

JOURNEYING

with the

LIVING GOD

Dr. Peter Ngotho Njoroge

JOURNEYING
with the
LIVING GOD

A Personal Encounter

Dr. P. Ngotho

Journeying with the Living God

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SPECIAL DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to my wife and children for their prayers, undying moral support and encouragement throughout the project.

I also dedicate this work to the Vincentian Ministries for bringing hope to God's children.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

It took me six calendar years to prepare my manuscript for publishing. The effort put into this work was tremendous. It would have been impossible to get time to carry out research and write all these pages while attending to my busy profession, my young family and other leadership roles at the same time. This is the reason why I sincerely thank the Almighty God for His guidance and providence.

The memories of my childhood plus the flow of scriptures and quotations from saints was purely the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

I thank the Lord Jesus for His love, which enabled me to complete this work amidst the challenges. May the Holy Trinity receive glory and honour through this book.

I appreciate my wife Regina, my daughter Joy and sons Elvis and Vincent for their moral support in promoting my talents. They are my greatest source of inspiration. My parents and siblings have also been of immense help through prayers and moral support. They all participated in editing this manuscript thereby making this a family resource book. I will remain forever grateful to my younger siblings who supported me in my business and ensured that all was well when I experienced tremendous challenges.

I received valuable comments from a number of editors and reviewers, especially teachers Bernice Karanja (Deputy Principal, St. Francis Girls High School, Mang'u), Thiong'o Waiganjo (English teacher, Kirwara Boys High School) and Fr. Daniel Mwangi (Dean of Students, St. Matthias Mulumba Seminary, Tindinyo).

I thank Author Steve M. Thoithi for encouraging me to go on with this publication and for assistance with some scriptures. His books were a great source of inspiration to me.

I wish to thank Tabby who faithfully typed the manuscript and made it easier for me to work through it. I also thank Angela for designing the cover page.

Since it is impossible to thank everyone by name, I take this opportunity to thank all workmates, relatives, fellow Christians and friends for their prayers, and encouragement.

Finally, I thank all the readers. Without your reading, all my efforts would be in vain. May God bless you and grant you sufficient grace not only to complete reading, but most importantly to embrace the joy of a personal journey with the Lord.

FOREWORD

The book 'JOURNEYING with the LIVING GOD' is a book for the faithful. It elaborates on a journey of faith which those who wish to live by the faith should walk every day. The author begins by giving us the gift of his life, through a step-by-step account. His life is similar to ours. It is not in any way dramatic or special. It is the life of an ordinary person characterized by the daily struggles and dreams of a man growing through his childhood into adulthood. The beauty of the author's story is that we can identify with it. We can take it into our own context and visualize it through our own window. The book could therefore be about you and me because it is close to our own lives.

The author narrates his suffering and tribulations in his health and that of his family. A reader may get the feeling that this suffering is too much and that a man of faith should be protected by God. However, he interestingly gives meaning to the painful struggles and encounters of a common man. He gives an explanation about the suffering of man, clarifying that there is a reason for every experience and encounter. The author's capacity to give a godly meaning to each experience is remarkable. His own life becomes a piece of art drawn by God. He fits every step of his life to his destiny in the plan of God.

Finally, the book crowns it all by telling us about our duty to ourselves, to our neighbours and to God. It makes it clear that we have a responsibility to undertake certain actions for our own good and that what we do determines what we become and where we end up.

‘JOURNEYING with the LIVING GOD’ is a book worth reading for everyone who believes in God and wishes to deepen that faith.

*James Njoroge Mwangi, director St. Martin Apostolate,
Diocese of Nyahururu.*

PREFACE

Rarely do people write autobiographies. Biographies are written by renowned authors for prominent personalities. Why would one write about themselves? This is a tough question. It is only other parties who can honestly describe the values in us.

My desire to share my life experiences became overwhelming. The marvelous deeds of the Lord could no longer be confined to the four walls of my house. The fire of the gospel was burning too strongly in my heart and I had to act.

When I eventually picked my pen to start drafting my manuscript, I realized that my life has been one continuous story, with many episodes geared towards proving that GOD IS REAL. This is how this book eventually became a testimonial autobiography.

It is true that many people can write interesting autobiographies out of their life experiences. Such books are very educative and inspiring. They benefit both the author and the reader. Recent research has shown that expressive writing helps the author to reconcile with his inner self, thus leading to inner healing. On the other hand, expressive writing helps the readers in two ways: Firstly, by sharing in the author's low

moments, they get to realize that their own challenges are not peculiar to them; others have gone through similar or worse experiences. Secondly, the author's high moments inspire them greatly, giving them hope that they too can emerge victorious. They are motivated to emulate the author in order to achieve similar goals.

It is more common to read inspiring stories where the author starts with challenges, only to overcome them and rise to the top. My story is different. It starts from the top, and then gets to the bottom. Fortunately, it does not end there. There is a new beginning. This fresh journey to the top is tremendously awesome, enabling both the author and the reader to overcome the unpleasant memories of the journey to the bottom.

The book begins with brief childhood memories in the first chapter, then analyses my education and faith in the next two chapters. The narration presents a successful, God-fearing child and teenager, who seized every opportunity to develop his career and talents while seeking to please God at the same time.

In the fourth chapter of the book, divisive politics arise, leading to ethnic clashes and displacement of families from their land. My education was greatly disrupted at this stage.

However, by God's grace, I eventually completed my university education and proceeded to employment. Unfortunately, this period became the lowest moment of my life as described in chapter five. This is when I made the greatest mistake ever! The consequences of this mistake are the main reason why I decided to write this book. This chapter takes you through two decades of agony that will touch the hardest of hearts.

Chapter six presents my turning point when one major step of faith changes the direction of my story. When I took my position in God's presence, God took His position in my life. His awesomeness became manifest and His wonders took charge of my life. This awesome flow of the healing grace of God will definitely rejuvenate your faith and hope. My pains and those of my family members miraculously eased gradually until we were completely free.

As you read through chapter seven, you will realize that many of our painful experiences are shared by other close relatives and there is need to pray together as a family.

Every experience has a purpose, be it painful or joyful. My own experiences had a reason too. It is after my turning point

that I managed to research, pray and read the scriptures in order to understand the reason. That is how I eventually managed to come up with the second part of this book. Chapters eight and nine will give you the knowledge on how to deal with challenging human experiences.

Chapters ten, eleven and twelve simply analyse our Christian journey as per the scriptures and the teachings of the church. It is a collection of inspirational teachings whose aim is to give deeper meaning to our daily Christian practices. This is what God requires from us.

The final chapter consists of prayers we can use for every topic. Apart from the confession prayer, the psalm and the peace prayer of St. Francis of Assisi, the rest are spontaneous prayers that flowed as I wrote each topic.

May God bless you abundantly as you journey with me through this book.

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Different Bible versions have been used in this book. However, the “GOOD NEWS BIBLE” version is the most extensively used because of its simple grammar and clarity.

The quotes from Saints are mostly derived from the daily inspirational messages from a Catholic mobile phone premium service (2014-2015). However, adequate confirmation from the church teachings and traditions was done to ascertain the authenticity of each quotation.

PART I

CHAPTER ONE: CHILDHOOD MEMORIES

I was born in the year 1971 as the third born in a family of twelve children; eight girls and four boys. My parents Michael and Jacinta worked tirelessly over the years to bring us up.

I grew up in Uasin Gishu District in the Rift Valley Province of the Republic of Kenya, currently known as Uasin Gishu County. My grandparents had migrated north into the Rift Valley Province in the middle of the twentieth century. Life in their native Central Province had become unbearable after the declaration of the state of emergency by the British colonial government in 1952. The aim of the government was to quell the so-called *MauMau* uprising against the white settlers. Like in many African countries around the same time, the natives had resorted to hostile resistance in order to get back their land and other rights. In response, the government detained and tortured many suspects. Men in particular suffered greatly. Some were moved from their reserves (areas where natives had been moved to in order to pave way for white settlers to occupy their land) to other parts of the country to minimize their concentration and weaken them. Others escaped from the reserves to safer grounds to avoid the sleepless nights associated with the government crackdown on

perceived *MauMau* fighters and sympathizers. They were nights of terror!

This is how my grandparents and many other families landed in the Rift Valley. These families needed to be taken care of; therefore, the men had no option but to seek employment. The colonial government had marginalized them economically and socially so that they had no choice but to provide cheap labour for the white settlers. As peasants, they would receive grains and other food portions in return for their labour. There were schools in the farms where children of able parents would learn. Not many children acquired sufficient education; girls in particular were discriminated against. Culturally, it was thought to be a waste of money to educate the girl child because she would eventually be married off. What a mentality!

My grandparents thus became squatters in the white settlers' farms. The maternal ones settled in one farm while the paternal ones settled in the neighbouring one. By then my parents were young children. They grew up here until the country gained independence in 1963. They attended school and acquired some education. My mother did not gain enough education to enable her secure employment due to gender discrimination. However, my father's education was sufficient

and as a result, he was employed as a teacher. Teachers were highly regarded in the society at that time. They were respected and recognized far and wide. I guess that is how my father got to win the heart of mum who lived nearby. Five years after independence, they tied the knot in a colourful church ceremony.

After their wedding, my parents lived in the teachers' quarters for several years, but eventually my mother opted to settle permanently in Burnt Forest area within the same district. By then, many white settlers had surrendered their land and returned to Europe. The government of independent Kenya sub-divided the land and sold the parcels to the local people. This is how my parents managed to acquire substantial land and my mother embarked on farming.

My father was soon promoted to the rank of head teacher. He helped to establish and rebuild many primary schools in the district. He worked for over three decades before his retirement. For the first two decades of his employment, he worked far from home. He came home during the weekends, mainly arriving on Friday evening. He would rest on Saturday, accompany us to church on Sunday morning, and then leave for work in the afternoon. We were happy to be with him during the school holidays.

My father was a key role model to us. He upheld family values and promoted family unity to its highest level. As a staunch catholic, he held different leadership positions in church and always encouraged us to pray and participate in church activities to the best of our ability. He also taught us to respect other people and to uphold morals. He laid a lot of emphasis on education, frequently reminding us about university degrees. Long before I joined kindergarten, I was already aware of the most prestigious ones. I knew there was need to work hard in school. I believe this is the driving force that has propelled us to great academic heights. Today the family is proud to have many university degrees awarded to its members. Several of these are postgraduate and more are in the pipeline. Family members who did not make it to university are holders of diploma and higher diploma certificates in their respective careers. Most of the family members have secured sustainable employment with some being self-employed. We glorify God for these achievements.

My father always taught us to take work seriously and face all challenges courageously. To date, he does not mind any form of work. He performs manual tasks with ease and has taught us to do likewise. He is a man with multiple technical skills. As we grew up, we saw him engage in house construction, farming, technical drawing, electricity and repair of electronic

devices among others. He also taught music and had several musical instruments in his possession, thus giving us an early exposure to music.

I do not forget the great moments with my father. As a great storyteller, he keeps his listeners laughing their hearts out. He creates humour out of every situation and knows how to turn every moment into a light one. His lessons were always very interesting to students and family functions always end up so lively in his presence. He advises all that taking issues too seriously leads to sickness and a short life span. He is right. At an advanced age today, he stands strong and as energetically as a young man.

A decade before his retirement, my father requested to be transferred closer home and by the grace of God, he was successful. As the challenging teenage years began to set in, I was happy to be with him at home everyday.

