

**THE EFFECTS OF OIL EXPLORATION IN NIGERIA:
A THEOLOGICAL CRITIQUE
(BASED ON THE PRINCIPLES OF CATHOLIC SOCIAL TEACHING)**

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Oil is a very lucrative commodity, which has empowered many countries that produce it for export, not just in terms of bettering the lives of the populace, but also with regard to increasing their political power among other nations. This is because this commodity is an essential one in our technologically advanced age, but the socio-economic situation in Nigeria and especially in oil producing communities is a totally different story. Nigeria, the most populous country in Africa, is one of the richest in term of natural endowments. Nigeria is the largest oil producing nation in Africa, and ranks 11th in the world. It is a major supplier of oil to Western Europe and the United States of America. ⁱ Speaking about Nigeria's natural endowments, The World Bank says that "Nigeria is the giant in Africa with enviable resources. With over 100 million people, it is the most populous country in sub-Saharan Africa, and earns annual oil revenue of over \$6 billion a year."ⁱⁱ Nigeria also has a huge reserve of natural gas, yet to be fully exploited. Yet instead of turning Nigeria into one of the prosperous states on the African continent, these natural resources have enriched a small minority while the vast majority has become increasingly impoverished: with a per capita gross national product of only U.S \$260 a year, Nigeria is one of the poorest countries in the world.ⁱⁱⁱ

The poverty, instability and erosion of human dignity, which we see in Nigeria, besides other factors, is hugely as a result of corruption, greed and mismanagement. Oil is the bedrock of the Nigerian economy and the presence of this essential commodity in a technological age has attracted the presence of some multi-national oil companies into Nigeria. These multi-national companies like Royal Dutch/Shell, Exxon, Mobil, Chevron, Texaco, Total, Elf and Agip etc, go into every country with promises of a better life for the populace. They usually have only one thing in mind; making profit at whatever cost, even at the cost of the environment and human lives. Nigeria is an example of this situation. These multi-national companies have been aptly described as "modern day Gulliver on the rampage, waging an ecological war wherever they set down their oil rig."^{iv} These multi-national, borderless corporations are oftentimes not accountable to any government and so are at liberty to violate human rights with impunity. The case of Shell's activities in the Niger Delta since it started oil exploration there in 1956 has proven this to be true. Ever since Shell began drilling oil in the Niger Delta in 1958, life has been a living hell for the people.

The Niger Delta area of Nigeria is one of the many parts of the world that bears witness to the paradox of poverty in the midst of plenty. This part of Nigeria is one of the world's richest areas. Apart from its substantial oil and gas deposits, there are extensive forests, abundant wildlife and fertile agricultural land where rice, sugar cane, plantain, beans, palm oil, yams, cassava and timber are cultivated. The Delta is famous also for its fish resources. It has more freshwater fish species than any other coastal system in West Africa. Indeed three-quarters of the fish caught in the sub-region are bred in the mangroves of the Delta, which have been described as the third largest and the most discreet in the world.^v The people of the Niger Delta area of Nigeria live in a part of Nigeria which can be described as the goose that lays Nigeria's golden eggs. In fact, according to an assessment carried out by the International Monetary Fund, the country earned a total of \$ 65.5 billion from the oil fields of the Niger Delta between 1958

and 1992.^{vi} But today, the rich eco-system of this area of Nigeria is gradually being destroyed. This letter of protest written by Dere^{vii} Youths Association to Shell- BP aptly describes the ecological situation in the Niger Delta today. It says:

Our rivers, rivulets and creeks are all covered with crude oil. We no longer breathe the natural oxygen, rather we inhale lethal and ghastly gases. Our water can no longer be drunk unless one wants to test the effects of crude oil on the body. We no longer use vegetables, they are polluted.^{viii}

