

# Community on Mission in a World Wounded by Poverty

## A Call to Solidarity, Vulnerability and Liberation

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## **ABSTRACT**

THIS PAPER EXPLORES TWO faces of poverty—the poverty of the wretched of the earth, and that of the lords of poverty. Both are bereft of dignity and humanity. Illustrations from the African context are given. Christian community on mission in a world choking on poverty is highlighted as modelled on the Jesus event, the humanness of God—a paradox of vulnerability bringing breath and life. *Ubuntu*, the African disposition to choose growth into fuller humanity, is proposed to aid a meaningful African Christian engagement with the various forms of poverty. Experiences of an encounter between the two faces of poverty at St Martin’s Catholic Social Apostolate in Nyahururu demonstrate how the Christ experience of openness to humanness—solidarity and vulnerability—can turn poverty into liberating grace.

## **INTRODUCTION**

This paper discusses the plight of people living in poverty. Though there are many kinds of poverty, it places it in two broad categories. There are those who live the burden of deprivation of essential provisions in life. We have called these the “wretched of the earth” following a title that Franz Fanon (1963) gave to a book describing, almost in prophetic terms, destitution all the world over. The second category are those who, in the words entitling another book, we call “the lords of poverty” (Hancock, 1989). These are the persons who control the structures that uphold the poverty of the wretched. Controlling the sources and the exchange mechanisms, they ensure that they have a windfall, in good and in bad times. They too are poor; their poverty is in compassion.

Along with the COVID-19 pandemic, the murder of George Floyd and subsequent global reactions count as the most outstanding shared experiences of the year 2020. Carried out in the view of the entire world, the drama of the exercise of brute power over the weak raised the question of poverty, powerlessness and exclusion to unprecedented, immediate shared attention. The image of

George Floyd is representative of oppressed people everywhere, the “wretched of the earth” whose very life’s value is considered debatable by some. His executioner may, in a dramatized yet true sense, represent the oppressing forces—the lords of poverty. Floyd’s dying words, “I cannot breathe,” re-echo today and resound into a human history blighted by oppression. Indeed, the cry “I cannot breathe” resounds across ages, gender, race and religion, as the earth and humanity’s two types of the poor choke under the load of exploitation, brutality and ignorance.

After discussing some expressions of the “poverties” in Africa, the paper discusses the call of the gospel to mission amidst these poverties, taking lessons from the Jesus event, the incarnational movement that models solidarity, vulnerability and liberation as a core Christian message. For the African Christian community, this is proposed as the way to live *Ubuntu*. Finally, a wonderful example of living *Ubuntu* in a Christian community on mission in the face of poverties within a Kenyan setting is highlighted. It offers hope for every local reality blighted by various poverties.

### **CHOKING “THE WRETCHED OF THE EARTH”**

The poverty of the deprived has many faces, among them economic and financial, social, educational, health, spiritual and environmental.

*Economic and Financial Poverty:* According to Compassion International (2020), economic and financial poverty propels people to choose lifestyles that lead them to isolation. This is often the fate of the urban poor in most African towns and cities, distanced from rural relatives and unable to raise the means to reconnect. This isolation is also suffered by the rural poor, especially the elderly. Social and relational isolation is a pain-filled kind of poverty. African communities highly regard and safeguard relationships. Horizontal relationships of the individual and peers within the family and the wider community are important, and can impact vertical relationships all the way to that of the individual and nature/

cosmos. Accordingly, the social isolation wrought by material impoverishment metastasizes into psycho-spiritual pain and poverty.

*Social Poverty:* Some community members are victims of poverty due to age—either too young or too old to fend for themselves. Worse still is the abandonment of the elderly in semi- or non-functional settings while their children seek gainful employment in the cities. However, the very lack of employment opportunities casts the shadow of poverty across generational divides. Loneliness and lack of basic provisions for many aged persons is coupled with powerlessness, guilt and cultural deracination for their progeny. The elderly lack the breath of joy of watching proudly over their grandchildren, the expected normal life trajectory. That the poor in Africa are often destitute (Theuri, 2003) remains persistently and pervasively true.