On the other hand, my mother spent her entire early adulthood and middle age taking care of us. She worked hard from sunrise before we woke up until late into the night, long after we had gone to bed. In the morning, she would prepare us for school and see us off, then take care of the domestic animals, before going to the farm to tend to the crops. She would then

get back to the house to prepare our lunch. In her, we saw the true strength of a woman.

As we grew up, she started delegating some of the chores and duties to us. We started taking up responsibility at an early age. Over the lunch hour, we would help her tend to the animals before going back to school for the afternoon lessons. On arriving home in the evening, the girls would fetch firewood and water and help prepare supper. On the other hand, we (the boys) took care of the animals – feeding the cattle, chicken, sheep and goats and milking the cows – plus other manual duties. As the sun set its rays upon the distant horizon, paving the way for yet another night, our home reflected the true image of a rural homestead in Africa. It was a beehive of activities!

In the evening, we took supper together as a family then took turns to do the cleaning. There was great family unity as we sat around the fireplace, sharing the experiences of the day as we laughed our hearts out. Mum would thrill us with oral narratives that were passed on from one generation to the other. They were so captivating, with clear moral lessons.

My mother ensured that we prayed every evening before retiring to bed. The liturgical calendar of the Catholic Church was followed to the letter in our home. During the rosary

months (May and October), we recited it daily. Lenten and Advent prayers were also recited daily during their respective seasons. As children, we found the prayers long and tedious and we often dozed off. Sometimes my mother would keep a glass of chilly water nearby, dip her finger in it and sprinkle it on the face of the culprit. The fear of the cold water kept us awake and praying. This may have appeared like a punishment to us then, but eventually, the culture of prayer got deeply rooted in us. As we grew up, the religious foundation sank deeper. This is the reason why today the family has remained united, with numerous blessings following each of the members. All of us have remained staunch Catholics, with our eldest sister joining ‘the little sisters of St. Francis’ congregation of nuns. May the Lord bless our parents for the great foundation. This foundation is the basis of this book.

My mother was a strict disciplinarian who never tolerated nonsense. Whenever any one of us lost track, she would breathe fire. She would not hesitate to dispense a thorough spanking when need arose. The discipline has kept us on our toes to date and has helped us to set standards for our children too. It has made us who we are today, focused and able to sustain our goals.

Life was good as we grew up. We lived in harmony with our neighbours, working, schooling, and attending church together. However, this was not to last forever, as we shall see later in this book.

CHAPTER TWO: MY EDUCATION

Primary school

I received most of my primary education in a school known as Koiluget in Burnt Forest Sub-Location, Uasin Gishu District. However, due to poor performance of the school, my father decided to take me to a better school in class seven. That is how I landed in Eldoret town. I joined Eldoret Union School in 1984. I lived with my maternal uncle who was very supportive.

As a matter of fact, urban schools performed better than the rural ones. There was stiff competition among the various schools and the students worked extra hard. Better facilities in urban centres such as electricity and equipped libraries also contributed to better performance.

To prove my point, when the first term results were released, I got a rude shock! I was used to being top of the class in my previous school, but here I was, nowhere in the top ten list! Everyone challenged me to pull up my socks as I was now in the middle of academic stars. One teacher by the name Mr. Oduor was particularly interested in my performance. “How can you top in Mathematics but perform poorly in other subjects?” he asked. “You must work hard or ‘face the music’ next term”, he finished without mincing his words. I knew I

had no option but to work hard. I immediately joined a group of boys who remained in school after regular hours for extra studies and discussions. We stayed on until 10:00 pm daily before escorting one another home. The boys were very serious. I was shocked by the level of their knowledge. They discussed complex topics that I had no idea about. I had to learn fast and study hard to reach their level.

I learnt to articulate scientific facts from them and then applied the same study skills to all other subjects. I put so much effort in my class-work that by the time I joined class eight, I was the top student. I maintained the position all the way to the final examination where I emerged the best student in the school. I remain thankful to Mr. Oduor for transforming me. Apart from the academic matters, the same teacher monitored my discipline closely and ensured that I never got into the wrong company. May God bless him abundantly in his old age.

Secondary school

In February 1986, I was admitted to the secondary school that Mr. Oduor had advised me to select. The best student in the school the previous year had joined this school. That was Njoro Boys High School.

It was an exciting journey to my new school. I met the former schoolmate who helped me settle down. Bullying was still rampant in the school, but I realized that no one dared molest me. I witnessed many senior students tormenting the newcomers, popularly referred to as ‘monos’, but the bullies kept off me. I did not understand the reason immediately, but soon I started to smell a rat. I noticed that my caretaker was either so much feared or respected by the rest. Whenever we passed by, they would give way. No one dared to get into any form of confrontation with him. With time, I came to realize that he was one of the greatest bullies in the school. At first I thought I was lucky to have a protective caretaker, but shortly after, the shocking reality hit me hard. I accompanied him to his dormitory one day during the first weekend in the school. He seemed to be hiding something from me. He told me to sit on a bed close to the door and then went straight ahead into an inner room at the other end of the dormitory. I could hear a group of boys talking in hushed tones. Shortly after, I saw heavy smoke billowing from the room! I immediately realized my friend was a criminal and I feared for my life. I thought of taking off, but my legs would not move. I remained seated on the same bed, though with great anxiety. Luckily, the crooks did not take long; soon they were through with their business and we left the dormitory. My friend was now in a drunken

stupor. I could tell that whatever they smoked was not ordinary cigarettes.

By the grace of God, there was a group of caring senior students who were concerned about me all this time. They were my immediate dormmates. Later the same weekend, two of them invited me for a tour of the school compound. We traversed the playgrounds and the farm and then came to the cattle fields. The site of the cattle grazing quietly, with some birds following them closely as if cheering them on, was so refreshing.

My seniors took the moment to explain their concern. They informed me that my caretaker was a drug addict and a great bully who was always on the wrong side of the school rules. I was not surprised because that was already evident. No wonder no one dared to cross his path. As we returned to the dormitory, the boys made it clear that my life was in my own hands. I had to decide. “Is it better to remain under the protection of a drug addict and fall into his trap or break the friendship and suffer bullying from the other notorious seniors?” I seriously pondered. I chose the latter. “After all my life is longer than the bullying season,” I reasoned out.

I thank my Lord for sending angels in the form of caring boys to save me from the hand of evil. I urge parents to ensure that

their children are well informed about challenges faced in new schools and environments so that they are prepared to face them. It is also important for students joining secondary school to realize that the decisions they make and the friends they choose have a profound impact on their future lives. At this age, the teenagers are in search of identity and peer pressure is at its peak. It requires strong will, courage, and information to say NO to negative influence. A single mistake can spell doom to the life of a promising youngster.

In some schools, senior students have been accused of subjecting the newcomers to sexual harassment! Therefore, parents should have open discussions with their children and encourage them to express their concerns. They should watch out for unusual behaviour in their teenagers and find out the root cause. School administrators must also strive to root out all forms of bullying from their schools and provide a suitable learning environment for all students.

In short, that is how I managed to overcome peer pressure, though at a price. My friend soon realized that I had decided to keep off and he gradually pulled away. In no time, the other bullies realized that I was no longer under his protection and they subjected me to all forms of mental torture, as if making up for the time 'lost'. We consoled each other with the rest of

the newcomers and kept going. We found tremendous support in religious groups as I shall explain later. No one was surprised when my former schoolmate was eventually expelled from the school.

“Binary,” as form two was popularly known, came with a lot of relief. Bullying was over and the newly found freedom was tremendous. This stage was very challenging to students. Many of my colleagues turned out to be bullies in the name of revenge, while others picked up negative traits from their seniors and ended up ruining their lives. It is common for the youth to become exceptionally rebellious against their parents and the school administration at this stage.

Even though I personally had a few wicked encounters with my parents, I was able to pick up the pieces and get up on my feet. It was heartbreaking to see several bright colleagues succumb to peer pressure at this stage. It is correctly believed that form two is a major turning point. Students who overcome negative peer pressure at this point mostly excel in life, while those who do not end up leading very uneven lives. Both parents and teachers have tough time counseling students to cross this turbulent phase of life. The effort is worthwhile.

During form three and four, I maintained the top position in class. The great competition among the students made me work extra hard. When Kenya Certificate of Secondary education (KCSE) examination results were released, I emerged the best student in the school, the second best in the district and among the best in the country. I was so excited! Neighbours, friends and relatives overwhelmingly congratulated me. My parents were very happy too.

At university of Nairobi

The greatest university in the South of Sahara and North of River Limpopo! That is where I was admitted to pursue Pharmacy, which was actually my first career choice. Being amongst the top students from different prestigious institutions in the country was a wonderful experience. Despite the course being demanding, most of my colleagues and I successfully completed the degree course. Family members, relatives and friends joined me for the graduation ceremony where we gave glory to God.

Extracurricular activities

During my primary school, I took up leadership roles in almost every class. I got awards for discipline and leadership. In Eldoret Union School where activities were more

advanced, I got the chance to participate in music and drama festivals. We always did very well.

Even though I gave priority to academics in secondary school, I did not forget to develop my talents. The most outstanding potential was leadership. I took up leadership roles in different capacities in class, dormitory, clubs and societies. I also took part in music festivals where we made it to the national level for two consecutive years. It is also at this stage that I discovered my talent in composing and reciting *mashairi* (Kiswahili poetry), which led me to perform in different social events and festivals. I pursued this talent in the university and beyond.

At the university level, the pharmacy curriculum was too demanding to accommodate many extracurricular activities. Leadership was also very demanding and highly political in nature. I decided not to take part in it. However, my colleagues realized my leadership potential and soon I was elected to the posts of Class Representative and Chairman of the Catholic students' community. Coordinating class programs and meeting the spiritual needs of the catholic students while handling my classwork at the same time was no easy task. All my free time was readily absorbed by the extracurricular activities. I was always busy. I liked it that

way because it kept me off idleness, which is the devil's workshop.

CHAPTER THREE: MY FAITH

Childhood faith

Having been brought up by devout catholic parents, I became much attracted to church. I really admired the missionary priests as everything about them looked awesome – their priestly robes and vestments, their hair, walking styles, voices and gestures. When I was about six, I believed that the priests lived in heaven! In my imagination, they came for Mass on Sunday and returned to heaven where they spent the rest of the week with God. This imagination made me have great reverence for them. At that early age, I clearly understood that they were men of God. What kept them looking so awesome was their faith, and the favour of God upon them. I was not sure whether I wanted to be a priest or not, but I truly desired their faith.

Soon, local priests replaced the missionaries. They interacted more closely with the parishioners and I came to realize that priests were human too. They had a house, a car and the basic needs too.

Our first local priest, Fr. Francis, was equally awesome. His way of life was so admirable. His gait and speech appeared well calculated to match his wisdom and prayerful life. In comic gestures, I would mimic his voice and gait, wrap

tablecloths around my waist and shoulders to resemble him in his priestly vestments, then proceed to ‘offer Mass’ to my siblings. Those were really funny moments!

It was on Christmas day after my tenth birthday when I was called upon to serve as an altar boy for the first time. I will never forget that day. I was excited to be close to the priest. I was in a group of four boys. Immediately after Mass, Fr. Francis requested us to accompany him for another Mass in a distant sub-parish. I could not believe it! That was the beginning of some of the most memorable moments in the parish. Since the sub-parishes and outstations did not have trained altar boys, we would accompany the priests every weekend to different stations for Mass.

My trips with Fr. Francis were the most exciting. He uplifted us spiritually by encouraging us to pray all the way and especially the rosary. I often stole the show because my parents had taught me all the prayers. After the prayers, Father would sing for us Marian songs (songs in praise of Mary) that uplifted us so much.

