

**ASSOCIATION OF EPISCOPAL CONFERENCES OF
THE CENTRAL AFRICAN REGION (ACERAC)**

*The Church and Poverty in Central Africa:
The Case of Oil*

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Malabo, Equatorial Guinea

INTRODUCTION

Central Africa is a region blessed by God in the richness of its soil and its underground wealth. Unfortunately, this richness contrasts with the extreme poverty of our countries, which hold the bottom ranks of the world scale of poverty. In the face of this contrast, we, the Bishops assembled within the Association of Episcopal Conferences of the Central African Region (ACERAC) are worried about the repercussions of the extractive industries and logging on the lives of our people.

In the course of our plenary meeting held from July 7-14, 2002 in Malabo, Equatorial Guinea, we decided to address all those who, in our region, intervene in the extractive industries sector and in logging, in order that the exploitation of these resources may turn into a benefit for our daily fight against poverty. To this effect, we would like to turn our pastoral regard towards the exploitation of our oil, of our wood, and of other mining resources. We begin this year with the set of problems relating to oil.

The issue of oil concerns virtually all the countries of Central Africa. For close to thirty years, Cameroon, Congo-Brazzaville, and Gabon have produced oil. Chad and Equatorial Guinea are progressively entering the ranks of oil-producing countries. Oil exploration seems to hold promise in the northeast of the Central African Republic. The Gulf of Guinea, as a whole, is becoming a strategic zone in world oil production. It offers an interesting alternative to the Middle East. Twenty-five percent of American oil will soon be imported from sub-Saharan Africa, with a large portion taken from our countries.

I – CONTEXT ANALYSIS

1.1 – Oil and Politics in Central Africa

A retrospective look at oil revenue management shows that it has played a key role in the politics of our States. Contrary to the OPEC countries that have nationalized their oil industries, our countries have entrusted the exploitation of our oil to private, foreign companies. Thus, our oil revenue is generated by fiscal policy. Complicity has come into play between our political power holders and the oil companies. There is absolute secrecy in the elaboration and signing of contracts. Revenue drawn from oil exploitation strengthens state authority, which is used to the detriment of the population. Enriched by oil dividends, the political power holders consider themselves independent of the people, to whom they no longer feel obliged to render any accounts.

The management of substantial revenue generated by oil production in our region has long remained the business of those in power. In the context of the single-party systems established in our countries soon after our independence, oil, like the other natural resources, has served as a strategic economic argument in order to maintain the regimes that give preference to personal interest to the detriment of the common good. With the complicity of oil companies that have been paying out large sums to their benefit, these men have been able to ensure their security, to fund their political parties, and to maintain their friendships with certain dignitaries in Northern capitals. During this period, as all criticism was deemed subversive and dangerous, people were suffering in silence from the exploitation of their natural resources for the benefit of foreign powers.

With the collapse of the Eastern Bloc in 1989, the Franco-African Summit in Baule in 1990, and a larger mobilization of opposition groups and national public opinion, our States have entered into a process of democratization. Political pluralism has once again seen the light of day; unfortunately, without fundamentally changing the lure of personal gain which maintains the veil of secrecy over oil.

The new political context has, in effect, created the hope of transparency at all levels. One has to be terribly shrewd to be able to make a decision about our oil revenue, where it will go, how it will be managed, and who will be its beneficiaries. Our oil is still, in most cases, the private financial reserve of the powers that be. They use it as they choose for funding political activities of their sole party, diverting people's consciousness during elections, and for buying arms to ensure their safety.

Today the tendency is to return to a veiled form of single-party rule. Most of our political leaders have ceased to dream of a better future for their people. Conversion to egocentric politics is the order of the day now and there is a rush to divide up the national pie, of which an important and secret portion comes from oil production. The quest for political power in our countries is less motivated by ideology and having a social agenda than by a willingness to become the all-powerful manager of the whole of our countries' resources. The social and economic well being of the people has become just campaign rhetoric. If not, why would the people continue to wallow in misery where oil is flowing?

1.2 – Oil and Economic and Social Development

Central Africa is known for the wealth of its flora, fauna, and underground resources, and at the same time for the misery in which the great majority of its population wallows. With a fundamentally extroverted economy, our countries produce for the outside. Because of under-development of the industry sector, we consume more products brought in from outside than we produce ourselves.

As far as oil specifically is concerned, it has become the property of foreign companies. Access to fuel means hours if not days of waiting in some of our countries. Compared to purchasing power, the price of oil for the consumer is very high in our countries. Our oil flows more for others and, as in the other economic sectors, we put up with international market law.