Gender differences, innately a gift and resource for collaboration, have also become a divide that fosters choking by exclusion and exploitation. Physical and sexual violence across the gender divide at home, in the work place, in church and in the public arena are a scary reality in contemporary African communities.

*Educational Poverty:* In most parts of Africa, the poor cannot access educational opportunities. Many African youth cannot compete nationally and internationally because the quality of education provided in formal public schools does not measure up to the pace and demands of the global economy; they cannot breathe in the economies of exclusion set up against them.

Africa's cultural mainstay in education was value-rich, relevant to the context, practical, life-long, corrective and accommodating of all segments of the society (Mosha, 2000). Indigenous education has, however, been largely neglected in a bid to join the national and international educational race. While many African countries offer free basic education, the reality is that the facilities in public educational institutions are wanting, hence the springing up of private schools. Modern education is therefore alienating while it is, ideally, aimed at integrating many African children into the world of today. Many cannot achieve the goals

of twenty-first-century education; yet they lose the rich values of indigenous education, especially the identity formation that gave them the security of a strong sense of belonging. Most African young people cannot breathe, neither in their cultural domicile nor in the liberal market economies of today's world.

*Health Poverty:* The wretched of the earth are unable to access health care services or ensure preventive health practices. Home to tropical diseases such as malaria, Africa is also battling emerging diseases such as diabetes, hypertension and cancer. Africa is the region most ravaged by HIV and AIDS and she has not been spared by COVID-19 either. In the indigenous setup, there were health experts who treated various ailments (Mbiti, 1969, 1991). Colonialism and sometimes misguided Christian missionaries, however, dealt a blow to these health institutions, labelling their experts as “evil witch doctors,” forbidding Christians from seeking their services and effectively side-lining their knowledge. Their skills have not been passed to younger generations because of this negativity. Meanwhile, western-modelled medical care is choking the poor in Africa—financially, psychologically, emotionally and even physically.

*Spiritual Poverty:* Spirituality is understood as that deep connection with oneself, with others and with the Power(s) regarded as central in and to one's being. African spirituality is predominantly rooted in connectedness with family and community, as mediums of connection with the ultimate spirit (Mbiti). Kinship is, in effect, the essence of life and it is especially expressed in ancestral relationships (Magesa, 1997). Africans who lack adequate social connection are also very likely to experience spiritual insignificance and death. Across cultures, the touch of others is often a mediator for the openness to the spiritual wealth of each person. In Africa, the vertical relationships between an individual and his/her elders, ancestors and the Creator, are considered to be critically important. However, the African poor are spiritually traumatized through social disconnection brought by active discouragement

of ancestral veneration in Christian communities. Without these, the markers of vivacious spirituality are absent from African lives.

Religion could assist towards appropriating spirituality. More often than not, however, religions are part of the mechanisms that generate spiritual impoverishment in Africa. Like education and health services, religion in Africa is highly commercialised and is often truncated to manipulate the disadvantaged poor. This is the ethos driving the so-called “prosperity gospel,” a materialistic business arm of Christianity in Africa. The poor are turned into a laughingstock as they part with their meagre resources to pay for indignities that accompany the antics of prosperity evangelists.

*Environmental Poverty:* The wretched of the earth bear the brunt of environmental degradation the world over. In *Laudato Si*, Pope Francis (2015) underscores the association of the fate of the poor with that of the exploited earth. In Africa, one of the many examples is the cumulative reduction of food independence of the population, through suppression of natural seeds from subsistence farmers, with the aim of expanding markets for multinational companies that endeavour to monopolize seeds (Shiva, 2016; Shiva, 2013). Food shortages, drought, floods and diseases, all attributed to environmental challenges, are compounded by the abuse of the land through the use of fertilizers and unnatural seeds, eventually compromising sustainable productivity. The choking of the poor along with the choking of the earth advance at high speed.

### **CHOKED: THE “LORDS OF POVERTY”**

We now turn our attention to the poverty of the “lords of poverty.” There is an assumption that a lord cannot be poor. After all, a lord is expected to be bedecked with plenty: money; land, houses, vehicles and power. What then does the poverty of the lords entail?