Fr. Francis liked to narrate stories of saints during his homilies. He particularly admired his patron, St. Francis of Assisi. The story of St. Francis was very captivating. Through faith, he would calm dangerous wild animals in an amazing

manner! He had deep love for God's creation, using the terms 'brother' and 'sister' to address creatures and splendid objects like the sun and the moon, as well as scary phenomena such as death.

Fr. Francis also taught us the importance of adoring the Holy Eucharist. He narrated to us stories of saints who had extraordinary encounters with Jesus in the Eucharist. His adoration spirit was evident in his prayerful life. This influenced me to cherish the moments of consecration and exposition.

The other great lesson I learnt from Fr. Francis was the importance of Mother Mary's intercession. He emphasized the need to recite the Holy rosary frequently because mother Mary intercedes for us and the Lord protects us.

One day as we were travelling back home from Mass in a sub-parish, it got late and soon we were engulfed in darkness. It was a remote area and the road was hilly and dusty. At one point, Father took a wrong turn and we were headed for the rocks. In a split of a second, we would crash! He suddenly realized and shouted in vernacular, "Mother Mary!" For sure mother Mary was around; Father managed to swerve back to the right track and proceeded at high speed. We all sighed with relief and thanked God. Father narrated to us similar incidents where prayers had saved him. He advised us to

practise the habit of reciting ‘Hail Mary’ prayer whenever we are in difficulties and the wonders of God will follow us. This prayer comprises the words of Angel Gabriel to Mary (Luke 1:28) and the words of Elizabeth to Mary through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit (Luke 1:42), followed by the prayer for intercession:

Hail Mary,

Full of grace,

The Lord is with you.

Blessed are you among women,

**And blessed is the fruit of your womb
Jesus**

Holy Mary, mother of God,

Pray for us sinners,

Now and at the hour of our death

Amen.

From that moment, I developed the habit of reciting the prayer thrice whenever in difficulty, and for sure I experienced God’s wonders.

One day when I was eleven, the end of year school closing ceremony was going on. My mother, who was an executive member of the Board of Governors, sent me to collect some

important documents she had forgotten at home, which were required for the ceremony. She gave me the key to the main door. When I got home, the key could not open the padlock! I could not bear the thought of going back to school to tell mum the story with the entire school waiting. I remembered my faith, took a step backwards, went down on my knees on the staircase, and recited 'Hail Mary' thrice. When I rose, my eyes fell on a metal bar lying in the grass. An idea struck my mind. I picked the metal bar and hit the padlock slightly, and then pushed the key into the padlock. I did not believe my eyes. It was as if the padlock opened itself for I could not remember applying sufficient force to the key! For the first time in my tender age, I felt a strong presence of the Almighty God. The house and the entire compound were so quiet that my heart raised its pace at the fear of God.

I had a similar experience during my secondary school days. We had just closed school and were headed home for the end of year holidays after my second form. As I was packing my belongings, I realized I did not have enough bus fare. There were no mobile phones then, let alone mobile money. I was so desperate, but I did not want anyone to notice my desperation. I sat on my bed and calmly recited the characteristic three 'Hail Mary' prayers. I then rose and continued packing. Shortly after, something happened that seemed like a dream or

a big joke. I believed God answers prayers, but I never expected the answer so quickly and directly! A God-fearing classmate from a different dormitory came over to me, looked at me and confidently asked, “Do you know of anyone without enough bus fare?” I gazed at him in awe as though he were an angel, before deciding on the answer. “Not really,” I answered calmly in an effort to conceal my desperation. “However, I do not think what I have will get me home.” I continued wisely. He asked me how much I needed and went ahead to lend me the money. I felt completely immersed in the love of God and the fear of the Lord pervaded my heart. I thanked him for His amazing kindness.

In another incident, I was returning to the University after a long vacation. Since my luggage was quite heavy, I accepted the assistance of a strange man. We agreed on a fee of five shillings. That was a very good offer by the standards then. We walked for a short distance then the man put the luggage down. Immediately, another stranger emerged and the two exchanged greetings, then they started talking in hushed tones. I was suspicious of their intention. I asked the first man what the problem was, but instead I got an answer from the second man. “Give us one hundred shillings for this job,” he said. I was so shocked! I explained to him about our agreement with his friend but to my horror, the first man denounced the

agreement. I stuck to my guns and insisted on the agreement. The men could hear none of it. They threatened to carry the luggage to a secluded corner where they would empty the bag and get themselves the one hundred shillings. I had three thousand shillings in the bag, which was meant for my upkeep throughout the semester. I could not allow them to open it because I knew they would rob me of everything. They made as if to lift the bag, but I stopped them. On realizing that they could easily attract a crowd, they asked me to show them what was in my pockets.

The first item to appear was my rosary. Immediately they set their eyes on the rosary, a city council *askari* (agent) suddenly appeared and joined us. His first question was, “what are these people telling you?” The first man tried to downplay the issue, but I could not let go the opportunity to escape. “They want to rob me,” I quickly interjected. I went ahead to explain about our agreement and the new developments. The *askari* warned them and asked me to give them the five shillings. I had twenty shillings in my pocket. I did not wait to get the balance; I handed it over to the first man, took my luggage and hurriedly walked out of sight with the *askari* accompanying me closely to ensure my safety.

I thanked the Lord for the miracle. The *askari* was a godsend, just like the angel sent to rescue Shadrack and his companions from the king's furnace.

I may not narrate all experiences, but I remember the Lord's saving hand in two accidents where I came out unhurt. Similarly, through Mother Mary's intercession, I have seen the hand of God helping me out of stress, fear, anger and frustration. By pausing and praying, I have experienced pain and body aches ease out during moments when strength was required.

Let us always trust the Lord and we shall see His mighty hand in action. I thank Fr. Francis for nurturing the seed that my parents had planted in me.

My faith in Eldoret

My life in Eldoret town was full of fun and adventure. During the weekends, I would lead my younger cousins in exploring various parts of the town and its environs. We enjoyed every moment of it. At the same time, I got the opportunity to exploit my music talent in a special way. My uncle was a choirmaster in a protestant church and most of his younger siblings knew how to play musical instruments especially the guitar. I took a keen interest in it and challenged them to train

me. By the end of the first year, I could comfortably play rhythm guitar to any song. Going back home, I tuned and played my father's guitar to the amazement of everyone.

During the same first year in the town, my leadership skills came out shining. I would organize the children in the neighbourhood into everything – football teams, classroom scenario and even church. I would teach them and even set and mark examinations for them, then proceed to award the best! In church matters, though the children who included my cousins were mostly Protestants, I still gave them a taste of the catholic way. I would wrap tablecloths around my waist and shoulders and proceed to “offer Mass” to them. They laughed their hearts out, even though to me it was serious business.

The same day my father brought me to town, he had shown me where the Catholic Church was located and warned me to stick to my faith. However, my great curiosity could not allow. Occasionally, I would accompany my uncle and the cousins to their church after giving false reasons as to why I could not attend Mass. On some Sundays after Mass, I would pass by other churches and observe how they conducted their prayers. Sometimes I attended open-air crusades either alone or in the company of my cousins and the younger uncles. I

became a religious tourist. I kept wondering why churches were so different, yet they all claimed to worship one God. I got different impressions from different churches, services and crusades. Some were powerful while others were not. Others were welcoming while others appeared threatening and unkind, mostly dwelling on doom. There were no Catholics in the neighbourhood to encourage me in my faith. I became confused! “Why doesn’t our catholic service appear as powerful and why don’t my churchmates speak in tongues like the Pentecostals? Am I in the right track?” I kept wondering. As I travelled home for Christmas holidays that year, I was a confused boy. The impact of teenage that was now setting in, coupled with the challenges of adjusting to the unfamiliar environment and school, plus the religious confusion, weighed heavily on me. I remember alighting from the public vehicle, leaving my entire luggage behind. My parents had to struggle for weeks to recover it.

It was about two weeks into the holidays when one of my aunts who was a nun came visiting. She had some pamphlets with her. I took one and read carefully. It contained detailed teachings on the Catholic faith. The main lessons included the sacrament of reconciliation, the Holy Eucharist and the Holy rosary.

The teachings gave me peace and relief. It was as if God noted my confusion and came to my rescue. Now I knew there was power and hope in my catholic faith after all! I surrendered all my doubts to Jesus and mother Mary and learnt to carry my rosary always and to recite it regularly.

I turned fourteen immediately I returned to Eldoret for the final year of primary education. I now had great confidence in my faith and I stopped peeping into other denominations. I became a lone ranger in the protestant environment, walking to church for Mass every Sunday in the company of no one. Deep down my soul, I was never lonely. I was always reciting the Holy rosary. As I looked up into the beautiful blue sky above my head, my soul was always overwhelmed with joy, for I knew that above it there was a loving mother who was always watching over me.

My joy was crowned at the altar of the Lord when together with other faithful I waited patiently for my turn to receive the Holy Eucharist. I truly experienced the company of my loving brother Jesus. The faith kept me going for the rest of the year. Blessed be the name of Jesus and our Mother Mary.

My faith in secondary school

When I joined Form One, I immediately registered with the Young Christian Students (Y.C.S.) group, a movement for Catholic students. My aim was to identify with them as early as possible and establish my foundation.

However, due to the ill treatment we received from the senior students, I had to seek refuge. While the Y.C.S. held their meetings on Sunday afternoons only, the Protestants, under their umbrella union (the Christian Union), held daily fellowships just before the students retired to bed. Many newcomers, I included, found the fellowship to be a good refuge. We would leave our classrooms and attend the fellowship, so that by the time it was over, most of the senior students were fast asleep and we would escape their wrath.

I continued attending the Christian Union and soon my potentials were recognized. I was occasionally called upon to lead the sermon and share testimonies. On Sundays, I would go for Y.C.S. meetings as usual. With time however, the leaders in both groups got concerned and each advised me to stick to their side. Personally, I had no issue with attending both fellowships but from the reaction of the leaders, I realized that was not easy. While the Catholics advised me that it was wrong to mix faiths, the Protestants were more

vigorous. They tried hard to convince me that my catholic faith was leading me nowhere. When schools closed for December holidays, they told me to let my parents and siblings know that I was no longer a catholic! I nodded in the affirmative, though I was not ready for such an encounter. I was just confused once again!

When I arrived home, there were pamphlets again! I took one and read slowly. The teachings were very similar to the ones I had read exactly two years before. I was shaken to the bones! This was the second time the pamphlets were coming, and just when confusion reigned in my heart! “This can’t be mere coincidence,” I said to myself, “there must be more to it.” I knelt and made the following prayer:

God, I am now convinced that you want me to remain a catholic. Make me a catholic for life so that I may spread your word to my fellow Catholics to the glory of your name.

When schools opened for the second form, I stuck to Y.C.S. My protestant brothers noticed the change but did not object because my stand was clear. I was elected into the executive team of the Y.C.S. and together with the other leaders we immediately introduced daily fellowships too. We revamped

the group to match the Christian Union. The Lord continued to bless us and our faith grew day by day.

During one of the terms, the priest in charge of the parish where we used to attend Mass on Sundays banned our school from doing so due to cases of indiscipline from a group of naughty boys. I will never forget the term. Believe me, the spiritual needs of more than three hundred catholic students, most of them my seniors, was placed in my hands! Every Sunday, armed with my Bible, I treated the students to a Sunday service whose nature was only determined by me. I went through a challenging term; no one, including the catholic teachers was ready to assist me. I did not even have a Sunday missal for reference! I selected the readings and the songs, organized the entertainments and the sermons every Sunday for the entire term! I attributed all the wisdom and courage to the work of the Holy Spirit and the assistance of Mother Mary who made me stick to my faith. I thanked the Lord when the priest allowed us back to the parish the following term.