The price of oil is negotiated on the basis of the law of demand and supply. If the member countries of OPEC have threats to drop production as an arm to regulate the oil market, our countries have no economic argument to oppose the buyers. Thus, we remain dependent on their good will. The contracts that our States sign with the companies are certainly to the advantage of the latter and reinforce our economic dependence.

The few dividends that flow out have not contributed to the reduction of our people's misery. Our region is still characterized by high levels of illiteracy, mortality, and malnutrition. The highways, health facilities, and schools of our rural and urban communities leave everything to be desired. Oil revenues that should transform this situation and form the basis of true economic development are embezzled. We are known for our corruption, for our aptitude for charity to the first person, which encourages egoism rather than altruism. Our oil is sometimes

mortgaged to pay off debts that have served the personal interests of certain of our fellow citizens.

Now, because humans were not created to be happy all alone, we are all miserable in spite of the difference in possessions. We are all mired under the same weight of enormous debt that mortgages the future of our countries. Even if we belong to the class of those who enjoy the oil manna, we are just as much prisoners of the economic chains of this world that degrades us to the rank of the underdeveloped.

The discovery of oil has often made people dream. At the announcement of the next oil project, people are given the illusion of more jobs, of an increase in buying power, of deliverance from the hard work of the soil or from barely-paid jobs. Consequently, the beginning of work in oil drilling is often accompanied by a lowering of agricultural activity and the abandonment of jobs in certain sectors of activity, notably teaching. Now, oil is not an inexhaustible resource, and the jobs that it offers are for the most part temporary. Today, the oil reserves are falling considerably in some of our countries. There is even a risk of oil exploitation coming to an end soon in some countries if new wells are not found. What will then become of the populations who believed in the oil manna without benefiting from it?

1.3 – Oil and the Human and Ecological Environment

In many cases, the oil production means an ecological and social danger for the adjacent populations. Indeed, in most of our countries, oil production goes on offshore, that is, on the sea, which presents little direct danger for the life of these populations. But marine life is of course affected by activities linked to this type of exploitation. Occasional oil spills in the sea naturally affect the environment. One study is in progress in the Congo, where changes have been noted in the seaside in oil zones.

Social equilibrium is more disturbed by oil production on land, which necessitates crossing inhabited zones with pipelines. In this case, the biodiversity of the region is in danger and the population directly subjected to inflation and endemic diseases. The example of the Chad-Cameroon Pipeline illustrates this clearly. In spite of assurances given by the different partners engaged in the project, harmful effects have been noted in different locations. Harmony is disturbed in certain communities because of rocketing prices of staple foodstuffs, of protests demanding salary increases, of fresh outbreaks of prostitution with its corollary, AIDS, of the disturbance of customs, and of the resulting destruction of nature.

The reality surrounding continued exploitation in the region shows that affected populations and the population in general of the countries concerned face a multitude of problems. There is an imbalance between the prejudices suffered because of the expropriations on the one hand, and the compensatory measures on the other. The oil companies violate promises made in the domains of environmental protection, of the granting of jobs, and of opportunities for local businesses. Transparent criteria in salary matters and social rights are not specified. Local administrative authorities abuse their power by pressurizing the populations so that they will submit to the unjust decisions of the oil exploiters.

Oil exploitation disturbs the environment and is also likely to exacerbate violent conflict.

1.4 – Oil and Conflict in Central Africa

Inside our countries, a certain animosity reigns between the oil producing regions and the rest of the country. The territorial location of oil wells and the unequal division of oil revenue have become arguments in favor of a new fragmentation of our countries. The secessionist, regionalist, and ethnic trends, which threaten the cohesion of our States, can be justified, in part, by the injustices of natural resource exploitation.

The control of oil manna is at the center of several battles for power in our region. Oil revenues have served as funding for arms purchases and to support private militias in certain States, sometimes with the complicity of oil companies. The latter have elsewhere, in their own interests, brought in financial and logistical support to belligerent parties in the region. The conflicts thus engendered have largely contributed to the spread of arms in the region, arms that have become one of the main causes of insecurity at the borders as well as inside our countries. One fears that tomorrow, some of our States will go to war against each other over shared oil concession zones.

The region of Central Africa wallows in misery despite the growing discoveries of oil and the exploitation of abundant mineral wealth.

II – THE FOUNDATION OF CHURCH INVOLVEMENT

The context of oil production in Central Africa affects the common good of our people. In such a context, the Catholic Church, which has a prophetic mission, cannot remain silent, at the risk of being an accomplice to the injustice before God and before history. Our involvement finds its foundation both in the Bible and in the social teachings of the Church.