*Acquisition and accumulation:* Being too engrossed with acquisition and accumulation of material things, at the expense of sharing these to alleviate the suffering of the poor, is a dire form of

human poverty. This paradox is a reality in Africa and in global economics. The obsession with acquisition regardless of its impact on others, perpetuating the poverty of the wretched by creating structures that sustain their poverty, is in fact a manifestation of inner poverty—wanting in humanness.

*The deficit mentality, obstruction and feigned ignorance:* The “lord of poverty” is one who is in a position to influence decisions to address the structures that maintain poverty of the ‘wretched’ but deliberately chooses to promote avenues of maintaining the *status quo*, for his/her own benefit. The lords of poverty are those who generate obstruction of access to relief for the “wretched”; they ignore the plight and pain of the poor and are preoccupied with positions, consumption and power. Maintaining situations or social structures that are unfavourable to the wellbeing of others only because it is in one’s favour is an expression of smallness, separateness and insecurity. It is the inability to associate others’ plight with one’s own. It is to participate in a deficit mentality where one feels that one can only win at the expense of others. Not only is this mentality a poverty induced mind-set, but also poverty-generating, creating a vicious cycle of destitution and powerlessness. These lords of poverty cannot breathe the fresh air of compassion towards other human beings. They too are impoverished because of their lack of a sense of connection to humanity.

The lords of poverty are often able to recruit the very “wretched” whom they exploit, getting them to buy into the notion that their situation is acceptable, is their lot and destiny. Kanyandago (2005) rightly opined that the woes of societies are wired in the people’s imagination, so that even with regime changes, without questioning this imagination, such unfortunate situations become self-perpetuating, locking the poor into the arena of poverty, and compounding their wretchedness. A classic example is the situation often observed in the cycles of electoral politics in many African countries: the lords of poverty—the politicians—purchase the votes of the poor whose wretchedness has generated loss of vision of a different reality for themselves.

*Dehumanised*: Inasmuch as they have so much in material possessions, the lords are actually poor. Their approach and attitude to the reality of the poor are witness to a dire experience of emptiness and fragility. To invest so much in the poverty industry manifests a fragility or inadequacy experienced by the lords of poverty at personal and corporate levels. Their poverty is a bottomless pit which can only keep consuming in order to assure themselves of their own doubtful importance. Feeling greater than others is essential to their sense of worth, leading to a sectionalized humanity, and desensitized to the suffering they wreak on others and on creation.

Though the final report of the Millennium Development Goals project celebrated significant numbers of people pulled out of poverty (United Nations, 2015), achievement was way below target. Admirable efforts are made under the banner of Sustainable Development Goals, yet the pace towards eradication of poverty has been decelerating since 2015, and the world is already off track to eradicate poverty by 2030 (United Nations, 2020). With CO-VID-19, the deceleration is accentuated and poverty is on the rise. By June 2020, already 70 million more people had been pushed into extreme poverty (United Nations 2020). Is this to confirm that the poor will always be with us (Mk 14.7)? What can a Christian community's response be?

## **CHRISTIAN MISSION AS A NOZZLE OF OXYGEN FOR A CHOKING WORLD**

The perspective of mission that this paper adopts is that in which the faith community observes God in mission and experiences its own meaning in joining God's mission. Mission is participation in the self-giving action of God (Bosch, 1991). This disposition underscores a fundamental Christian stance. God breathes into human conditions and they become life-giving.

As in the creation story, God's Spirit enlightens the potentials hidden in the darkness wreaked by poverties (Gen. 1.1-2). Poverities raise the opportunity to design a new inclusive world order. The lie that poverty accords to the wretched of the earth, making

them believe in their own sub-humanity, and the lie that the lords of poverty live, making them believe that a dignity for themselves can only be at the cost of others, can be turned around by creative compassion. The story of Christian redemption is embedded in the incarnation, a divine mission of solidarity. Christian community is, therefore, invited to embrace this movement of solidarity in its mission. In genuine solidarity, the community and its members experience liberation from their various poverties and empowerment for ongoing mission.

