion on the suffering of the poor and desires that we act to alleviate them: “I have observed the misery of my people ... I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them...” (para.187).

The redemption later wrought by Jesus Christ is in the same but explicitly more comprehensive order. A section of the Catholic population today would vigorously resist any interpretation of Jesus as a “social worker” who was concretely involved in social transformation. They prefer characterizing him exclusively as a “spiritual messiah.” But the evidence of the New Testament supports the understanding that Jesus’ mission of fulfilling “the law and the prophets” (Mt. 5:17-20) consisted fundamentally also in completing the social liberation of humanity from every form of “slavery.” As Jesus himself saw it, his ministry consisted in the fulfilment of life for everyone, notably, the preferential option, for the emancipation of the vulnerable (Lk. 4:18-19). The Gospel of Matthew reports that “Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness among the people (4:23).

In Jesus Christ, therefore, the “social” and the “spiritual” commitment do not translate into neat, mutually detachable or exclusive compartments. Jesus as “living water” (Jn. 4:14), “living bread,” and “life of the world” (Jn. 6:51) is presented in the Gospels as encompassing the physical, social, emotional, and spiritual realities of human existence. Shortly after his death, this fundamental principle of Christian discipleship was demonstrated in the implications of the celebration of the Eucharist. St. Paul was justly upset by the practices of class divisions during the celebration of the Eucharist among the Christian communities at Corinth (1 Cor. 11:17-34). Further, in his ministry, he pointed out that, like Jesus himself, he was always “eager” to help the socially

disadvantaged (Gal. 2:10). In minute detail he spelt out this spirit in his letter to Timothy (1 Tim. 5:3-16).

The Pastoral Epistles of the New Testament mirror an identical social awareness as Paul's. The Epistles of James and John distinguish themselves by their candor, succinctly expressed in the simple but profound statement of John: "Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love" (1 Jn. 4:8). John frankly elaborates further that "Whoever claims to love God yet hates a brother or sister is a liar. For whoever does not love their brother and sister, whom they have seen, cannot love God, whom they have not seen" (1 Jn. 4:8). The point is simply that "Anyone who loves God must also love their brother and sister" (1 Jn. 4:20-21). Touching directly upon theological and pragmatic social concerns, John elaborated that "This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters." It follows that "If anyone has material possessions and sees a brother or sister in need but has no pity on them, how can the love of God be in that person?" For John, the inference is obvious: "let us not love with words or speech but with actions and in truth" (1 John 3:16-18). In a similar manner, James defined true religion as one "that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless" to involve taking care of "orphans and widows in their distress" (1:27). "Suppose a brother or a sister is without clothes and daily food," he exemplifies, "If one of you says to them, 'Go in peace; keep warm and well fed,' but does nothing about their physical needs, what good is it?" (James 2:15-16).

These passages are self-explanatory and are reminiscent of the instruction voiced by Jesus himself as the unique mark of true faith in the discourse popularly known as the "Judgement Scene" (Mt. 25:31-46). Jesus advanced the directive to attend to the helpless in society as the exclusive criterion of observing the Law and the Prophets (Mt. 22:40). It constitutes "salvation," a mark of being on the side of God.

The immediate acquaintances of Jesus' disciples,

called the Fathers or Doctors of the Church (who lived between the second and the mid-eighth century) carried this same message in their writings which are still paradigmatic for the church in this area of theological reflection. They underlined the necessity of sharing material goods as an essential dimension of Christian behavior. The common thread running through their teachings is that wealth should be equitably shared with regard to the common necessities of life for all, the requirements of food, shelter, and clothing. The early Church Doctors argued that God intended the universe to be the commonwealth of all. Other divisions are secondary human arrangements that may never be absolutized in any society; they are relative and must be kept open to constant reform in order to realign themselves with the divine intention of the common good (Avila, 1983).

This sets the foundation upon which the attitude of the church on economic issues has essentially been and continues to be built. The intrinsic union of the "corporal" and "spiritual" works of mercy characterizes the church's perspective toward any economic ideology. The message of Francis in EG (2013) is that, today, the application of this stance is all the more urgent on account of the negative consequences that have been triggered by the phenomenon of capitalist economic globalization upon the majority of humanity. Concern for social justice must once again form the central element of the proclamation of the Gospel.

### **The ideology of capitalism and the ethics of the common good**

Based on this tradition of the church about the demands of the gospel for universal human solidarity, the view of Francis is that it is unethical when the capitalist ideology renders the vast majority of otherwise hard working women and men unable to sustain decent lives for themselves and their families. How is it possible to explain, let alone justify, a situation where the majority of human beings lack the essentials of life, when a tiny minority enjoy an excess of wealth? Because situation negates the principle of the "common good," the church must address this question,

Francis has urged. He is emphatic in EG (2013) that if “the social dimension of evangelization is not properly brought out, there is a constant risk of distorting the authentic and integral meaning of the mission of evangelization” (para. 176).

Francis explicitly returns to, and draws from, the imperative of sharing addressed by the early Doctors of the Church as central to the Christian view of economic activity. This is the “heart of the Gospel,” he writes (Francis, 2013, para. 178). The practical consequences of capitalism do not measure up to this demand. Economic “success” under capitalism may be unparalleled in the history of humankind, but at what cost?

