Mission in the context of endemic poverty and in situations of affluence

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Poverty and affluence are two sides of the same reality of injustice in a finite world. Endemic poverty is structural poverty hidden in the exploitative Feudalistic and Capitalistic systems of our times. It is basically the result of selfishness, the result of Fall and so has existed in history in various forms since one happy, sharing family that God created became warring families of Cains. "They count fields and seize them; and houses and take them away; they oppress a man and his house, a man and his inheritance" (Mic. 2:2). The affluent do not love their neighbours as themselves and tell the poor: "Do not covet your neighbour's property". (Ex. 20:17). They quote the verse: "The poor shall always be among you" (Dt. 15:11) without quoting "There shall be no poor among you if you will obey the voice of the Lord" (v. 4). They do not realize that "God has made of one blood all nations of men to dwell on all the face of the earth" (Ac. 17:26) and that "the whole earth and the fullness thereof belongs to God" (Ps. 24:1), and that the Heavenly Father's spiritual and material wealth belongs to all His children and not to the rich alone. Gustavo Gutierrez of Liberation Theology fame is right in saying: "The term poverty designates in the first place material poverty... What we mean by material poverty is a sub-human situation... Poverty is an expression of sin, that is negation of love". Love is uniting and sin is alienating. In the present class-structured society of rich and poor, employer and employed, alienation that started with Fall has become a universal phenomenon. To quote Ronald de Vaux, "Alienation of private property and the development of lending at interest led to the growth of pauperism and the enslavement of defaulting debtors or their dependents" even in ancient Israel. If the Jewish nation or people had practised the equalization of wealth every fiftieth year as commanded for the Jubilee year (Lev. 25), poverty and affluence could have been checked, but they did not obey the Lord's commandment. If Mission is to solve the reality of sin and hasten the liberty, equality and fraternity of the Kingdom of God, endemic poverty and affluence must be attacked with a vengeance.

Preferential option for the Poor is not just the call of the Bishops of Latin America, but the precept and practise of Our Lord Himself. The famous Magnificat which the Vth Assembly of WCC called the song of high revolution, was a call to put down the affluent and exalt the lowly (Lk. 2:34). Christ's attitude to His own mission, clearly spelt out the Nazareth Manifesto (Lk. 4:18) was a definite option for the poor. "It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a
needle than for a rich man to enter the Kingdom" (Mt. 19:23).
"A man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions" (Lk. 12:15). The sin of the rich man in the parable of Lk. 16:19-31 was that he allowed his neighbour to die of poverty when he himself remained rich. The conversion of Zacchaeus led him to a preferential option for justice and for the poor (Lk. 19:1-10), not by external compulsion, but by the change of his heart by the Mission of Jesus. The spontaneous socialism of the Jerusalem Church as a result of Pentecost (Ac. 2:44-47; 4:32-37), if repeated, will make the affluent share their riches gladly, not just for common consumption, but for common production that there will not be a need person around. Some effective laws will have to be passed and implemented against the Ananias-es and Saphiras whose preferential option is not for evangelical poverty, but for luxurious life-style for themselves. The uniqueness of genuine Christianity is in its mission of agape which enjoys koinonia more than selfish accumulation of wealth. No wonder, that in the West people have started to speak of 'post-Christian era' as secularization and selfish accumulation of wealth has choked Christianity. The greatest opportunity of Christian Mission will dawn when mission is not just saving of a few souls from hell, but the risk-involved fight against endemic poverty and situations of affluence. Then will mission become relevant, authentic fight for the Kingdom.

Some early Fathers on Poverty and Affluence: In many ways, the patristic period was the golden era of the Christian Church. There was no huge gulf between the rich and the poor in the early Church. "The position which the Church reached before the conversion of Constantine (312)" says William Temple, "was equality in the enjoyment of God's bounty and the justice of a claim put forward by the needy to share with those who have more than a sufficiency; where unity of hearth and mind with general good will is pursued".\(^3\) Clement of Alexandria wrote: "Everything necessary is, or should be common property. God made the human being for sharing and usage in common. It is absurd for a person to live in luxury while many suffer from poverty".\(^4\) In the worlds of Tertullian: "If anyone is worried by the loss of his family possessions, we advise him as do many biblical texts, to scorn worldly things. There can be no better exhortation for the abandonment of wealth than the example of Jesus Christ who had no material possessions. He always defended the poor and condemned the rich".\(^5\) St. Basil who gave all his wealth for the poor and whose sister Macrina used Besiliad, Basil's Estate for the first mission hospital of the Christian Church, wrote: "The unfair accumulation of wealth by private individuals is, then, a form of injustice and there is clear transgression of the divine will in the irresponsible use of wealth and submission to covetousness. For the sake of wealth, relatives deny nature, brothers look at each other with eyes of criminals; for the sake of wealth the desserts breed robbers, the sees breed pirates...