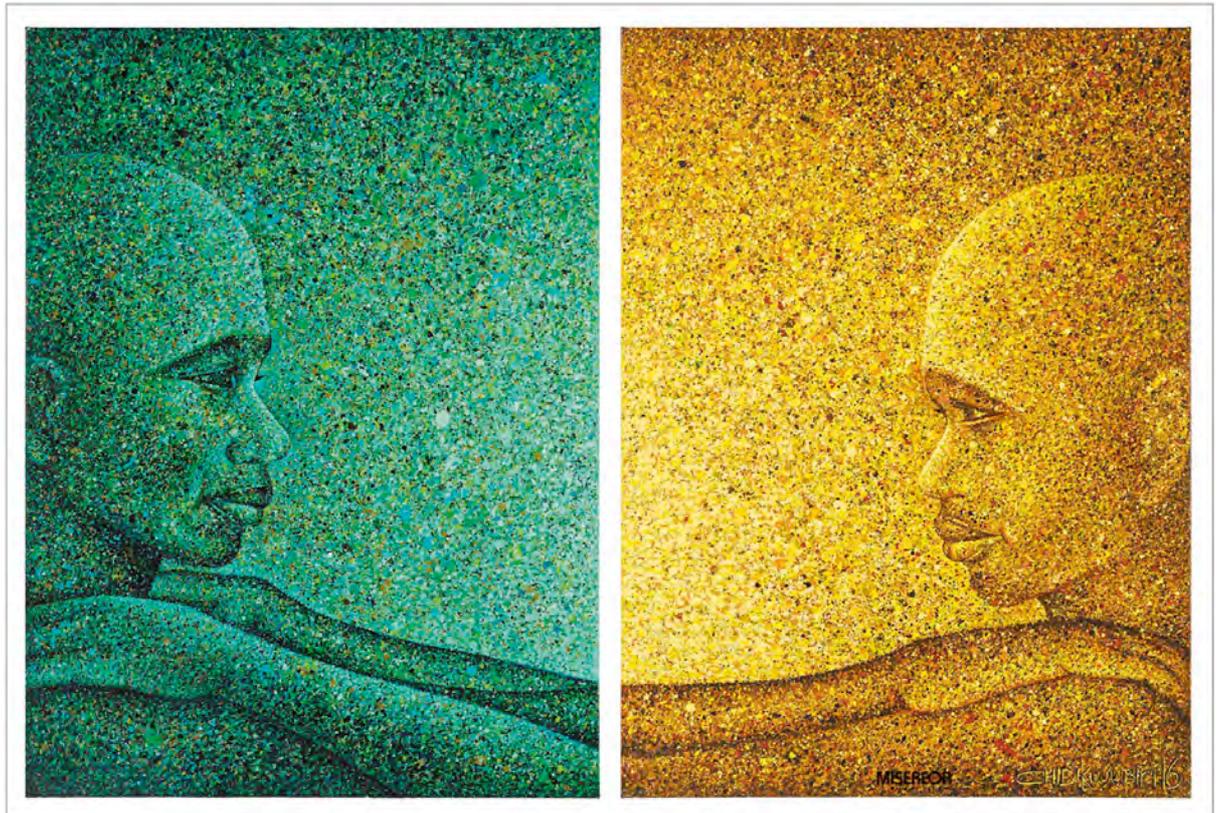


I am, because you are

The MISEREOR Lenten Veil 2017/2018

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The MISEREOR Lenten Veil 2017 "I am, because you are" by Chidi Kwubiri © MISEREOR

'What inspired me were the two longest rivers in Nigeria: the Niger and the Benue. They conjoin. Fortified, from that point on they continue flowing peacefully, even though they originate from different sources. When these forces of nature actually come together, leave their mark on and strengthen each other, and look at one another and say: "Look, I am, because you are", then this is precisely what I am trying to express.

The yellow turns to the green, and the two look at each other, gravitate towards each other, and say to one another: "I am, because you are" (...)

We are diverse and united. Even though we have different origins and identities, we are always us. We turn to the other and say to the person we see: "I am, because you are."

Chidi Kwubiri

'I am, because you are' is an African proverb. It expresses the idea that personhood involves being part of a web of relationships. We are all dependent on each other. With this Lenten Veil MISEREOR is inviting everyone to join a dialogue on how human beings can shape the future together. We believe that to deal successfully with the manifold challenges we all face, we need to meet more often on equal terms, and we need to get everyone on board. Possible ways of approaching this are also suggested by the Encyclical Letter *Laudato Si*, in which Pope Francis makes an impressive contribution to the debate on the global crises and the possibilities the world offers.

Two people and a space in between

Salvation or doom can begin with a glance. The Lenten Veil by the Nigerian artist Chidi Kwubiri shows two larger-than-life monochrome human figures in profile, as mirror images of each other. They are looking at each other and touching one another respectfully across the boundary between them. Each has got his hands on the other's shoulders, and is even taking on the 'other' colour. Through this giving and receiving, a relationship grows.