This is the question. The system becomes flawed morally in that it prioritizes material achievement over ethical values. Structures that facilitate the concentration of wealth into the hands of a few individuals, consigning the majority of humanity to the indignity of indigence, suffering, and unnecessary early death for lack of life’s essential needs cannot be justified in Christian terms.

The principle of a human or Christian economy requires that economic structures and processes be characterized by attentiveness to the primacy of solidarity, social justice, and charity – that is, the “universal common good” – above and beyond everything else. In his Encyclical *Caritas in Veritate*, Pope Benedict XVI (2009) emphasized the same thing. Insensitivity to the poor in society in political, economic, and social activity betrays the basic message of the gospel that is the moral of love. As Francis (2013) has insisted, love implies, “going forth from ourselves towards our [needy] brothers and sisters” (para. 179).

### **Necessity of interplay between faith and economics**

Francis writes in EG (2013) that “It is no longer possible to claim that religion should be restricted to the private sphere and that it exists only to prepare souls for heaven” (para.

182). Indeed, he has argued, “no one can demand that religion should be relegated to the inner sanctum of personal life, without influence on societal and national life, without concern for the soundness of civil institutions, without a right to offer an opinion on events affecting society” (para. 183). With this stance, the Pope justifies Christian engagement in active critique of systems and structures that are detrimental to justice and charity and the integral dignity of each and all persons.

The Pope’s stance and plea have attracted severe criticism from many quarters. There are those who condemn it as a naïve mixture of religion

and economics. The critics have argued that because Francis’ premises and conclusions are founded upon a Christian (or Catholic) faith perspective, they distort what should otherwise be an “objective” or “scientific” approach to the “forces of the market.” Therefore, they have claimed that the approach

Francis espoused in EG itself risks turning into an ideology, without logical merit outside of the Christian faith-space. The critique is, of course, not new. It has been recurrent in the history of Christianity whenever church leaders have pronounced on issues of economic and social order, and, specifically, whenever they have critiqued or objected to unjust social structures and called for a fairer distribution of resources. The mistrust has largely built upon mentalities that pit “reason” against “faith,” and privilege the former.

However, an impartial reading of history shows that strict dualisms of this kind are simplistic and ultimately untenable. The integrity of the human person and of humanity as a whole cannot stand if faith and reason are divorced from each other. Both constitute the proper process of human evolution and, if well-balanced, they are life-generating forces. At any rate, faith in the Christian God is one vested in a “rational” Divinity, who reveals the divine-self in evolving

**“The integrity of the human person and of humanity as a whole cannot stand if faith and reason are divorced from each other.”**

empirical reality, and requires rational thought for understanding and acceptance. In Christian terms, faith and reason and reason and faith are complementary; one is not against or exclusive of the other.

The Catholic Tanzanian statesman, Nyerere (1997), remarked in a similar way that faith is only mature if it engages pragmatically and reasonably with the real world. As he saw it, this is what makes the faith of the church credible:

... unless we [the church] participate actively in the rebellion against those social structures and economic organizations which condemn ... [human beings] to poverty, humiliation and degradation ... the Church will become irrelevant ... and the Christian religion will degenerate into a set of superstitions accepted by the fearful. (p. 111).

In the same vein, he underlined that “Unless the Church, in its members and organization express God’s love for ... [humanity] by involvement and leadership in constructive protest against the present conditions ... [of human alienation], then it will become identified with injustice and persecution.” (Nyerere, 1997, p. 111). In other words, faith alone without sensible practice remains inane, and social practices that are not enlightened by Christian faith risk being un-Christian.

### Conclusion: promoting a human economy

What, then, according to Francis, is the way forward towards a more human world economy? In EG, he has offered a portrait of this possibility. EG echoes the Catholic Church’s enduring conviction about the Christian’s obligation for justice and solidarity in the world. This is in the interests of lasting peace. The perspective of Nyerere (1997) again augments this logic. For Nyerere, economic development is necessary, but it “must be put at the service of the human person.” Authentic progress should be understood as “the creation of conditions, both material and spiritual,” which empower individuals and societies to become integrally the best they can (Nyerere, 1997, p. 110; Paul VI, 1967).

The construction of a human economy, therefore, takes into consideration both how wealth is created and how it is distributed and used. The process of production, especially, must respect the human rights and dignity of all people. The renowned economist Heilbroner (1975) identified as the greatest failure of capitalism its obsession “with material achievements.” The capitalist ideology, he wrote, is “attuned to highly quantitative modes of thought ... dazzlingly rich in every dimension except that of the cultivation of the human person.” (p. 77). But the holistic human flourishing of each person and every person should rather be the goal production of material wealth (Paul VI, 1967).

A fundamental change in the goals of capitalism is required to humanize it. For it is essentially true what Nyerere (1997) remarks, that “Poverty is not the real problem of the modern world.” Today, he has pointed out, humanity possesses “the knowledge and the resources which could enable us to overcome poverty.” According to him, “The real problem – the thing which creates misery, wars and hatred ... is the division ... [of humankind] into rich and poor.” (p. 109). In short, the problem that is poverty revolves around fundamental injustices in the creation, distribution, and use of wealth. In the view of Francis in EG, contemporary orientations and structures of capitalism abet this situation and must be radically overhauled.

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