This section uses two sources for reflection on the meaning of Christian mission vis-à-vis various poverties in Africa. First is the Jesus event, the life of one man imbued with the fullness of humanity. Second is an African understanding of Jesus—the one who has the fullness of *Utu* (to use the Kiswahili term)—humanity. African Christian community can grow in understanding of Jesus' mission through reflection on the *Utu/Ubuntu* spirituality (Ubuntu has the same meaning as Utu in southern African Bantu languages). These two sections will feed into the last part of the paper where a case of an African Christian community response to both poverties and the liberating power of this human solidarity is highlighted.

### The Jesus event—Breath of life for mission in poverty

The incarnation of Jesus is the central event of Christian meaning, enlightening all human experiences. Jesus' approach to human experience is the invitation to fullness of life (Jn 10.10). The incarnation experience, as lived out by Jesus, is a challenge for both kinds of the poor—the wretched of the earth and the lords of poverty. Many times, he invites the poor to an active faith that breathes a fuller life: lift up your mat and walk (Jn 5.8), stretch out your hand (Mt. 12.13); recognising the validity of their aspirations to flourishing, as in the case of Bartimaeus (Mk 10.46-52). In the widow with a small offering, Jesus recognises and praises the greatness of heart of some of the poor, even when their visible means seem small (Lk. 21.2-4). He also invites the lords of poverty of his day to

put away the crutches of their positions, as in the story of Levi (Lk. 5.27-32), their preoccupation with appearances and to embrace the privilege of solidarity with the poor and the marginalised and so breathe in their own humanness (Lk. 19.1). Both Levi and Zacchaeus find new joy in following Jesus, while the rich young man goes away sad (Mk 10.22), unable to yield to the desire of his own yearning for eternal life, and staying a prisoner of his great wealth. In calling out every one of these poor people, Jesus demonstrates the wisdom that grows ever so slowly in Israel and in our mission communities, that while humans may be preoccupied with appearances, God looks at the heart (1 Sam. 16.7; Jer. 17.10). These encounters of various poor people with Jesus also make explicit that while a person can be imprisoned by one form of poverty or another, lacking the breath of life, once freed, the person breathes in solidarity with other human beings. Both types of formerly poor, like Zacchaeus and Bartimaeus, once freed of their shackles, follow the way of Jesus (Lk. 19.8-9; Mk 10.52).

In his mission, Jesus holds strong convictions and accepts the consequences of his choices even when they are unattractive (Mk 3.6). Rendered vulnerable, he refuses to lean on crutches that compromise his congruence: “If you are the son of God . . . Man shall not live by bread alone” (Lk. 4.1-4). Unwilling to abuse his power, he shows that the measure of the full human person is the willingness to accept the consequences of living his/her convictions.

Living authentically necessarily brings one face to face with his/her own vulnerability. The passion story from Gethsemane through to Good Friday highlights how Jesus lived his life in authenticity that rendered him vulnerable. Hawkins (2007) has signalled how Christian commentaries of the passion have tended to downplay the vulnerability of Jesus in Gethsemane. Yet, the evangelist Matthew twice mentions how Jesus was in great turmoil in Gethsemane (Matt. 26.39), standing in need of the comfort and support of his disciples. Jesus’ passion and death throw light on the paradigm of his whole life; all given for others, his life was a precursor to his death (Rutledge, 2015). His solidarity with and liberation of the poor brings him into conflict with the imperial

forces of Rome and their collaborators among the Jews (Luke 23.2). And his authenticity and vulnerability vis-à-vis all poverties lead to a revelation of who is on his side when God raises him (Acts 2:24). Following the insights of De La Torres, Vellem (2017) interprets the resurrection of Jesus as a continuation of his insurrection against oppressive forces. In the New Testament communities, the insurrection continues, building on the liberating encounter with the Spirit of Jesus.

The cross, foolishness and weakness to the world, is the wisdom and strength of God (1 Cor. 1) by which the post-resurrection communities disentangle their squabbles, their various poverties, and find the meaning of their presence/mission in the world. A Christian community, led by the Spirit of Jesus, becomes itself a sign of a new counter-cultural economy of love (1 Cor. 12–13). The New Testament is a witness of Christian communities, born of the death and resurrection of Jesus, which struggle with the menace of various poverties as in 1 Corinthians 11, where some members get drunk and others go hungry. But, the vulnerability of these early Christian communities mediates illumination of community mission; the Spirit of God is experienced to break through the barriers of these poverties and bring new breath, forging new communion.