II.1 – Biblical Foundations

The word of God reveals to us that:

? Our God is a liberating God

Before the exploitation and the misery of people, God rose up to say, "I have seen the misery of my people and I have decided to free them!" This liberating God has concern for all the oppressed of the world.

Jesus the Son of God joined in this liberating choice. He began his mission by announcing the liberation of the oppressed. To each person, he gave the possibility of participating in his or her own liberation: "Rise up and walk!" To show concern for the oppressed, he gave them his good news first.

To his disciples, he gave his mission, a mission for all time and for all countries. We are in charge of this mission today in Central Africa.

? Our God is a God of union

God united himself with the people he liberated and led them towards the land of happiness. Freed for life, these people who are partners of God have lost their way. But God regularly speaks to their hearts and shows them the way to life. All people of God have the obligation to live by the demands of this union manifested by respect for the immutable values of human dignity, truth, justice, sharing, and solidarity. All people who do not support these values given by God break the union and are heading for their own loss.

Christ, who has made a union with all of humanity, has identified himself with all human beings, but in a particular manner to all those whose fundamental rights are flouted.

Our Church, which has received its mission from God, cannot remain indifferent to the outcry of the people of Central Africa, to the cry of the starving here who helplessly watch the pillage of their sub-soil.

II.2 – Foundations in the Church's Social Teachings

The Church's tradition continues through the teachings of the Church fathers and the successors of Saint Peter. Several principles of these teachings oblige us to speak up in order to recall that we are co-inheritors of the goods of the universe, whose management should be consistent with the accomplishments of every person and of each whole person. We quote, among others:

? the universal destination of earthly goods.

By entrusting His creation to human beings, God wanted them to manage it for the good of all. Every person is a co-inheritor of the resources of the universe, as spelt out in Gadium and Spes 69: "God meant the earth and all it contains for the use of all human beings. This is why humans, in the use they make of it, must never hold the things they legitimately possess as belonging only to them, but to regard them also as common in the sense that they can profit not only owners, but others."

? the preferential option for the poor

If the evangelical message is addressed to all men and all women, it explicitly marks its preference for the poor. John Paul II reminds us of this in his message to the people of the Philippines in 1981: "Yes, the preference for the poor is a Christian preference. It's the preference that expresses the solicitude of Christ who came to proclaim a message of salvation to the poor, because the poor are, without contest, loved by God and it is God who guarantees their rights. The Church proclaims its preference for the poor, even inside the whole of its evangelical mission which is meant for all human beings."

? the commitment to justice and peace

Justice and Peace are an integral part of evangelism. They are the heart of the church's mission.

"The announcement of justice and peace is an integral part of the task of evangelization, (and) it follows that the promotion of these values must also be part of the pastoral program of each Christian community. This is why I insist on the necessity of training all the pastoral agents in a adequate manner in view of this apostolate. The training of clergy, of monks and nuns and of laypeople, emphasizes the social doctrine of the Church." (*Ecclesia in Africa number 107*).

This Justice and this Peace must become incarnate in the everyday life of the church in all its locations, especially in Africa. We have an obligation to include it in our pastoral program. Number 107 of *Ecclesia in Africa* insists on this aspect of our mission: "The mandate which Jesus gave to his disciples at the moment he was

preparing himself to ascend into heaven applies to the Church of God for all time and for all places. The Church family of God in Africa must also bear witness to Christ in the promotion of justice and peace on the continent and in the entire world. "Blessed are they who are persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."(Matthew 5:9-10)" (Ecclesia in Africa number 105).

? solidarity among all human beings

Beyond state boundaries and cultural differences, all men and all women are called to lend a hand in order to build together the kingdom of God from here below. For, "The fact that men and women, in different parts of the world, can feel as if they were personally concerned by the injustices and human rights violations that men commit in far-off countries where they will, no doubt, never go, is another sign of an internalized reality of consciousness, taking on as well a moral connotation because we are all responsible for everyone," as John Paul II says.

? the presence of the Church in the world

Our Church is the living presence of Christ returned to today's world, in each country. Thus, "As an organized body inside of the nation, the Church has the right and the duty to participate fully in the erection of a just and peaceful society, with all the means at its disposal. One must mention here its apostolate in the realms of education, health care, social awakening, and other social assistance programs. Given that the latter reduce ignorance, improve health, and favor a larger participation in all the problems of society, in a spirit of freedom and co-responsibility, the Church creates the conditions for the progress of justice and of peace." (Ecclesia in Africa number 107).