I continued seeking God for the rest of my life in secondary school. We worked together with our fellow Christians, referring to each other as brothers. Secondary school taught me that even though we belong to different denominations, we

need not fight or call each other names as we are the distinct parts of the body of Christ that the Bible refers to.

I also learnt that it is important to remain strong in faith. In whichever denomination one is brought up, it is necessary to have a firm foundation. This can only happen through seeking the face of God, reading the Bible and other religious books as well as associating with the men and women of God in the church. These efforts lead to growth. Lack of foundation and growth is bad for the spirit. It is the cause of the loss of many souls in the hands of cultic leaders as well as false prophets and seers whose aim is selfish gain.

My faith at university

When I joined the University, I immediately went searching for my fellow Catholics. I did not want to give the world a chance to get the better of me. Within a week, I had joined the catholic community prayer group. We met twice a week for rosary and Christian discussions. Before the end of our first semester, some senior students, including some of the catholic group leaders left for vacation. I was unanimously elected the new Chairman. That was too soon for me, but I agreed to take up the challenge. I was now used to surprises and did not shy away from responsibility.

My leadership role made me interact with many priests. The chaplain, Fr. Tom, was particularly kind and caring. He became my friend and mentor. Throughout university, I knew I had a friend in Christ to count on. May God reward Him for His great kindness.

During vacations, I teamed up with the youth in my rural parish for the activities in their calendar. I cannot forget one priest by the name Fr. Philip. On realizing my talent in musical instruments, he bought an electric guitar for the choir. I played it during Mass and this added flavour to the liturgy. Fr. Philip also loved the youth and ensured that their calendar of events was fully packed and lively.

Shortly after, Fr. Philip was transferred to a distant Parish. Occasionally, he would ask me to join him in the new parish. The stay was never in vain as together we visited sub-parishes, primary and secondary schools as well as tertiary institutions. Here I played guitar during Mass and later got the chance to speak to the students and the faithful on various topics. I still cherish those moments because they greatly boosted my self-confidence and oratory prowess. May God bless Fr. Philip in his work.

Undoubtedly, my faith made me succeed through university. We lived together in harmony with our protestant brethren,

encouraging and respecting one another. However, life was not to be as smooth as it sounds; it is my faith that enabled me to withstand the great turbulence that was to follow.

CHAPTER FOUR: THE SEASON OF TRIBULATIONS

What do you think life is all about? The three chapters you have read so far portray the image of a perfect youngster, with a smooth childhood, triumphant school-life and great faith. You probably expect greater stories; don't you? Unfortunately, my life was not to be a bed of roses; a series of misfortunes came knocking at my door and dragged me behind. The devil is not pleased when our hearts keep searching for the truth. His aim is to pull us down so that our prayer life is destroyed, and the gospel is disrupted. This is why people who are committed to God face temptations, trials and tribulations. We should not allow these storms of life to pull us down, because at the end of it all there is victory in Christ. The next four chapters that you are about to read will prove this point to you.

Health challenges

Throughout my childhood, I was full of energy and life. I continued in perfect health till the second year in the university when some health problems cropped up. To begin with, I underwent a series of dental procedures that affected my studies largely. At the same time, my eyes developed photophobia, which compelled me to go for glasses. This however did not help me much and so I bid night studies

good-bye. I slept as early as 8.00 pm, a crucial time when most of my colleagues were settling down for discussions and personal studies. To compensate this time, I made use of every available minute during the day and especially the weekends. This is how I ended up surviving the course I had undertaken.

Ethnic clashes

Secondly, during the same second year, foreign donors who used to fund university education pulled out, citing corruption in the government. It was also the period when the wind of democratization was blowing across the continent and single party states like Kenya were under pressure to embrace multi-party politics. The climax of this was the withdrawal of foreign aid, leading to great inflation. The economy of the country depreciated, and the excellent university life deteriorated greatly. The boarding facilities became pathetic, prompting the students to march frequently to the streets in riots, while their lecturers went on strike from time to time, demanding pay rise to enable them cope with the high cost of living. We were in and out of campus, each time carrying our heavy luggage, while being watched from a distance by ruthless police officers just in case we defied the orders. So much time was wasted as the government and the university

senate met to resolve the standoff. My relatives in the city never got tired of accommodating me during that trying period. I spent so much time in their houses that some of my young cousins who lived away from us thought I was a houseboy!

The government finally gave in to multiparty democracy. This transition was not smooth at all. The country got divided along ethnic lines and the results were disastrous!

It was in December 1992. I was busy packing, ready to leave for the Christmas break when my roommate walked in with newspapers in his hands. A glance at the headline sent shivers down my spine! *EIGHT PEOPLE KILLED IN BURNT FOREST TRIBAL CLASHES*. I froze temporarily in denial before gaining the strength to read on.

My greatest fear had finally materialized! The tribal animosity had resulted to ethnic clashes. This was very likely, with general elections set to take place in the same month of December. The citizens who were considered alien to the Rift Valley were viewed as opposition members and the purpose of the clashes was to displace them so that they would not vote. This would automatically give victory to the leaders whom the ‘natives’ supported.

Even though some parts of the Rift Valley had experienced clashes earlier, I never imagined that at any one time my own home area would be affected. I never visualized I would be declared an unwanted inhabitant of the place I had called home for twenty-one years. The most devastating fact was that now people had been displaced, homes set ablaze and eight people killed. Where were my family members and who were the casualties? The same paper went ahead to warn passengers against using the roads. The arsonists were burning down public vehicles too. My thoughts of a merry Christmas took a complete about-turn. Assisted by a few friends who sympathized with me, I completed packing, carried my luggage and headed to my uncle's residence. Luckily enough, my uncle was very supportive. He calmed me down as we waited for communication from my parents. There were no mobile phones then, and so waiting seemed like eternity.

It was after three long weeks that a relative managed to sneak out of the clash-torn area and came to visit us. To my relief, she informed me that my parents and all the siblings were safe in Eldoret town in a churchyard, courtesy of my aunt who was a nun. The information greatly revitalized my energy. However, the stories she told concerning the clashes were quite traumatizing.

Our family, like many others, had been ferried to Eldoret town to escape the wrath of the arsonists whose aim was to kill, and torch houses and granaries. After about two weeks, a semblance of peace had returned to Burnt Forest and our family, together with others whose houses had luckily been spared, decided to settle back. Two days later, there was a rumour of an impending attack. The villagers had learnt not to take chances. Within an hour, the local shopping centre was full of families and their belongings. True to the rumour, the arsonists emerged in a large group to the full view of the unprepared families. Energetic young men were heavily armed with bows and arrows. Their intention became clear when they started shooting indiscriminately. The villagers could not run away because their little children were all over. It was a matter of life and death and they had to defend themselves. The men took to the front line with plastic basins and buckets, plus any other portable items that could serve as shields. The children were instructed to collect stones, which could be thrown to the attackers. These were the only available weapons. It was like the movie “No retreat No Surrender”. I could imagine my little brother, then aged ten, busy collecting stones and quickly handing them over to the men in the war front. It was the best he could do to save his life and that of his little sisters.

The attackers kept advancing towards the villagers. A clear cloud of death was hovering over the centre and the worst was imminent. Suddenly, a military lorry with officers from the General Service Unit emerged behind the villagers. The attackers disappeared. Surprisingly, the officers did not pursue them. Instead, they confronted the villagers and took away their farm tools and other items they claimed could be used as weapons. Though this appeared strange, the villagers praised God for saving their lives. No life was lost in that bloodcurdling incidence. Our family returned to Eldoret town.

The other hard-hitting reality I had to face was that my parents, like most of the other families, had lost virtually all domestic animals. The cattle, sheep, goats, chicken, cats and dogs were nowhere when the family returned to the farm. The priority at that time was to save human life, essential documents and belongings. Sadly, one of the eight casualties mentioned in the newspapers following the earlier attack was my close friend.

The elections were finally conducted and the serving president, who enjoyed great support in the Rift Valley, won the elections. This is how some peace was finally restored. Burnt Forest was declared safe for habitation three months

later. It was time to be reunited with my siblings and parents. My uncle's residence was now a beehive of activities as many more relatives had joined us.

The five-hour journey to Burnt Forest appeared longer than usual. I was anxious to meet my family members. I supposed they were now back home with no more fears. Little did I know that it was just wishful thinking. Before we got to Burnt Forest, we came across a police roadblock. The officers stopped the bus and informed us about fresh chaos in the farms. Their advice was for us to either alight at Burnt Forest and monitor the situation first, or continue with the journey to Eldoret town. I chose the former. I alighted at the next bus stop and headed for the Catholic Church from where I was sure to get clear information. My heart sunk low at the turn of events again. No sooner had I reached the church gate than I spotted my parents heading for the church from the opposite direction. The mood could tell that all was not well. After an emotional reunion, they led me into the church compound where my younger siblings were playing happily, oblivious of the events. I tried to build a smile as I greeted them, but my heart would not accommodate. I sympathized with the kids; they did not deserve all these.

In the church compound, families were busy putting up makeshift structures for the night. These were to be their homes until “fate knew when”. My father was lucky to get one ready structure. It was a miserable sight. A family that used to live comfortably in a permanent house was forced to share a polythene structure with the firewood and maize cobs that were used for cooking during parish events.

My elder siblings had gone back to college and I was now the eldest child around. After sunset, we watched with little amusement as mum prepared supper. We took it and then prayed, asking God to come to our aid. We then proceeded to the worst nightmare. The structure was too small to accommodate all of us for the night. We decided to lay mattresses on the maize cobs for the children to sleep on, then the rest of us would seek solutions later. I watched sadly as mum spread the bedding. I had never seen my parents so helpless.

Worst of it all, it was clear that there was going to be some rain that night. The structure could not withstand heavy rains. When the children slept, I decided to go to the priests’ house for some warm water. When I entered the kitchen, the women in charge welcomed me and asked how we were planning to spend the night. When I explained our situation, they deeply

sympathized with us. They advised us to move to the Parish library where some families had put up. We quickly shifted, carrying the sleepy children along. Fortunately, we got enough beds, and hardly had we switched off the lights when heavy rains pounded the iron sheet roof. Indeed, the Lord had come to our aid at the moment of need.

Days turned into weeks as my parents pondered the next move. None of the internally displaced families had the courage to go back to their farms. The future became bleak. Their means of livelihood had been destroyed and all systems had collapsed. Furthermore, the children were missing education as no learning was taking place in the schools.

My parents finally decided not to turn back. There was only one option: to buy land in Central Province and settle there. Luckily, we had another aunt who worked for a secondary school in Nyandarua District in Central Province. She was also a nun. Her school was ready to accommodate us in one of the teachers' houses until we were settled. For sure, this difficult period made us realize how helpful the church is to the society.

One month after settling at the church compound in Burnt Forest, we were ready to leave the Rift Valley province. Just like the exodus of the Israelites from Egypt, we left the region

of hostilities for our ‘promised land’ where we felt that the aggressors could not extend their hand of cruelty. The journey took so long that we arrived late in the evening.

Our new home

The ‘promised land’ was productive. Even though the area was considerably remote compared to our previous home, we were happy to be miles away from the Rift Valley, where peace and harmony had become an illusion. The people here were so kind; they helped us with our luggage and comforted us as we joined our relatives who had arrived earlier. We lived as internally displaced persons in the school community, hoping that soon we would be on our own. The school administration was kind enough to offer us casual jobs to sustain ourselves. This kept us busy and helped us to forget the past.