### Muntu—The African understanding of full humanity and breath of life

Contemporary Africa occupies a place in global geo-economics and geo-politics that portrays her as the poorest continent. The levels of corruption on the continent seem emblematic of her people as the gaps between her rich and poor are splashed across world screens. Yet Africa suffers historical dehumanisation that has choked her ability to reach into the breath of life in her cultures. The poverty of the African people—demonstrated by both her wretched of the earth and her lords of poverty—has to be seen against the backdrop of extreme cultural deracination that has produced a people unable to appreciate the depth of their inner wealth and strength.

The Church in Africa needs to admit her share of responsibility, along with other agents, for the disrepute to which the African cultural heritage is put by her own people. Many African Christians are suspicious of their cultural heritage. A recent unpublished research study among urban African youth in Nairobi shows that they are very suspicious of African cultural practices and regard African culture as no longer relevant in the contemporary world. Indoctrinated to a point of self-negation and self-hate (Kanyandago, 2014), how can a people who view their past as “worthless” and “bereft of God’s sacred action” have the confidence to seek God’s ways in the present, and partake of God’s mission? Without value for one’s own culture, the people become anthropologically impoverished.

Many African Christians do not conceive of African-ness or African cultural heritage as of any worth; many others conduct their Christian life and their ordinary African cultural lives as parallel domains that do not interact (Magesa, 2004). This is a natural outflow of the presentation of Christ to Africans almost exclusively in non-African symbols. The works of many African Christian scholars, such as Ela (1988) and Magesa (2004) decry the tragedy that the proclamation of the gospel in Africa has had little regard for African sentiments and experience. The exclusion, for example, of African symbols from African Christian life and worship in favour of Western ones candidly sends the message of the inadmissibility of African-ness into Christian life (Ela, 1980, 1988). Such religiosity that continues to discourage African Christians from associating African-ness with authentic Christianity is part of the fabric of deracination and disintegration. It becomes a religiosity of hindrance, rather than aid, to the creation of a new and better world (Sobrinho, 2008). This alienates African Christians in at least two ways: most cannot feel fully at home in a Christian community, others find convenience in this “distance,” seeing that the demands of authentic Christian living are rather removed from them. For them, it becomes enough to pay lip service to the gospel while placing their leaders on a pedestal. Complacency thus becomes well-established; without rocking the status quo either

inside the Christian community or in “secular” spaces. Our two categories of the poor each ride in their lane. The opportunity is missed for religion, in this case Christianity in Africa, to be the bearer of mystery (Sobrino, 2008), actively seeking and offering liberation from the changing shapes and expressions of poverty.

How can the incarnation resuscitate an anthropologically impoverished community? Kambanda (2016) recognises that the way to make sense of the gospel in Africa is through her cultural resources. Through these, African Christians can find the wisdom to communicate the gospel in ways that reach their own hearts. This message is often recognised and quickly ignored. Might we have “lords of poverty” even in Christian communities who desire to keep the confidence of the Christ encounter away from the “wretched of the earth” by locking it in categories outside of their cultural milieu? Conversely, African spirituality can enlighten the way to propagate compassion for, solidarity with and liberation of the poor. A church of the poor and for the poor must be one in which the poor can recognise themselves, as Pope Francis has insisted in *Evangelii Gaudium*; one that speaks in symbols that are meaningful to them, as Ela has strongly pleaded, where God’s self-revelation, the mission of salvation and of liberation are intricately bound together (Mayemba, 2015). This becomes the incarnational approach to poverty mediated through the African *Utu* spirituality, rediscovering and reinterpreting the *Muntu* (to use a related term from isiZulu)—the Christ of African spirituality.

More efficacious images of the Christ experience can help Christian communities read the presence and salvific action of God in the poverties of Africa. This is not least because the predominant images of Christ in Africa continue to be those that accompanied the initial missionary enterprise—a conquering Christ image from European Christendom, choking everything African, good or evil. There is still little in African Christian discourse to affirm the possibility of being fully Christian and fully African. This absence hampers the solidarity, vulnerability and liberation mission of Christ in African Christian community. To remedy this, we propose that the rampantly cherished notion of the *Muntu* across

Africa portrays an anthropological standpoint from which African people can appreciate deeply the presence and action of the Cosmic Christ, whose footprint far surpasses that of the historical Jesus. *Muntu*, the full stature spiritually initiated African person, is responsive to the challenge of life-long maturation.