Oil exploration is devastating their environment. Shell BP is one of the oil companies with a huge presence in the Niger Delta and their activities there, together with other companies, have not been so beneficial to either the people or the environment. "Green Peace" agrees with this statement when it says that "since the beginning of Shell's operations in the Niger Delta, the company has wreaked havoc on neighboring communities and their environment. Many of its operations and materials are outdated, in poor condition, and would be illegal in other parts of the world."^{ix} The people are wallowing in poverty in the midst of plenty, and their efforts to resist this form of oppression by the Nigerian government and these multinational oil companies have often been met with suppression, as the violence done to the land is also sometimes translated into violence against the people.^x The people of the Niger Delta of Nigeria are among the poorest in terms of living conditions in Nigeria. "Seventy percent of the inhabitants still live a rural, subsistent existence characterized by a total absence of such basic facilities as electricity, pipe-borne water, hospitals, proper housing and motorable roads."^{xi} This is why Nnadozie Emmanuel could say that "oil is a curse which means only poverty, hunger, disease and exploitation for those living in oil producing areas."^{xii} Oil could be a source of blessing for those countries that have learnt how to use the proceeds from this commodity for the benefit of the people especially in terms of social spending, and for the repair of ecological disasters which are attendant consequences of oil exploration. But for those countries where greed and corruption characterize the activities of the ruling class, oil becomes a curse. Nigeria belongs to this latter category.

Oil exploration has devastated the eco-system of the Niger Delta, and the Nigerian government has often paid deaf ears to the cry of the people of the Niger Delta in their demand to save their environment. This is because oil accounts for 90 per cent of Nigeria's foreign exchange, and 80 per cent of Nigeria's revenues. All attempts of the people of Niger Delta to demand their rights to preserve their environment, or at least to partake of the fruits of their land, has often been suppressed with military might, and so to make themselves heard, they've often resorted to violence. "The profound discontent felt by many in the 'oil producing communities' that they do not benefit from oil production, and the realization that it is only by closing down production that attention has been brought to their grievances, leads to repeated occupations of oil facilities, hostage taking, seizure of property, and other attempts to disrupt the flow of oil."^{xiii} This has made the Niger Delta area the most violence-prone area of Nigeria. Human Rights Watch says of the Niger Delta:

The Niger Delta for some years has been the sight of major confrontations between the people who live there and the Nigerian government security forces, resulting in extra-judicial executions, arbitrary detentions, and draconian restrictions on the rights to freedom of expression, association and assembly.^{xiv}

Many unemployed youths have lost their lives in their fight for survival with multi-national oil companies and the Nigerian government. Prominent among such martyrs for championing the cause of the people of the Niger Delta is Ken Saro Wiwa, the celebrated author and Nobel Peace Prize nominee who was hanged with eight other

Ogoni^{xv} chiefs by the Nigerian government during the reign of Nigeria's worst military dictator, General Sani Abacha, in 1995.

Multi-national oil companies are always ready to co-operate with corrupt governments in impoverishing the populace, since this means more profit for themselves and millions of dollars for a tiny fraction of the population, usually those in power, hidden in foreign bank accounts. Through a combination of investor pressure, countries like Nigeria have set up a special investment zone like the Niger Delta, that is not only tax free, but also free of all regulations. Corporations that adhere to regulations in their home countries often abuse labor, human dignity and environment in other countries, especially poor countries like Nigeria, as these multi-national companies have done. They maintain substantially lower environmental standards in poor countries than in their home countries.

It is a known fact that at least in Nigeria, an oil company like Shell has a frightening amount of control over the government. 80% of Nigerian government revenues comes directly from oil, over half of which is from Shell, and so it is logical that this company is treated with kid gloves. Given the overwhelming role of oil in the Nigerian national economy, the policies and practices of the oil companies are important factors in the decision making of the Nigerian government.^{xvi} For countries where there isn't much transparency and accountability on the part of the ruling class, this influence is exerted negatively. An example of this is the type of alliance between Shell BP and the Nigerian government.

In Nigeria, oil companies bribe influential local officials to suppress action against them. Shell co-operates with the Nigerian government in the continuing violent assault on indigenous peoples and the environment, since both have a stake in this deadly deal for blood money from Delta oil. Shell even goes to the extent of contributing to the funding of the military in the Delta region, and has at least indirectly induced the Nigerian government into the use of force, in suppressing the natives in their demand for justice and equity. A case in point is the massacre of 80 people from Umuechem, an oil producing community in the Niger Delta. Under the guise of protecting Shell's facilities from peaceful demonstrators in the village of Umuechem, the police killed 80 people, destroyed houses and vital crops in 1990.