A few months before the clashes, the government of Kenya had started the construction of the oil pipeline from Nairobi to Eldoret town to serve the Northern and Western regions of the country as well as the neighbouring countries. The pipeline passed through people’s land and those affected were duly compensated. We were among them. Our piece of land was split into two portions along its entire length and substantial

acreage was declared government land. My parents were so frustrated for that. The sight of bulldozers at work was so devastating. Crops were flattened, and fences were pulled down. My parents' farming activities would not have been the same again. Little did we know that shortly after, we would be displaced from the same land by the tribal clashes. Luckily, the compensation was timely, and this is the money that my father used to buy new land in Nyandarua. God had prepared his finances in advance, in a way that we could not comprehend initially. For sure, as written in Romans 8:28, ***everything works together for good to them that love God, to them who are called according to His purpose.*** We thought we were losing forever but in actual sense, we were losing to gain.

We worked hard on our new land and proceeded to construct our family house.

When I returned to University for my third academic year, I left behind a settled family; the land was then green with crops. My younger siblings were admitted to the local school and my father was eventually transferred to a nearby school too. The bit of land that remained at Burnt Forest was eventually sold at a throwaway price, and my father used the

money to buy more land in the neighbourhood of our new residence.

The final academic years

The remaining academic years were not as eventful, but due to withdrawal of donor funds, the university administration instructed the parents to pay some tuition fees and cater for the accommodation of their children. Due to their situation, my parents could not afford the fees. Worse still, my mother had developed some eye complications and was recuperating after surgery. My father had to pay the hospital bill, thus worsening his financial situation. Fortunately, the government's Higher Education Loans Board (HELB) was disbursing loans to needy students. I had no option but to apply. The process of applying for the loans was quite rigorous. It required the local provincial administrators to ascertain the needs and reliability of each student. I had to travel back home in search of the Chief, his assistant and the Divisional Officer (D.O.), then back to HELB offices in time to beat the deadline.

As a new resident in the area, I relied on assistance to locate the administrators' offices. I successfully managed to clear with the Divisional Officer and the Assistant Chief. However, by the time I was through with the two, the Chief had already

left office, as it was late. I did not want to spend the night without meeting my objectives lest I fail to meet the deadline. Someone advised me to go to the Chief's home. The idea was good although the home was about twenty kilometres away and the means of transport was unreliable. Due to my determination, I decided to try it. Only two public mini buses were expected before the end of the day.

When the first bus arrived, it was already full. Since it was getting late, I had no choice but to board. I joined other passengers in standing in a row between the seats. It was normal for passengers in this area to stand or hang on precariously because the few vehicles available could not serve everyone comfortably. The poor condition of the roads kept many public vehicle operators away from the area. We travelled slowly, dropping and picking more passengers along the way.

About halfway my journey, we came to a very steep hill. The engine struggled to pull the overloaded bus up. Halfway upwards, something happened that made all the passengers take a deep breath. The driver tried to engage the lower gear, but his efforts failed. The engine went off, the brakes failed too! The bus started moving backwards slowly, and then faster and faster. The driver lost control. The passengers

screamed helplessly as they hung on. In the next minute, the bus was so fast and only screams could be heard. Suddenly, the motion of the bus changed from straight to zigzag, making it veer off the road. Instead of progressing down the terrain, one of its rear wheels got stuck in some mud at the edge of the road, making it skid and overturn on the spot.

A few passengers got fractures while some escaped with minor injuries. The rest, I included, emerged from the scene unhurt. We went about hurriedly helping the victims as a rescue vehicle was called in. As we looked down into the dense canopy that we had missed by a whisker, our hearts could not stop magnifying the name of the Lord.

Since it was getting late, I decided not to wait for the rescue vehicle. There were no other public vehicles coming along, so my only option was to walk for the rest of the journey. The road was lonely with very few people walking along in the opposite direction. There was so much uncertainty in my mind. It was getting late and I was not sure I would get means back home. I did not know anyone here, except a colleague with whom I once taught in a certain secondary school. However, I could not count on him because I had never been to his home and there were no mobile phones then. I took out

my rosary and recited it along the way, seeking God's intervention.

As I walked along the lonely road, I spotted a young man walking in the opposite direction from a distance. As I walked closer to him, an aura of familiarity became evident. Soon he was close enough and I gave him a closer look. That is when it dawned on me that this was none other than the former colleague! For a moment, I thought it was just a pleasant dream, but the reality of God's company hit me. I was so delighted. How joyful it is to receive the favour of God especially when so much uncertainty surrounds us!

As I rested in the comfort of my friend's room that night, I had met all my objectives. He had taken me to the Chief's home and helped me explain my entire story. The following morning, I travelled early to the city in good time to meet the deadline. Through God's grace, I managed to secure the education loan, and this was replicated in the subsequent academic years until I completed my degree course.

CHAPTER FIVE: FROM THE FRYING PAN INTO THE FIRE

How would you explain yourself when everyone looks at you as very successful, yet deep inside you are hurting quietly? Have you ever come across someone who was so blessed, only to stagnate at some point? The experiences I am about to share with you now are the main reason why I wrote this book. It was not merely a decision, rather it was an overwhelming spiritual desire to testify about the works of God in my life and encourage those in similar situations.

Employment

I got my first job offer in October 1997 without any struggle. I did not even complete my internship. My supervisors were kind enough to let me go for the job. The salary was good enough to enable me rent a spacious self-contained house. I took my meals from reputable eateries and furnished my house to suit my tastes. In a nutshell, I could afford the lifestyle I desired. I was truly reaping the fruits of many years of hard labour and prayers. However, like many successful people, I made one great mistake.

The mistake

Even though I did not join the company of ungodly people, I completely neglected my prayer life. I attended Mass every Sunday, but that was the only time I dedicated to God! I locked Him out of my life for the rest of the week, only remembering to recite a quick prayer before meals when in the company of a second party. I justified myself that I was too busy, and God would understand. I expected Him to allow me to sleep without praying because I was too tired, and to leave the house in the morning without prayers because they would make me late for work. Furthermore, God had helped me to complete my education and given me a respectable job. “The time to pray is over; it is now time to enjoy the fruits of my hard work,” I reasoned out. In fact, I became a fan of movies and enrolled with one video library after the other.

Does this remind you of the story of the ‘rich fool’ in the Bible? It is found in Luke 12:18-19.

“This is what I will do,” he told himself, “I will tear down my barns and build bigger ones, where I will store my corn and all my other goods. Then I will say to myself, Lucky man! You have all the good things you need for many years. Take life easy, eat, drink and enjoy yourself.”

That was my attitude!

The next two verses hit out at this attitude:

But God said to him, “You fool! This very night you will have to give up your life; then who will get all these things you have kept to yourself?”

Jesus concluded:

“This is how it is with those who pile up riches for themselves but are not rich in God’s sight.”

As I accumulated my resources, I kept losing my spiritual wealth. I was no longer rich in God’s sight. I did not participate in any devotion or church group. The rosary I used to recite in private or with family members and schoolmates became history. I continued receiving the Holy Sacrament even though I never went for confession. Though God did not terminate my life like the rich fool, what followed was equally sad! I came to learn two major lessons the hard way: -

- 1) Satan is happy when a Christian succumbs to temptation. He takes revenge by bringing great suffering to them.
- 2) The rich also cry. Wealth is not everything. Many rich people are lonely and unhappy because their hearts are empty. St. Augustine of Hippo made this clear when he addressed God in his manuscript: *“You have made us for*

yourself, and our hearts are restless, until they can find rest in you. Mark 8:36 summarizes this, **“For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and lose his soul?”** Surely, there is no benefit.

The hard lesson

Barely one year into my employment, a dull pain developed in my neck around my voice box. I associated it with the nature of my work and hoped it would disappear with time as I took painkillers. It never did; instead it increased in intensity and would continue throughout, even into my sleep. An x-ray image led to the diagnosis of a condition known as *cervical spondylosis*. In simple terms, it is a degenerative disorder affecting some discs (vertebral bones) in the neck region. The doctor assured me that the condition was common though in my case it had started unusually early. At twenty-eight, I was suffering from a condition commonly prevalent among the elderly! I was shocked! The doctor prescribed some anti-inflammatory drugs and assured me that the problem would resolve with time. “It came early, and it is likely to resolve early,” he said.

I completed the doctor’s prescription without any improvement. In fact, the intensity of pain was increasing. I used one drug after the other; anti-inflammatory agents and

painkillers, massage gels and pain balms. I tried one pillow after another, seeking relief that never came. Eventually, the side effects of the medicines became intolerable. I gave up on them and learnt to live with the pain. Did you know that when one part of your body is in pain, your whole being concentrates on it? All the other senses seem to stop. You actually halt your life until the painful part gets well. That is what happened to me. I focused my attention to the painful neck, hoping that the future would be brighter. I waited for days, weeks, months, then years, without improvement! Little did I know that for the next sixteen years, I would live in pain and anguish, with serious health complications arising. This made me spend heavily on hospital bills. I would have progressed to vegetative state had the Lord Jesus not come to my rescue.

The complications

I will begin with a brief physiological overview. When one has cervical spondylosis, the main symptom is pain. The muscles surrounding the affected area contract in an attempt to contain the pain. These involuntary contractions are known as muscle spasms.

When the spondylosis persists, the pain and the spasms also persist. Persistent spasms are also very painful. They pull on

the neck continuously, making it stiff and gradually distorting its curvature. When the distortion is excessive, the discs may touch the spinal cord, giving rise to a whole range of neurological complications that affect body senses and reflexes. That is what happened to me. The first complication was reaction to sugary foods. They gave me a headache that would not respond to any medication and would take days to ease. I had to avoid sugar and sweet products like sweets, honey, fruit juice and soda, sweet bread, most snacks and cookies, sweet potatoes, bananas and some fruits, yoghurt and many others. I became so selective that visiting other people became a nightmare. They could not understand why I behaved that way, no matter how hard I tried to explain.

The second complication was a choking effect on my throat. This was due to the muscle spasms around the voice box. Eventually, talking, chewing and swallowing became painful and exhaustive experiences! I became a poor and slow feeder, mostly preferring soft foods. Prolonged talking also led to fatigue and pain. I kept off discussions and arguments and slowly turned antisocial. I thank God I could sustain my job because I did not have to take much time with my clients. Away from work, I preferred to remain indoors. I avoided gatherings and gradually lost friends. I could not maintain any meaningful relationships! The most painful fact was that no

one could understand what I was going through because physically I looked completely healthy. I guess some people thought my change in behaviour was a result of pride because I was earning good money. I do not blame them. There was no way to convince them otherwise.

I watched the years fly by without satisfactory progress in my life. However, I thank God and my business partner because it was at this point in time that I became self-employed. I concentrated fully on the business because it was my new source of fulfillment. My social and spiritual lives became completely stagnant.

Have you ever experienced rejection? I did. Rejection operates in a vicious cycle. My antisocial behaviour drove people away. My conscience interpreted this as rejection. As a result, I developed the fear of more rejection, which made more people keep off. I wanted their friendship, but I could neither maintain it nor explain why. It was a devastating feeling!

The devastation was so much that I slowly lost the purpose of life. I subconsciously developed the statement “I HATE LIFE” in my mind. The statement would keep crisscrossing my mind whenever pain was excessive or when leaving my work place, psychologically preparing for yet another night of

loneliness and emptiness. I kept wondering why God kept me alive to suffer every day and wished I would not wake up to the pain of the following day. Life was like a continuous unpleasant dream.