To be *Muntu*—fully human in African philosophy—is the fullest human accomplishment (Magesa, 1997; Sibanda, 2014). The *Muntu* is the carrier of the *Ntu*, the Spirit that humanizes (Jahn, 1961). Interestingly, the greatest manifestation of the *Muntu* is his/her goodness, *la joie de vivre*, compassion, care and relational gifts (Idoniboye-Obu and Whetho, 2013: 230). The Incarnate Word possessed by the Spirit brings good news to the poor, freedom to captives and recovery of sight to the blind (cf. Lk. 4.16–20). African Christianity can well use the image of *Muntu* to mediate an efficacious understanding of Christian community on mission vis-à-vis poverties of all kinds. The African Christian community can make active sense of the action of the Holy Spirit (Rom. 8.14–17) in terms of the *Muntu*—filled with goodness, possessed by the *Ntu*; the person and community stop living in fear and timidity, as do many African Christians, and become channels of breath for others—engaging in mission. As a manifestation of the *Ntu* in the *Muntu*, the African Christian becomes a vehicle of the Cosmic Force (Spirit) to perpetuate life-giving energies of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness and self-control (cf. Gal. 5.22)—building a more reconciled universe across the poverty divide.

The Cosmic Christ present in creation, enfleshed in *Muntu* comes closer to the African poor—both “the wretched” and “the lords,” reaching into the realities of their African lives, touching their ancestry with blessing and healing, and calling them forth to integration. Effectively, the *Muntu* Christ can generate an eloquent image of African Christian maturity and communion—“I am because we are; and, since we are, therefore I am” (Mbiti, 1969: 108–109)—crossing the racial, ethnic, gender, age and class divisions that wound the people. A discourse of Christ as *Muntu* can enlighten and mediate the engagement of solidarity between the

various poor, and a liberation that empowers the mission zeal of African Christian communities responding to many poverties.

Both the wretched of the earth and the lords of poverty in Africa can together find a path to authentic following of Christ by returning to the invitation to live the *Ntu* spirituality. The encounters experienced in St Martin's Catholic Social Apostolate (CSA) provide a model of how this togetherness of the different kinds of 'the poor' can bring wholeness for all. It demonstrates how the balm of healing the poverties becomes available in the encounter of solidarity which then yields liberation. The Spirit of Jesus here shows up in efficacious community, where the African soul, the *Muntu*, is upheld and a new humanity emerges, healed and recreated in encounters of community in mission.

### **VULNERABILITY AND COMMUNION IN ST MARTIN'S CATHOLIC SOCIAL APOSTOLATE—BREATHING TOGETHER INTO NEW LIFE**

St Martin's Catholic Social Apostolate (CSA) was founded on the experience of vulnerability. A priest encountered a mentally and physically disabled man, excluded from society in a community where such disability is highly stigmatized. He then gathered around himself a community that committed to walk with its members who lived with disabilities, to integrate them and restore to them the dignity that is theirs. While doing this, many individuals in the community rediscovered their own higher dignity and purpose. They are brought to their own wholeness through the privilege of ministering to the disabled and others whose life circumstances have otherwise put them into the lot of the "wretched of the earth."

Many people have associated with St Martin CSA in an effort to reach out to the needy. The surprising yet repeated experience of these "helpers" is how, while they themselves were reaching out, they were in turn "broken open" to their own poverty and vulnerability, and brought to healing. They move from considering themselves to be helping the needy, to an understanding of being united

with the vulnerable; they become aware of their own woundedness and of their being healed through the loving encounter with other vulnerable people. Many reader-friendly and heartwarming publications that come out of St Martin CSA bear witness to the multiple experiences of mutual edification when an able-bodied/minded person reaches out to a “disabled” one and discovers his/her own fragility.