We are citizens of our respective States and each citizen has the right and the duty to participate in the political, social, and economic life of his or her country.

It is now clear that our involvement as a church in Central Africa with the issue of oil does not arise from meddling in issues reserved for the authorities of our States. We are witnesses to the suffering of the people to whom we belong. Our prophetic mission impels us to launch a heartfelt appeal to all those who participate in oil exploitation in our region or who wield any political and economic power. Together, let us offer the chance of integral development to the men and women of our region by a more humane exploitation of oil, as with all our natural resources.

III – THE HEARTFELT APPEAL OF THE BISHOPS OF ACERAC

III.1

First of all, we rejoice in the constant effort of all the men and women of good will who are active in our countries in order to eradicate the demons of injustice, corruption, and violation of human rights and the degradation of nature. We carry their actions constantly in our prayers and we encourage them not to give up, for, as peace builders, they will be rewarded in the kingdom of heaven. Unfortunately, such men and women who are dedicated to peace building are still very few in our region. We appeal to you all, beloved sons and daughters of God, to transcend your fear, to overcome your personal selfishness and the prison of exclusion. Work hand in hand, and become unreservedly involved in the quest for the respect of our dignity of the human person, the preservation of our rights, and the advent of social justice in our countries, and in our region.

III.2

We truly appreciate the progress realized by certain States in the adoption of ethical yardsticks for the exploitation of oil. We are particularly grateful for the adoption of a law on the management of oil revenue with special regard to the institution of a mixed management commission, the expressed will of budgeting oil revenues, the elaboration of environmental protection and social management plans. May such examples inspire all of our States so that there will be transparent conditions and good oil revenue management everywhere. And especially, let these good promises become reality, for, too often, our good intentions contrast with our everyday practice. Hence, we invite our governments to:

- ? work for fair distribution of the fruits of oil by the investment of revenue generated in the social sector, offering services at reduced costs to all citizens;
- ? manage our natural resources in a forward looking manner by creating reserve funds for future generations and by investing in the diversification of economic activities;
- ? favor transparency by involving civil society in all decision-making processes concerning the future of our nations, notably by the spread of information relating to the exploitation of oil and other resources, and consultations of organized groups during oil contract negotiations;
- ? keep an eye on the commitments made by oil companies and all other enterprises engaged in oil exploitation;
- ? prevent conflicts by investing, not in arms, but in peace building activities

III.3

We salute the choice made by certain oil companies to elaborate their codes of conduct in order to correct the mistakes of the past and to improve their image. Would that all oil companies in action in our region, as well as all involved corporations, would choose this path so that the exploitation of our oil would be done with total respect for the lives of our people, for our environment, and for our personal and social rights. We recommend that oil companies should:

? elaborate just compensation plans, going beyond the material aspect, in order to integrate moral harm caused by your action on the harmony of the peoples and the nations.

? consider the local populations as partners, offering them the chance to define their needs in the matter of community compensation and the social amenities to be constructed;

? refrain from all direct or indirect involvement in conflicts, which cause widespread deaths in our region;

? contribute to transparency and the fight against corruption by publishing the oil revenues they pay to our national governments.

III.4

We appreciate the involvement of international financial institutions in the process of oil exploitation. The World Bank, for example, is laying particular emphasis now on the use of oil revenues for the reduction of poverty. Let this noble wish become reality by the refusal of the Bank to act as guarantor for any undertaking which deviates from this guideline. Let the Bank put in place follow-up mechanisms for oil projects in our region, and let it evaluate the effectiveness of these operational directives, and put in place the means and criteria to make them more concrete.

III.5

We are very thankful to particular Churches from other countries and other continents that constantly show solidarity with our Churches. Our universality and our union as members of the one body of Christ predispose us to effectively contribute to the positive transformation of the world. The oil companies that are active in our region are based in your countries. We hope that you will be able to amplify our voices in your respective countries. May all people of good will acting in your countries in favor of the humanization of oil exploitation in our region find true support in you.

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III.6

We firmly resolve to continue to play our prophetic role in this part of the world that God has entrusted to us. Our Justice and Peace Commissions, engaged in the monitoring of oil exploitation at the parish, diocesan, national, and regional levels, have our blessing. We encourage all actions that are geared towards the humanization of the oil industry in our region. The success of such action depends on the degree of consciousness that we all have in the community of earthly goods.

Let all receive our apostolic blessing.

For the Bishops of ACERAC,

President
(Seal, signature)

Monsignor Ildefonso Obama,
Archbishop of Malabo