Fortunately, as the saying goes, there is always a light at the end of the tunnel. Even though I hated life so much, I had reasons to cling to it. One was my belief in God even though I was not committed to Him. I knew that my destiny lay in His hands. I started attending one healing crusade after the other hoping for a miracle that never occurred.

The other powerful reason for clinging to my life was that my dear younger siblings started trickling in, one after the other. Helping shape their future and easing the burden on my parents was a major source of inspiration for me. It was worth living a hurting life for their sake. I cannot underestimate the role they played in my life. They brought life back into my days and took care of me. Their friends also added immense value to my life. At least this was a group that would not reject me. They put up with me in my condition. However, they were not aware of my pain. I never wanted to share my desperation, lest I extend it to them.

The other group I cherished was little children in the neighbourhood. Truly, children are the angels who will bring

you beautiful roses when your view is full of thorns. Like Jesus, they are the friends who will love you unconditionally. They will quickly forget the past and will never reject you unless you reject them first. Unlike adults, they are easy to please. They frequently came knocking at my door to check on me, even long before my siblings came in. They uplifted my spirits and reassured me of my self-worth.

More complications

As time went by, more complications set in. The first was severe photophobia. Changes in light intensity affected my eyes. I was only comfortable in my house and my place of work where I was used to the light pattern. Any unfamiliar environment triggered discomfort to the eyes and I would be in a hurry to leave. I visited many opticians and ophthalmologists and each time I got a prescription for a new pair of glasses. I remember changing glasses more than ten times in one year, spending enormous amounts of money before resigning myself to fate.

Closely following the photophobia was the next complication, chronic migraines. The migraines had one interesting characteristic: they came during the cold season! Though they were not the classical type of migraine, they presented with a tightness and heaviness of the head that greatly affected my

concentration. This meant that from late May to early September, my performance at work was dismal, and my business got greatly affected over the years.

Holy Matrimony

Regardless of what I was going through, I never bothered to improve on my relationship with God. In fact, I drifted further away because my discomforts would not allow me to calm down and pray. Despite this, the unrivaled mercy of God never deserted me. I had a job that sustained me, enabling me to meet my financial obligations. Furthermore, it was at this point in time that my most valuable dream came true! My most precious friend and future partner came into my life. The fact that she came into my life at such moment, accepting me with all my weaknesses, was a sign of true love from both God and my wife-to-be. It was truly a great miracle!

Though my faith was not impressive, I made up my mind to organize a church wedding. A few months to the wedding day, I joined the Small Christian Community for approval and support.

The wedding day was the happiest in my life. Family members, relatives, neighbours, friends, businesspeople, clients and colleagues gathered in great numbers to witness

the ceremony. Even the Town Mayor and his Deputy graced the occasion! My siblings and my fellow parishioners participated actively, making the day great. I will never forget the sweet melodies from the choir and the colourful liturgical dancers. Four priests celebrated the Mass, making it a truly blessed day. Above all, most of my attention was focused on my bride. She was incredibly beautiful! Her bridal outfit gave her an angelic look, with her hair and make-up professionally done to match. She was a sight to behold!

From the moment we exchanged our marriage vows, it was as though smiles were permanently glued to our faces. We were overcome with joy. The day reminded me that I was still valuable to the world. I temporarily put all pains behind me to celebrate the day.

After the wedding season, we both resumed duty. My wife was very supportive. She was never tired of listening to my litanies of pain. Instead, she always assured me that suffering would end, and the future would be bright. Though my bodily pains remained, her care and encouragement made life bearable and meaningful. The word 'hope' found its way back into my vocabulary.

The family challenges

We continued participating in the Small Christian community activities although our prayer life was still restricted to the bare minimum. Like all newlyweds, we looked forward to the gift of children, asking God to bless us soon. Unfortunately, our hopes were dashed when the first pregnancy turned out to be ectopic. Following counseling and assistance from medical personnel, we managed to overcome the grief and look into the future with hope. That future was not to be a bed of roses. The second pregnancy turned ectopic too! It was like a horrible dream! “It cannot be true!” I agonized. We wondered why God had decided to turn our world upside down, leaving us miserable even as we witnessed many couples rejoicing at the gift of bouncing babies.

For the second time, I nervously waited outside the surgical theatre as my wife underwent the operation. I gazed blankly into space with my heart full of emptiness and fear. The memories of university days came back to mind. I remembered the professor of human anatomy who taught us about the complications of pregnancy. He too had his story to tell. When we got to the topic on rubella (a virus that interferes with normal fetal development), he became so emotional. In conclusion, he stunned us when he made the

following remarks: “Do you know why I get so emotional about this virus?” he asked. “It made my first-born son mentally retarded for life,” he continued painfully. Preparing us for similar eventualities, he advised us not to ask the question; why me, when misfortunes come our way, but instead we should ask; why not me. “This is the attitude that has kept me going,” he concluded. In reality, it was very hard for me to ask the question: why not me. However, I had to remain emotionally strong for the sake of my wife. Relatives and friends who streamed in during this moment helped us greatly, both materially and emotionally.

My wife was eventually discharged from hospital. The memories of the discharge still linger in my mind. The doctor was so insensitive in his ‘advice’. He had the following words for us: “Go pray to your God; if He wants you to have children, you can have as many as you wish. However, if that is not His will, find out what it is. There are many other things you can do in life.” He may have been right but all we needed at that moment was the assurance that all would be well. We took it to mean the opposite. We left the hospital feeling extremely dejected. It is important for anyone taking up the role of a counselor to know how, where and when to pass information.

Life after our second misfortune was hollow and empty. We could not bear the thought of being a childless couple. Our parents and siblings agonized with us, wondering what had gone wrong. The best they could do was pray that the Lord eventually removes the obstacles on our way to parenthood.

The first-born

Indeed, prayers worked, though not as smoothly. We lost the third pregnancy through miscarriage! We went through the emotional struggles that we had now become accustomed to. However, with everyone praying, our good Lord could not send us away empty handed. One year later, a bouncing baby girl was born to us. We named her Joy to herald the joy she had brought into our lives. The emptiness in our days was replaced by great enthusiasm as we watched her grow day by day. Her health was great except for a skin condition known as *eczema*, which made her itch from time to time, and especially at night. It was however controlled after visiting several dermatologists.

The second born

Our second born did not come easily either. We went through the experience of yet another miscarriage, but shortly after, there was a stable pregnancy.

During this period, circumstances forced my wife and her colleagues to undertake further studies in order to retain employment at their workstation. Those who failed to comply risked being transferred to other stations in the country. We were not ready for that. God gave my wife the strength to handle all these responsibilities simultaneously albeit with numerous challenges.

The course work and practical sessions took one calendar year and involved much travelling. One day, a colleague offered her a ride in her car as they returned from a rural station for a practical session. She dropped her off at a busy bus stop where she (my wife) was to use public means for the rest of the journey home. She was now in her last trimester of pregnancy. As she stood there waiting for the right vehicle, a speeding motorcycle unexpectedly veered off the road as the rider tried to avoid hitting a stationary vehicle at the bus stop. The bystanders jerked backwards to escape. Due to her condition, my wife was not as lucky. The motorcycle hit her left leg, sending her sprawling to the ground. The good Samaritans acted rather swiftly. By the time I received the distress call from one of them and rushed to the scene, they had secured her belongings, administered first aid and a kind lorry driver had lifted her up onto his lorry ready to take her to

hospital. May the Lord bless such people and reward them abundantly.

Accompanied by a kind sister-in-law, I took my wife to hospital where she was treated and discharged. By the grace of God, our baby was unharmed! We were so relieved and gave thanks to God. A few months later, a healthy baby boy was born. The Lord was indeed so kind to us. We named him Elvis.

Our son was born about two weeks to his mother's final examinations. Those were very trying moments for all of us. As expected with newborns, the nights were sleepless. The mother had to handle the delicate act of balancing between caring for the baby, revising for her exams and catching some sleep to regain energy for the following day. I had to be by her side to help in all these while attending to our daughter whenever she needed attention.

During the exams, we had to hire extra help. My wife would carry the newborn to the exam centre, leave him with the caretaker, tackle one paper, rush to breastfeed the baby during break time, and hurry back for the next paper. Whoever said that women are the weaker sex needs to carry out better research. The strength of a woman is beyond imagination. My wife eventually emerged with flying colours. Her colleagues

joked that our son needed to be awarded a certificate too because he had accompanied the mother all through the lessons and to the examination centre.

We appreciate my wife's colleagues who were so kind and understanding. One particularly helped her in both revising and taking care of the baby, while another offered accommodation to our son and the caretaker. May God bless them.

Our son's health issues

We naturally thought that my wife's graduation would mark the end of our hardships and usher in a new season of relief. Unfortunately, this was not the case. Our son developed persistent constipation that gave him so much discomfort shortly after. He would cry and sweat profusely from time to time. The nights became sleepless. We visited many doctors, but none came up with a conclusive diagnosis. One day, one of the doctors decided to send us for food allergy tests. The results were shocking! The boy was allergic to most common foods. He could only tolerate rice, tubers like potatoes, arrowroots and sweet potatoes, selected plant proteins, few green vegetables and some fruits. He was allergic to maize products, wheat products, all animal proteins, bananas, some fruits, some plant proteins and cabbages. The mother could

not take any of these products because they would end up in the breast milk and affect the boy.

This marked the beginning of a long journey of dieting together as a family and especially for the mother. For the next one year, she took tea without milk with tubers for breakfast and rice with potatoes for the rest of the meals. The baby would then take special infant formula to supplement breast milk. It was painful to watch my wife gradually lose weight because of the diet.

Even though she was free to resume normal diet after weaning the boy, my wife had to ensure that a lot of care was taken to avoid contaminating his food. Such contamination would lead to abdominal pain, restlessness and sweating. As part of the measures, snacks, sweets and cookies were banned in our house and my daughter and I had to forego many foods in solidarity with mother and son.

Our relatives and neighbours were so concerned. Whenever they visited us, they would not be sure what to carry for the children and whenever we visited them, it was even worse because they were not sure what to serve us!

Any time my daughter and I took maize or wheat products, we had to wash our hands immediately, wipe the tables clean and

ensure the floor was completely free from food particles because even a tiny one was enough to cause havoc to our son. His care was so delicate and demanding that many house helps came and left. Despite the challenges, we carried our cross with love and sacrifice, with great hope that one day our son would outgrow the allergy.

The boy grew and joined kindergarten in good time. We remain thankful to the teachers who understood him and lovingly took care of him. He had to carry his own food and drinks to school. Whenever he came home looking gloomy, we knew he had bumped into some snacks especially when other kids celebrated their birthdays. During his own birthdays, we provided snacks for his classmates to share, yet the celebrant could not enjoy them.

At this juncture, we decided to seek genuine herbal remedies. These proved more helpful than the conventional ones. However, the relief was temporary. The allergy resurfaced after a few months. We gave up and decided to wait upon the mercy of God.

More about my health problems

All this time, I had to forget my health problems and concentrate on our son. Unfortunately, the stress involved made my conditions worse. More illnesses and complications arose. One was a condition known as *gastro esophageal reflux* disease (GERD) which is associated with hyperacidity. I was treated for three months and got better.

