



DICASTERY FOR PROMOTING
INTEGRAL HUMAN DEVELOPMENT

Debt cancellation: a matter of justice

An initiative that starts in Africa, for Africa, but extends to the whole world

The Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development and the Vatican COVID-19 Commission are supporting the campaign for debt cancellation for African countries. The initiative was launched yesterday afternoon, Wednesday 7 April, during a webinar organized by the Dicastery and the Commission itself, in collaboration with: Caritas Africa, Symposium of Episcopal Conferences of Africa and Madagascar (SECAM), Jesuit Conference of Africa and Madagascar (JCAM), Association of Consecrated Women of East and Central Africa (ACWECA).

"This campaign, which is even more urgent because of COVID-19," said the new **Undersecretary of the Dicastery, Sister Alessandra Smerilli**, "starts in Africa where the local Church has given shape to a widespread demand in civil society. The Dicastery's contribution has been, and still is, to help it gain international visibility in the hope of creating a broad movement as in 2000. So that it comes to the attention of the G7 and the G20, that is, of those who can have a direct and concrete impact on the issue".

Gabriel Justice Yaw Anokye, Archbishop of Kumasi (Ghana) and President of Caritas Africa, opened by saying: "Now is the time to see, judge and act on behalf of the poor and vulnerable. In times of difficulty and crisis, we can see God's action in solidarity". **Henry Akaabiam, Secretary General of SECAM**, said: "We cannot fail to act, because if Africa lives in debt, the whole world will live in debt. If Africa is doing well, the whole world is doing well".

"It's true," added **Fr Augusto Zampini, Adjunct Secretary of the Dicastery and member of the board of the Vatican COVID-19 Commission**, which the Holy Father himself wanted a year ago, "and as we think about how to fight and defeat the pandemic on the health side, we must keep in mind what Pope Francis says: How will we come out of this crisis, better or worse? Because we have to remember that this crisis is not isolated but connected to the previous ones: the crisis due to the pandemic has only exacerbated already existing crises. So, we cannot get out of this crisis, which is health, economic, social, political, cultural, without alleviating the debt burden. This is not just a question of technique or mere solidarity, important though that is, but a question of justice. It is a question of intergenerational justice, because we cannot make our children and future generations pay for all the effects of our mistakes, and of spiritual justice. Nor can we forget the ecological debt of the richest countries, which are primarily responsible for climate change. But most of the burden falls on the poorest nations. Like those in Africa".

"Debt and poverty are cousins, they go together unfortunately," said **Sr. Hellen A. Bandiho, STH, Secretary General of ACWECA**. "Imagine the number of schools that can be built each year or the desks that can be bought to allow students to learn comfortably instead of sitting under trees. Imagine the number of health centers that can be built or improved to allow women to walk fewer kilometers to reach them."

"It is certainly an ethical issue, but it is much more than that," said **Fr Charlie Chilufya, director of JCAM's Justice and Ecology office**. The point is that the permanence of the pandemic in the peripheries of the globe, for lack of means, puts everyone's health at risk". Today, the cost of the accumulated pandemic would be enough to vaccinate the entire continent against Covid. And yet, the prelate goes on to emphasize, "this crisis, which is so violent, is also providing many opportunities for collaboration that have never been seen before: people, like us today, are coming together to find a solution to promote life in the world".

Jaime Atienza, from Oxfam, drew attention to the link between all the forces that can help improve crisis situations. "We are at a time when we need to push finance towards social justice," he said. "Everything is connected. That is why we need to work and push harder for broader measures, a stronger push for the SDGs; and build coalitions, practice the exercise of solidarity with civil society, the media and world leaders."

"The urgency of debt cancellation", said **Dominic Chai, SJ, a Jesuit economist for the Vatican COVID-19 Commission**, "requires that we work steadfastly and continue this dialogue. In doing so, we will raise both awareness and commitment to a new level, not only in Africa, but in all regions where the burden of unjust debt is felt."

The concept of the universality of action for debt cancellation wherever it is needed (in addition to Africa, Latin America, Asia...) was also emphasized by **Card. Peter K.A. Turkson, Prefect of the Dicastery**, who officially launched the campaign and guaranteed the support of the Vatican Dicastery. What can be done in practice? Starting from the "see - judge - act" model, the Cardinal explained. Then, "by implementing advocacy and pressure actions in two directions: in dialogues with large international financial institutions and in relations with governments and groups at local and national level to ensure maximum transparency of activities. This also means developing a system of checks and controls so that the resources freed up for the benefit of the continent go where they are actually needed to grow and improve the conditions of peoples and people". No blank cheques, therefore, but the assumption of mutual responsibilities, as well as towards the people who live most in situations of extreme poverty. In fact, the Cardinal continued: "With adequate control mechanisms, it can be guaranteed that the money forgiven is spent to promote health and education, to guarantee that integral human development to which all men and women, as Pope Francis often reminds us, have a right". "The person, as the Social Doctrine of the Church teaches", he concluded, "has a dignity that cannot be compromised: no one can be left behind because of injustice. We are called to be guardians of our brothers: this is the heart of our solidarity".