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**SPIRITUALITY** - Though the originator of a popular metaphor used to introduce JPIC to me many years ago is unknown, the image has continued to move me deeply. Our workshop moderator shared the story of a group of picnickers along a river that noticed the bodies of several babies floating down the river. They jumped in to rescue them and noticed even more babies floating by. In minutes, other people joined and it became a chain rescue operation. As more and more babies appeared in the river, people began organizing temporary shelters along the bank. Medical officers became involved and relief materials were fetched. Eventually a team of social workers began to arrange for foster care. Finally, one person started walking upstream along the shore. As more babies continued to float down the river, others shouted at the person to stay back and help. The person turned and answered: "I'm going upstream to see who is throwing the babies into the river and what makes it possible for him to do this".

The decision of one of the picnickers to move upstream is insightful. It is a radical decision to tackle the problem from the source. His consciousness made him aware that unless the various structures that support the ugly situation are dismantled, they would all spend their entire lives on the rescue mission. This metaphor in a sense paints the picture of the church in her two thousand years of evangelization. Once in a while, a Francis of Assisi or Teresa of Calcutta breaks away from the norm to move upstream. What a difference it would make in our world today if this was the general orientation of the church? The church is rich in works of mercy: the hospitals, clinics, health centres, adoption and foster care, food collection, emergency services, social works and counselling services among others. But as important as these are, they seem to hide and endorse the unjust structures in society. Is there not wisdom in going upstream to confront the structures that create the excruciating pain in our society? This reflection suggests

that moving beyond charity and sacred ministry to embracing advocacy will be a more viable way to make the gospel message come alive in our world. I would also suggest that a fresh understanding of two important Christian doctrines, "heaven" and "sin", will enhance the soil for effective advocacy.

Obviously the capacity to move upstream to confront unjust structures requires not only an inner journey and transformation of the human consciousness but also a more pragmatic understanding of the most basic Christian doctrines which we often take for granted. This is important because as Albert Einstein said, "No problem can be solved by the same consciousness that caused it". A conscious love produces compassion and solidarity in the world while fearfulness produces violence and domination of every kind. It is also important to recognize that for centuries, we have lived under the platonic world view without knowing how much it has shaped our deep seated Christian attitudes and our response to the whole Gospel message.

An average Christian thinks of heaven as a celestial reality after death. If this is right, then there is nothing wrong with people suffering here with the hope of heaven afterwards and working for Justice and Peace should not be considered an option. But the catechism of the Catholic Church [2793] underlines that the biblical expression heaven does not mean a place ("space"), but a way of being; it does not mean that God is distant but majestic. Pope John Paul II echoed this when he referred to heaven and hell as eternal states of consciousness more than geographical places of later reward and punishment. If there are no geographical places to look forward to, then we can choose to make this earth heaven for all by transforming the socio-economic structures of our present society to be more in harmony with Gospel values and Isaiah's vision (Is 65:17, 66:22) of a new social order that will be respectful of the dignity of every human being and the integrity of creation. In my view, this is what the building of the kingdom is all about. To choose otherwise is to create hell on earth. Pope Francis supports this view in [Evangelii Gaudium](#) [180] when he declares that "to evangelize is to make the kingdom of God present in our world. ....it is about loving God who reigns in our world. To the extent that he reigns within us, the life of the society will be a setting for universal fraternity, justice, peace and dignity". The world wants peace but looks for it in the signing of treaties and conventions, ignoring the fact that discontent in the world is a function of unjust socio-economic structures and that peace is obtained when those structures are adjusted to address every human need.

Just like heaven, understanding "sin" more pragmatically would be helpful to our commitment to advocacy. Its opposite is "salvation". Among Christians, sin has come to assume the meaning of "acts". But from its meaning in Greek, sin simply means 'to miss the mark'. We would interpret 'missing the mark,' as the ability to not living up to our full human potential. We dare to say that not to live up to our full human potential is to live in a condition of sin and any structure that limits or inhibits people's attainment of their full potential is a structure of sin; to be freed of

those restraining structures therefore practically equates to gaining salvation. In this vein, it is not difficult to see that the economic partnership agreements [EPAs] which create more poverty and unemployment, the land grabbing that creates more hunger and the arms trade that fuels conflict in Africa are expressions of unjust, global socio-economic structures. Meanwhile, these countries or unions will turn around to give aid to Africa. It is not surprising then that John Paul II described sin through unjust structures as structural sin. The tragedy is that these sins are often committed without our notice and nobody takes responsibility because they are embedded in the structures of the society that we serve. The story is no different within the African countries either. In Nigeria, for example, the best primary and secondary schools are owned by the Church. Incidentally, these schools are not affordable to the average Nigerian. Consequently, the church gives the best education to the rich who then move to Europe and America for the best tertiary education while the church at the same time turns round to give alms to the poor. In these ways we inadvertently widen the gap between the rich and poor through the promotion of unjust economic structures (Acts 16:19-31).

It seems to me that the church is sometimes apathetic towards social issues. Rather than move a finger to challenge a social anomaly, she will embark on long years of prayer waiting for an unseen intervention. Could this be part of the disease of the idealistic worldview that we live with? This is not an attempt to relegate the potency of prayer but to state that our prayer must be matched with action if it is to yield fruit. John Paul II characteristically called upon missionaries to be present where decisions are made. Pope Francis has also in *Evangelii Gaudium* made a similar call in which he charged Christians to display concern for the building of a better world through influence on societal and national life, bearing in mind that as children of God, the world is created for the enjoyment of everyone. (1 Tim 6:17). Each of these calls is a special and an urgent invitation to Christians to make a choice between a religion of belonging and embracing Gospel life to transform the structures of sin in our society into structures that support life. And there is no better time to make the decision than now (2Cor 6:2).

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ibid

Source: Africa Europe Faith and Justice Network