Shortly after, my most serious neurological complication set in. This was the condition referred to as *trigeminal neuralgia*. In simple terms, it refers to pain on the nerve supplying the face. Any touch (whether light or violent) on the left side of my face or the back of my head triggered a wave of pain emanating from the point of touch and spreading to the whole head. The wave would then die off slowly, leaving behind a moment of dizziness and headache. I became very sensitive to touch, whether from a second party or myself. Sleep became hectic. I could only sleep on my right side or on my belly and ensure that no bedding got anywhere close to my left side.

Bending my neck also became a nightmare as it resulted in fatigue and partial numbness on the left side of the body. Since my job entailed bending most of the time, I gradually lost the ability to work. I could not finish with one client before dizziness set in. I opted to spend many hours in my

house. I went to work just for formality but even then, I would spend most of the time sitting in the office. My workmates got deeply disturbed by the apparent lack of drive and interest in my work. Since they did not know my situation, they became highly demoralized and the business continued to spiral downwards.

Treatment

In an effort to regain my health, I visited physicians, orthopedic surgeons and neurologists. I underwent expensive examinations and scans. Finally, it became clear that a disc was exerting pressure on the spinal cord at the level of the larynx. Trial treatment was initiated, but I was advised to prepare for surgery in case it failed. The trial treatment involved medication, physiotherapy and traction. The aim was to ease pain, reduce muscle spasms and straighten the neck to free the nerves. The procedures were so expensive. I shifted from one hospital to another shopping for the cheapest. I ended up spending so much time and money in these procedures that I almost got bankrupt. To add insult to injury, I never got better! My pains were getting more severe.

I went back to the orthopedic surgeon for review of progress in the year 2011. The doctor drove the last nail into the coffin by openly telling me that the progress was not significant, and

it was now clear that no recovery was expected at my age! He then advised me to change my lifestyle, reduce my working hours, stop driving and travelling for long distances, and avoid bending too!

It was like watching a daytime horror movie! A dark curtain was drawn across my mind, shattering the hope I had regained. As a medical person, I knew he was right but I preferred to live a lie than face the sad reality. For the first time in my life, I stared death in the face. The capital sentence had finally been passed.

I left the clinic so devastated. Questions raced through my mind. With no more hope of recovery, who will take care of my young family? Am I going to be a dependant? Will my business survive? Mark you, I worked thirty-five kilometres away from home. I could not avoid travelling. How will my wife and business partner take this? Will they give up on me? The questions were endless... no answers forthcoming.

Eventually, I cooled down. By the grace of God, my wife remained so encouraging. By faith, she assured me that the doctor was wrong, and recovery would come. On the other hand, my business partner was very understanding. We agreed on a schedule that significantly reduced my working hours. I travelled by public means, took a few hours mainly handling

the office work, then travelled back home to rest. On several occasions, the pain would be severe, and I would not report to work at all. I slowly learnt to manage myself to avoid much anguish.

Indeed, we should thank God when we are in perfect health. We should never take it for granted. In a split second, we can lose it all.

The Third Born

Our third child was born with less challenge. We named the healthy boy Vincent. He appeared to progress very well for the first few weeks and we were sure that things were okay this time.

However, when he was one month old, he started vomiting often. Initially, we thought it was the normal infant regurgitation but when he started coughing, wheezing and chocking repeatedly, we knew there was more to it. Soon he developed fever too. We rushed him to hospital where he was admitted in the high dependency unit and oxygen therapy was immediately initiated. He was diagnosed with inhalation pneumonia. This implied that some vomitus had been inhaled into the lungs. He was treated and discharged after a few days.

Treatment continued at home and he appeared to recuperate. However, one week later, the same symptoms resurfaced. We rushed to the same hospital where oxygen therapy was initiated again. A few days later, he was moved from high dependency unit to general ward.

Even though the boy was still on treatment, he did not respond well. He became very restless and even developed persistent constipation. Due to the experience with our second born, my wife decided to forego the foods that he (the second born) was allergic to. This helped greatly but the boy continued to vomit frequently and cry a lot. Both Mother and son suffered sleepless nights.

The consulting doctors seemed to have hit a dead end. They could not tell what our son was suffering from and so we were advised to stay on for further observation and symptomatic management. At this point, God took control of the situation. One day as the doctors were conducting their ward rounds accompanied by postgraduate students, one of the students suggested an endoscopy for closer examination of the stomach. The doctors agreed and sent us for one. Believe me, the student made the right diagnosis to the surprise of the senior doctors! The boy was suffering from severe reflux disease.

Reflux occurs when the sphincter (valve) at the upper edge of the stomach is weak. As a result, one cannot retain the stomach contents properly. Our son's was the severe type and that is why he vomited after every feed and slowly inhaled some of the vomitus leading to pneumonia.

The doctors concluded that the boy had to undergo an operation to correct the defect. However, the paediatric surgeon was not in a hurry. He prescribed medication for the baby to use for a few months as he reviewed the progress. He then gave his second prescription, which shocked us. The baby had to be positioned upright all the time. His bed had to be elevated almost to a sitting position and the sides well supported because any fall or tilt would immediately trigger vomiting.

This marked the beginning of yet another nightmare. Only the mother could handle the baby. No matter how carefully I tried to assist, the results were disastrous. Any slight pressure on the boy's belly would also result to vomiting. Well-wishers were discouraged from visiting us in hospital because upsetting the baby physically or emotionally led to the same results.

My wife's love for our son was beyond words. She undertook to take care of him single-handedly, leaving nothing to

chance. Whenever the boy was awake, he was always against the mother's shoulder in an upright position. The mother could only rest for a while when the baby slept.

Deep contemplation

During the period of hospitalization, I had to prepare the other children for school, drop them, and then go to the hospital where I would spend the rest of the day with my wife and the baby. I listened as she narrated the ordeals of the previous night. The presence of other mothers with sick children served to encourage her greatly. I left in the evening to take care of the other children at home. The daily trips to and fro were too painstaking. The difficulties we were going through were so unusual.

One morning before I left home for the hospital, I sat on my bed and asked God why He allowed all the suffering to come my way. I recalled my long-term service to the church. All through my childhood and youth, I had been in the forefront in serving God. "How come I ended up like this and where are the promises of God for those who revere Him?" I lamented. Questions raced through my mind without any answers. Psalms 77:7-10 was meant for me at that moment:

If the Lord has rejected you, is this final?

**If He holds His favour, is this forever?
Is His love over for good
And the promise void for all time?
Has God forgotten to show His mercy?
Or has His anger overcome His
tenderness?
“This”, I said then “Is what distresses me:
That the power of the Most High is no
longer what it was.**

Like the Psalmist, I got deeply sentimental. At that instance, I thought of the youth in my Small Christian community. They were so devoted to God just like I was. “Would they end up so dismayed and discouraged like me?” I painfully pondered. I picked up my phone and posted a short message to all of them. The message read as follows:

*Dear young guys, congratulations for keeping
the faith this far.
All this time, you may not have seen the fruits
of your faith, but keep strong and one day you
will marvel at the wonders of God.*

I did not know where these words came from. They manifested great faith amid despair. Only one of the youth replied, thanking me for the encouraging message. The rest must have wondered what I was up to. Little did they know that I was trying to encourage myself by ‘encouraging’ them. Frankly speaking, it worked! I left for the hospital in a brighter mood.

Indeed, the Holy Spirit had led me to send the short text. The wonders of God were now knocking at my door and the message was soon to become a reality in my own life.

Discharge

Our son was eventually discharged from hospital. There was the burden of a heavy hospital bill and expensive drugs. The position prescription was also to continue until the boy could sit upright.

The tender care for our son had three consequences. The most obvious was my wife's health. Holding the baby upright all the time caused her bodily pains and fatigue, which she lovingly bore to the very end. The second was the loss of patience by her workmates. They gave up on her and she had to put up with many nasty accusations. Some even commented that we feigned the boy's ailment to get sick leave and sympathy. Luckily, her boss was considerate. At the end of it all, her job was still intact.

The other consequence was shock from relatives, neighbours and friends. They watched from a distance as the mother struggled. They had to postpone all baby shower ceremonies. However, their prayers kept us going and my wife got the

grace to face the challenges. She completely sacrificed her social life for our children's sake.

More allergy

Even though our last-born son was accorded all the care, his recovery was poor. His constipation was still persistent. We decided to take him for food allergy tests like his elder brother. The results were even more devastating. The problem was extreme compared to his brother. He was allergic to rice, all maize and wheat products, all tubers except potatoes, all animal and plant proteins, all fruits and vegetables except a few traditional ones. We had to feed him on more expensive baby formula compared to his brother. On the other hand, the mother braced herself for yet another year of dieting, this time feeding on potatoes and amaranthus only!

It was a great miracle for my wife to survive on a protein-free diet for a full year. She only resumed protein intake when the baby stopped breastfeeding. The combination of the diet and the physical strain made her greatly lose weight again.

At this juncture, people got more confused. Many prayed for us and assured us that the future would be brighter. There were however some elements who tried to bring in superstition; we brushed them aside with faith.

We consoled ourselves that many couples agonized over childlessness. God had blessed us and so we were ready to take care of our children no matter the cost.

CHAPTER SIX: MY TURNING POINT

The year 2013 remains extremely important to me. It started with the hospitalization of our son. It was around the same time that I sent my message of encouragement to the youth in my Small Christian community.

That same year, the cold season started unusually early and my migraine headache started in late March. My neck pains also turned severe and I immediately realized that the year would not be smooth. I had hoped that after our son's discharge, I would have more time to concentrate on my business. However, with the onset of the migraines, all the hopes were dashed. I got psychologically prepared to see yet another year going down the drain.

One morning during the same week, I took the children to school. On my way back home, I tuned in to the local catholic radio station, *Radio Waumini*. As a by the way, the presenter mentioned about a three-day retreat which was going on at Don Bosco Parish in Nairobi, courtesy of the Vincentian Priests. He informed the listeners that profound spiritual and physical healing was taking place daily at the retreat. A few friends and relatives had previously advised me to attend the Vincentian retreats, but I never gave it a second thought. This

time round, this announcement appeared relevant because it came at the right time.

I immediately reorganized my schedule to attend, even though it was the second day of the retreat. I felt as though Jesus was specifically calling me. Suddenly, I had so much faith. I assured my wife that I would come back healed.

The Vincentian Retreat

When I entered the gate to the magnificent Don Bosco Church, I was attracted by sweet melodies of praise and worship. There was a massive portrait of Jesus at the entrance, with the words from John 6:37 boldly written below it: **I will not reject anyone who comes to me.** The words struck me because I had come to consider myself a reject and unworthy of God's mercy. On entering the church, there was another portrait of the bleeding face of Jesus. Beside it were the words of prophet Isaiah 53: 4 – 5:

**Yet it was our infirmities
that he bore,
Our sufferings that He
endured;
While we thought of him as
stricken,
As one smitten by God and
afflicted;**

**But He was pierced for our
offences,
Crushed for our sins,
Upon Him was the
chastisement that makes us
whole,
By his stripes, we are
healed.**

The message was so powerful. The suffering I was going through was nothing compared to that of Jesus, yet He was tormented for my sins, not His own! He underwent great suffering so that I may suffer no more.

I settled down for the day's programme. There were powerful sermons, prayers and songs. The messages revolved around repentance, forgiveness and worship. The climax was the adoration of Jesus in the Holy Eucharist. The participants joyfully and enthusiastically immersed themselves into worship and adoration. Finally, Holy Mass was celebrated to crown the day.

I had never experienced so much peace. The deep melodious worship, culminating in a joyful encounter with the Eucharistic Lord was just beyond my expectations. It was a true taste of heavenly life, where the Holy Spirit binds together men, women and children with the angels and saints

into one exuberant community that unceasingly praises and worships the Holy trinity.