A woman who works in the centre as a health professional is on the verge of resigning from her job because she feels treated beneath her dignity. She encounters a young boy with serious disabilities and, with his sister, is deserted by his parents. The children not only greatly appreciate the visit of this health professional, but bear upon her to share the very little food they have obtained from a school feeding programme. As she shares in this strong moment of solidarity, the woman discovers the real meaning of her profession—a divine invitation to communion. She decides to stay on the job, to give up the higher salaries she might fetch elsewhere, to work on her relationship skills with her colleagues to enable her to continue participating in this mutually liberating ministry. The boy with disability and his sister are agents of a liberating experience that helps the health worker breathe new life into her career; she is a breath of life for them in visiting them and giving them not only the healthcare support but also the joy of being remembered as valued (L’Arche Kenya and St Martin Communities, 2014).

In another episode, as a young man drives to work every day he notices a line of people with mental and physical disabilities, “the wretched of the earth,” struggling to their daily place of work. He experiences the pull to stop and speak with them but dreads the possible dependence on him that he imagines is sure to ensue from such an encounter. One day, however, he yields to the tug on his heart and dares to stop. From this first meeting, there ensues not dependency, but a transformative friendship with these people whom he earlier feared to be just a drag on his life. In his witness, he wonders who he would be without their friendship in which he is loved unconditionally. With them, he does not need to perform, to pretend to be or to have anything. He is loved for just

being there. This liberating friendship with the most unlikely has become his “life breath.” Through it, he experiences his true worth (L’Arche Kenya and St Martin Communities, 2014).

In these St Martin’s experiences, the sense of giving and receiving is mutual and the exchange is deeply humanizing. Each person brings their “poverty” along with their gifts. Together, they experience solidarity, vulnerability and liberation. How so incarnational and mission-authentic these experiences are! They indicate the path of mission in the midst of the woundedness that is all around the world. Mutual vulnerability opens up the possibility of experiencing and sharing in *missio Dei*, irrespective of which side of the poverty divide one may be.

Because of St Martin’s CSA, a new understanding of the Church and of mission has emerged in the town of Nyahururu and its environs. It may not be the stated or formal ecclesiology, but all who have encountered the St Martin’s CSA approach know the Church as a living community of love and mercy without borders, one on a hope-restoring mission.

St Martin’s CSA stands out as a Christian community on mission in today’s world. As an open community, it does not limit itself to people who profess the same faith. Christian-inspired though it is, the apostolate encourages the local community residing in the neighborhood of a person in need—the family and the neighbors—to partake of the grace of walking together, contributing to finding solutions. By its openness to touch the various forms of vulnerability, increasing the breath of life through solidarity, and liberating communities and their members from debilitating poverty, they turn poverty into the breath of life.

## CONCLUSION

Vulnerability is certainly the lot of the wretched of the earth, lacking as they do any cushion from the edges of adversity. Whether in large-scale enterprises such as whole nations or in small ones such as domestic employment, the lords of poverty fight against vulnerability. Vulnerability is feared by all. Yet, is it likely that it is precisely

through openness to vulnerability that the light slips in and shines on the path to healing the world and bringing wholeness to individuals and communities in the likeness of the experience of the incarnated Christ? In her TedTalk entitled “The gift and power of emotional courage,” Susan David (2017) touches on the value of vulnerability, saying: “Life’s beauty is inseparable from its fragility.” True, everyone seeks the beauty of life. The problem comes from the futile obsession with avoiding life’s fragility. The human spirit discerns true beauty in the healing compassion of vulnerable solidarity, and rejects the façade. In her highly appreciated research, Dr Brené Brown (2012) has elaborated how openness to vulnerability brings not only pain and shame but also becomes the gateway to profound and lasting joy and peace. Vulnerability is key to accessing the depths of humanness and building community. Genuine community, in turn, is both empowering and liberating as it provides the security from which members can reach out in solidarity that reverberates in liberation.

The foregoing is patterned in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, the incarnate Christ. It can be understood better in the African Christian community through the prism of *Muntu*. Mission, for Christian community, confronted with the detriments of poverty, can hope to address such ills through openness to the same path as the Incarnate Word. In faith, Christian community can see potential wholeness in the face of poverty through the Spirit, and discover the courage to breathe.

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