Another example of such an incident comes to mind here. In November 1999 soldiers from the Nigerian army moved into Odi, an oil producing community in Bayelsa State of Nigeria, and engaged in an exchange of fire with young men who were allegedly responsible for killing 12 policemen who were guiding Shell facilities, and proceeded to raze the town. The troops demolished every single building, burning the bank, the Anglican church and the health clinic. Hundreds of people were killed in this raid. This is one among the many cases of killings, imprisonment, torture etc., which the people of the Niger Delta face daily as host communities to multi-national oil companies. Shell has also admitted to purchasing weapons for the police force who guard its facilities, and there is suspicion that Shell funds a much greater portion of the military than previously admitted.^{xvii}

What is going on in the Niger Delta area of Nigeria is a clear demonstration of the fact that after 38 years of oil exploration in the Niger Delta, the natives have become poorer and less empowered, contrary to what one would have expected, judging from some cases of oil rich countries like Venezuela and Saudi Arabia, who have learnt how to manage the excess wealth generated by this lucrative commodity. The violence, poverty and environmental degradation which oil exploration has fostered in the Niger Delta is a clear violation of human dignity. Pope John XXIII makes it clear in the encyclical, *Pacem in Terris* that "human dignity is violated when there exist conditions that prevent access to adequate food, shelter and other goods, necessary for human

well being and flourishing.”^{xviii} The poverty which structures of exploitation perpetuate is a threat to the dignity of the human person created in the image and likeness of God. Whatever will not allow human beings to live life to the full is a hindrance to human beings realizing their full potential as humans.

We believe that oil as an essential commodity in this technological age, even though it has empowered many countries that possess it, has ended up impoverishing some countries like Nigeria, who cannot manage the enormous profit it generates as a result of corruption, selfishness and greed. In Nigeria in particular, some of the adverse effects of this lack of ability, or unwillingness to employ the profit from oil to the betterment of the living condition of the people is poverty, environmental degradation, and violence. These adverse consequences can be adequately challenged using the core principles of Catholic Social Teaching. Namely, the dignity of the human person, and stewardship of creation. Made in God’s image, all human life has inherent dignity which is the basis of fundamental human rights.^{xix} We agree with Bill Ryan, that Catholic Social Teaching can and did have significant, if rarely determining, influence in shaping history in particular situations.^{xx} It can also do same in the case of Nigeria. In fact, the principles of Catholic social teaching are in a better position to challenge the phenomenon of poverty, and environmental degradation because, “the core values of Catholic social teaching are common and accepted, at least in principle, in all local churches-even if the living out of them leaves much to be desired...its core social values are found to some degree in all world religions.”^{xxi}

Oil exploration in Nigeria is fostering inequality, injustice, and violence. This inequality exists among people living in the same country simply because the majority of the masses who have no access to the wealth generated by oil exploration and exportation, cannot compete with employees of oil companies who are paid better salaries. Hence the cost of living in oil producing states in Nigeria is higher because of the presence of oil companies and their employees. In the same country “while most Nigerians have been sliding into destitution, the political and economic elites of the country have grown ever richer- in most cases obscenely so.”^{xxii}

Having lived in the Niger Delta area of Nigeria, I have witnessed first hand the effect of poverty and its attendant erosion of human dignity. I was very often caught in the demonstrations and riots against oil companies like Shell and the Nigerian government, and still have friends and family, who still live in this part of Nigeria. In the face of all these I have come to the conclusion that there are alternatives. It offends God to see human beings created in his image wallow in abject squalor as a result of structures of sin, set up by fellow humans. Nigeria could become one of the richest countries in the world if only corruption and greed were eschewed and accountability embraced. Many countries have applied oil wealth to better use. Nigeria can do the same.

The history of the contact between multi-national oil companies and the natives of the Niger Delta, has been that of impoverishment and environmental degradation. This impoverishment affects more their eco-system, which is widely acclaimed as one of the best in the world. The struggle by the local communities of this area of Nigeria with the Nigerian government and oil companies for a fair share of the products of their land has transformed this once peaceful part of Nigeria into a violence-prone zone.

I believe that these negative consequences of oil exploration can be more effectively challenged using the principles of Catholic social teaching. Oil exploration in the Niger Delta over the years has perpetuated poverty and environmental degradation, which violate human dignity, and becomes an abuse of the mandate received from God to care for creation. Using the Bible and Magisterial texts we can critique effectively, the poverty and violence which oil exploration has fostered as these constitute a threat to

the dignity of the human person created in the image and likeness of God. Ecological disasters, as a result of reckless use of resources of the earth, are an abuse of the mandate given to human beings by God to subdue the earth. Humans are constituted stewards of creation, and so actions of some trans-national companies with the collaborations of some governments should be challenged, not just from the ecological point of view but also from a theological standpoint. The task of preserving the earth is not just for environmentalists, but is also a theological concern.