The Lenten Veil consists of two images that are deliberately arranged such that a narrow white space remains visible between them, causing us to stop in our tracks. Shall I draw a line, or shall I cross it? Would I like to get closer, or shall I keep my distance?

Chidi Kwubiri used a special dripping technique to produce the images, creating nuances of yellow and green and marking outlines with a brush.

The artist drew his inspiration from the confluence of the Niger and the Benue in central Nigeria. At the city of Lokoja, the turquoise-green waters of the one unite with the yellowish clay-coloured waters of the other to form a single large river. Like yellow, green – the symbol of growing life – is seen in many cultures as the colour of creation and fertility. Through its proximity to gold, yellow points to God, combining the natural with the divine. All life carries the traces of God within it.

I am, because you are

The proverb 'I am, because you are' or 'I am, because we are, and because we are, I am' reflects the philosophy of life of many African cultures. It expresses the belief that the human condition involves being part of a web of relationships. Things are so intertwined that they resemble a single fabric. When just one thread vibrates, it sets the whole thing in motion. In the African context, this experience of sister- and brotherhood includes the entire world that envelops us. As we interpret the shimmering of the colours in the Lenten Veil as nature in all her manifestations, the human figures then come into being from hundreds of these tiny dots: The human person creates new things and influences her environment; conversely, she is brought forth by the elements that surround her. Chidi Kwubiri's Lenten Veil is rooted in this fundamental principle of a human condition that is mutually shared. Only in our relationality to others do we become ourselves.

The Biblical Creation narratives also tell of relationships: Created by a fatherly and motherly God, all creatures form one universal family. 'Everything is related', as Pope Francis emphasises on several occasions in his Encyclical Letter *Laudato Si'* (see LS_92), where he also criticises the short-sightedness of a way of thinking that only analyses the individual parts, and loses sight of their interconnectedness.

As brothers and sisters, we are connected to the creatures around us so deeply that it is impossible to just consume and exploit without endangering all. Ecological balance goes hand in hand with just and harmonious relationships in human societies.

We are called to make this world a better place, in dialogue and encounter with others. According to an address held by Pope Francis in Florence in 2015, the best form of dialogue is to make plans and build something together: 'Please, do not watch life from the balcony, but commit yourselves (...) Accompany especially those who are on the roadside (...) Wherever you may be, build neither walls nor borders but village squares.'

Who is meeting whom here? Through which tinted lens – green or yellow – do we see each other?

This Lenten Veil recalls to mind overcrowded refugee boats, barbed wire that has been put up, and heated debates about immigration and controlling the numbers. Displacement has many faces. This brings us to the heart of our reality in Europe.

To the Israelites who were concerned about their identity, God says: 'The stranger who sojourns with you shall be to you as the native among you, and you shall love him as yourself' (see Lev 19.34). The two people depicted are very similar to each other. They are people like us. Putting yourself in the other person's shoes requires courage and a willingness to push the envelope. Dialogue means being there for others, and shouldering responsibility in this situation of encounter.

Meeting on equal terms

By combining ethics with aesthetics, the image appeals to us on both an intellectual and an emotional level. It communicates a 'human' perspective, free from hierarchical attitudes. People are no longer reduced to their neediness, no longer categorised as victims or helpers, poor or rich, women or men, people with disabilities or able-bodied people, old or young. First and foremost they are – human beings.

'Behold, I am doing a new thing', as it says in Isaiah (43.19). Let us now change the tinted lens, look at things from another angle and gain a different perspective. On the wealth of ideas produced by dairy farmers in Burkina Faso, on ingenious women such as the vegetable grower Aminata. If we change the way we look, then we will see people and things in a different light – we will see the 'new thing' that is coming forth here and now, in our midst!

MISEREOR encourages us to meet with people from other religions and non-religious people on equal terms, without anxiety. Where does our sister or our brother count for more than our own certainties and standpoints? Where are the spaces in which we can conduct disputes together for peaceful, just and inclusive societies that are free from fear and violence? Where does negotiation not mean getting the best slice of the cake?

A Lenten Veil for all who wish to overcome divisions without being afraid of the different, and who wish to leap across divides!



Chidi Kwubiri, born in 1966 in Umuahia in Nigeria, is an internationally known and highly regarded artist. He was a master student of fine arts under Prof. Buthe and Prof. A. R. Penck. His studies were followed by numerous solo exhibitions all over the world. It remains his dream to be seen not as an African artist, but as an artist from Africa whose pictures and sculptures form part of a global art and are interpreted according to international criteria. Today he lives with his family in Pulheim near Cologne. To find out more, click here:

www.chidi-kwubiri.com and www.hungertuch.de (in German).

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