The church in Nigeria has no doubt been a voice for the voiceless and the conscience of the nation since independence in 1960. Following the example of the universal church, she has always taken the side of the poor in denouncing structures of oppression and injustice. Unfortunately she has done little or nothing in the case of ecological concerns especially as it affects the Niger Delta area of Nigeria. We call for an urgent response from the church in Nigeria with regard to ecological issues. The Gospel message should be liberative, especially in places like Nigeria where the faith is flourishing. *Evangelii Nuntiandi* makes the link between proclamation of the Gospel message and social liberation when it says that “the church has the duty of proclaiming the liberation of millions of human beings, many of whom are its spiritual children, the duty of aiding liberation at its start, of giving witness in its favor, and of accompanying its effects that it may be achieved. This is not apart from evangelization.”^{xxiii}

It is our belief that even though the faith is “flourishing” in Nigeria, the needed social transformation which should accompany this has not yet been achieved because here, the Bible is often given a spiritualized interpretation and only read for the nourishment of individual souls towards spiritual salvation and not in view of societal transformation. But Pope Paul VI makes it clear in his address to the Diplomatic Corps on January 17, 1967 that “the church cannot remove herself from temporal affairs, because the temporal is the activity of men, and all that concerns the Church. A disembodied Church separated from the world, would no longer be the Church of Jesus Christ, the Church of the incarnate Word. The Church, on the contrary, interests herself closely in every generous endeavor which helps to set humanity on the road to heaven, but also in the search for well-being, for justice, for peace, for happiness on earth.”^{xxiv}

The church in Nigeria has on many occasions lived up to her calling as a force for social transformation. The Niger Delta area can benefit more from the prophetic voice of the Nigerian church.

1. Taken from <http://www.eia.doc.gov/emeu/cabsoppec.html>

2. The World Bank Report on Nigeria, *Nigeria and the World Bank*, 1995.

3. Human Rights Watch, *The Price of Oil: Corporate Responsibility and Human Rights Violations in Nigeria's Oil Producing Communities*, (New York: Human Rights Watch, 1999), 6.

4. Ike Okonta & Oronto Douglas, *Where Vultures Feast*, (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 2001), 44-45.

5. *Ibid.*, 63.

6. IMF, *International Financial Statistics, in Khana, Nigeria*, 184.

7. Dere is the name of one of the six tribes that make up the Niger Delta of Nigeria

8. J Timothy Hunt , *The Politics of Bones: Dr Wiwa and the Struggle for Nigeria's Oil*, (Toronto: McClelland Stewart Ltd, 2005), 33.

9. Okonta & Douglas, *Where Vultures Feast*, 43.

10. *Ibid.*, xi

11. *Ibid.*, 19.

12. Emmanuel Nnadozie, *Oil and Socio-economic Crisis in Nigeria*, (Lewiston: Lewiston University Press, 1995), 17.

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13. Human Rights Watch, *The Niger Delta: No Democratic Dividend*, Vol. 14, No 7 (A) October 2002, 6.
 14. Human Rights Watch, *The Price of Oil*, 1.
 15. The Ogonis are one of the tribes that make up the Niger Delta area in Nigeria. It is the most despoiled of all,
and has put up the fiercest fight against Shell and the Nigerian government amongst all the other tribes.
 16. Human Rights Watch, *The Price of Oil*, 3.

 17. Human Right Watch, *The Ogoni Crisis Report* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 1995), 2.
 18. John XXIII, *Pacem in Terris* (Sherbrooke: Editions Paulines, 1994), # 17.

 19. Bill Ryan, “Catholicism in a Globalizing World: Is Catholic Social Thought Relevant in Today’s New Context of Globalization” in *The Nash Memorial Lecture* (Regina: Campion College, 2004,) 3.
 20. *Ibid.*, 5.
 21. *Ibid.*, 18.
 22. *Ibid.*
 23. *Evangelii Nuntiandi* # 30.

 - ^{xxiv} Pope Paul VI, cited in Dom Helder Camara, *Church and Colonialism*, (London: Sheed and Ward, 1969), 175.