Immediately after the Mass, one priest by the name Fr. Anthony took to the pulpit and gave prophetic messages to the congregation. He pronounced healing to many individuals and solutions to the prayers of others. The participants cheered wildly in praise of God.

As soon as he was through, he started to give a breakdown of the following day's programme. I was so discouraged. "How come I was not healed like the others?" I pondered. "Is this just another crusade with no results or has my fate been sealed forever?" I painfully questioned. I concluded that I did not deserve the healing of the Lord after all.

The turning point

Do you know that the Lord steps in when we reach our dead end? Just when I was wondering whether I would attend the retreat the following day, the priest concluded his remarks. Then suddenly, something happened that caught me off guard. It was like a dream, yet so real; it was my turning point.

The Priest appeared to have remembered something very important. He paused for a moment then uttered the following

words: “There is someone here with migraine headache; the Lord is healing you.” Then he touched his neck and continued: “Even the neck, the spondylosis, the Lord is healing that too.” He then wished the congregation a good night. Even as the participants arose for the exit hymn, I remained glued to my seat, my eyes fixed on the priest as he joined the rest for the exit procession. For a moment, I thought it was a dream. My heart was filled with deep fear of God. I was sure those words were directed at me as no one else could be suffering my conditions simultaneously.

Indeed, the prophesy was mine. As I left Don Bosco Church that evening, all my neck pains and migraines were gone. As I boarded a bus home, I wished everyone in the world could experience what I was going through. The omnipotent, omniscient and omnipresent God was strongly evident. I was like a new born. The fear in me was slowly replaced by tremendous joy and a state of grace that no words can describe.

When I arrived home, I found my wife eagerly waiting. “I am healed!” I gave my testimony. I proceeded to narrate the encounter. She reacted like me; initially being engulfed by the fear of God, and then progressing to a state of immense joy. She could clearly see the changes in me. The Lord was real

and had come to our rescue. We glorified Him with all our hearts.

It was amazing to see how calmly the priest had pronounced my healing but even more amazing to visualize how kind Jesus is. He could spare a moment to look at me, touch me and heal me, yet there are billions of people under His care.

Gradual recovery.

My healing was followed by gradual recovery. The complications started to ease slowly. The neck continued to straighten day by day as the muscle spasms reduced, and soon I could bend comfortably, work well and even drive far. Indeed, everything is possible with God. I had reached the end of the tunnel and the light was now evident. For the first time in sixteen years, I could think of a future.

The recovery was like waking up from an extremely unpleasant dream. Looking back into the painful past was no easy task. Recounting the many lost years made me almost sink into depression. On several occasions, I tried to relive my past in order to fix the missing link but that would always make me shed tears as it was too painful.

Thanks to Jesus; He increased my faith and gave me the grace to pray. Whenever I prayed, the Holy Spirit granted me peace and helped me overcome the temptation to remain glued to the painful past. The encouragement from my family also went a long way to support me emotionally.

Eleanor Roosevelt was indeed correct when she said, *“He who loses money loses much; he who loses a friend loses much more; he who loses faith loses all.”* I had lost money and friends but somehow, I still clung to my faith. The faith eventually led me to freedom and healing.

We should never give up on God. If we hold onto Him, He will never abandon us. GOD IS REAL. However much we suffer, the moment to marvel at His wonders will surely come. We need to trust in Him in all circumstances as Abraham did. This is the greatest test of our faith. When we fail to trust in the Lord, we never get His help.

MY CHILDREN’S MIRACLES

The second born

Having been healed from a condition medically considered incurable, I now strongly believed that all my children would be healed too. I could not rest until they were all fine.

One week after my healing, I attended another retreat by the same priests at St. Jude parish, Donholm. Immediately it was over, at around 8.00 pm, I quickly left the church to catch up with Fr. Anthony. Luckily, the participants who came to seek the priests' audience were not as many. When I got to him, I gave my testimony, then went ahead to explain the situation of my children. He was deeply moved. "Did you wed in church?" he asked the first question to which I replied, "Yes." "Who in your family was polygamous?" he asked the second question, catching me by surprise. I could not see the relevance of the question at that moment. Anyway, there was only one polygamous person in the entire family tree - the late maternal grandfather. Therefore, the answer came easily, "My grandfather." "How many wives?" he asked the final question. "Two," I replied. Without any more questions, he said to me, "Go and offer nine Holy Masses and bring the children tomorrow." He then wished me a good night and left.

None of the two tasks he gave me was easy. However, the faith in us was strong enough to overcome all challenges. I remembered the story of *Naaman*, the army commander of the Syrian army who went to Prophet Elisha for healing from his skin disease. He wondered aloud why he was given such a grueling task: to bathe seven times in the River Jordan.

Finally, he obeyed, and his flesh became firm and healthy like that of a child.

The following day, my wife and I picked the children earlier from school so that we could make it through the traffic jam to see Father Anthony immediately after the retreat. As we struggled through the traffic, I looked at my children and kept wondering what the polygamy of their great grandfather had to do with them. The grandfather was a successful man, with seventeen children, most of them Christians. He passed on at the age of ninety-five. He had close to one hundred grandchildren and several great grandchildren at the time of his death. To the best of my knowledge, none of these family members shared my experiences. “Why was I and my children singled out?” I painfully pondered. In any case, I had come across many polygamous families. Even though I did not advocate for the practice, it never occurred to me that it was such a grievous sin.

We arrived sound at the Parish. I immediately noticed that Fr. Anthony was at the pulpit talking about polygamy. The issue had really touched him. “Children are suffering because of a polygamous grandfather,” I got his words. He cautioned Christians against sinful practices because these later affect the generations after them. He referred to several scriptures

including Proverbs 20:7: **A virtuous man whose ways are blameless – happy his children after him.** At this juncture, I remembered the words of Exodus 34:6-7:

Thus, the Lord passed before him (Moses) and cried out, “The Lord, the Lord, a merciful and gracious God, slow to anger and rich in kindness and fidelity, continuing his kindness for a thousand generations, and forgiving wickedness and crime and sin; yet not declaring the guilty guiltless, but punishing children and grandchildren to the third and fourth generation for their fathers’ wickedness!

I realized why preachers frequently talked about the four generational curses. No wonder, my family had innocently suffered the consequences of my grandfather’s polygamy.

It became clear to me that polygamy is a grievous sin. It is synonymous with living in adultery. Even though the new revelation was shocking, I was greatly relieved to note that the diagnosis to my problems was now clear. I was one hundred percent sure that Jesus was going to wash away all the curses through His precious blood.

Immediately after Mass, we caught up with the priest and presented our children as directed. He placed the Holy cross on their foreheads while reciting some prayers. He then

instructed us to offer three Holy Masses for the family and three more for the souls of the departed relatives. We left the church and made our way home easily through reduced traffic.

The following day, I went straight to the church closest to my work place to book the Masses. At least, I could manage to attend lunch hour Mass daily. I presented my intentions and offerings for three family Masses. By the end of the three Masses, no change had been observed in my family. We went ahead with the next three Masses for the departed souls. We completed them without observing any changes either.

Initially, I thought the priest had reduced the previous nine Masses to six, but when no healing took place, it occurred to me that the nine were separate and mandatory. They were the prescription for deliverance from the generational curses. I went ahead to offer them. By the third Mass, there were still no changes. However, from the fourth to the sixth, things changed for the worse. Our second born son became very irritable and restless. The nights became sleepless. It was as if he had fed on all the foods he was allergic to at the same time. We were greatly confused. “How can this happen when we are so deep into prayers?” We wondered. Little did we know that God’s wonders were just one Mass away.

The healing

Do you remember how Jesus calmed the storm in the sea? Immediately after the seventh Mass, the mercy of the Lord was manifested! All of a sudden, our son became extraordinarily calm and peaceful. No other evidence was required to prove his healing. We carefully introduced different foods to him, and true to our faith, he reacted to none! The Lord had set him free from allergy. By the end of the final Mass, he could feed on a full range of foods. The previous allergens now became his favourite foods. His school life also became very enjoyable because he could share food and snacks with his friends. We glorified the Lord for the great miracle that brought us tremendous joy.

The healing of our son taught us a few lessons. One was that God's time and ways are always the best. He had come at His own time and helped us. He had chosen to heal one child first and we knew that was His way. The time for the other son would surely come. The other lesson was that God's instructions must be followed to the letter. Authentic prophets are to be obeyed.

We learnt too that prayers for healing and deliverance are a serious spiritual warfare. Satan tries to fight back to keep us in bondage. This resistance is manifested when prayers start to

take effect. When we notice symptoms of illness getting worse, we should pray harder because the devil is in the process of giving up.

The third born

I became a frequent participant of the Vincentian services in Thika and Nairobi, attending at least once in a month. Each service multiplied my faith as I witnessed the healing of many people. The centres are open to all ages, races, faiths and denominations.

With my second born son healed, it was now time to concentrate on the third born. He was still on medication for reflux and the mother was still struggling with the diet. Furthermore, we were spending heavily on his special formula.

I joined the long queue to see Fr. Anthony after one of the services. I presented the case of the boy and I was given the necessary spiritual exercise. It involved going through a series of scriptures and two litanies daily for one month. At the end of it all, we were to offer one holy Mass in thanksgiving.

The healing process

We embarked on the prayers with my family. For the first two weeks, we experienced no change. However, during the third week, things changed for the worse. At one point, we thought we were heading to hospital again. The reflux got worse, making the boy so uncomfortable. At the same time, our daughter suffered from strange restlessness. Nights became sleepless again as we closely monitored the two. I realized immediately that this was the height of spiritual warfare. Slowly and reluctantly, the evil one was losing ground. He was trying to fight back, but the army of the Lord was too strong for him. With this in mind, we prayed with more vigour. Believe me, towards the last week, our son suddenly calmed down. Whenever we gave him the reflux medicine, he became so uncomfortable and even choked on it. He was reacting to the same medicine that kept him going for months. We decided to skip a few doses and observe him. We skipped the first, the second, the third, and alas! There were no symptoms of reflux disease. The boy had received his miracle too! We stopped all medication and watched as the boy transformed from a sickly baby to a jovial toddler full of life. He now preferred to lie flat most times as if to compensate for the months of elevation. We gave all the glory to Jesus for yet another life-changing miracle.

This miracle astonished everyone who knew us. Our relatives, friends and neighbours rejoiced and thanked God with us. As expected, the doctors were the most astonished. One was eager to know what we did to the boy that we had not done before; another insisted that an operation must have been carried out elsewhere. The third doctor disowned the diagnosis. “This could not have been reflux disease; it was a misdiagnosis,” she concluded. In all cases, we insisted to them that it was an answer to prayers. We did not care whether they believed it or not, but deep down our hearts, we knew that we were bidding them farewell. The frequent hospital visits were eventually becoming history.

Though the boy was now free from reflux, his allergy to food remained. The Lord had taken away one serious problem for which we rejoiced, with faith that the allergy would soon come to an end.

Our daughter’s peace was also restored after an extra month of scriptures and litanies. We glorified the Lord for the stream of miracles. He was gradually restoring the health of the entire family out of His love and mercy.

My talents restored

To crown it all, the Lord gradually restored the strength of my voice, and I ventured back into my talents of poetry and music. Even as I continued writing, I felt a strong urge to complete the pending gospel music albums.

I sincerely thank the Lord for enabling me to resume my duties in good health. He also blessed my dear wife with promotion at her work place because of her great love for the children. May His Holy name be glorified.

CHAPTER SEVEN: THE MISSING LINK

Dear reader, to my imagination, I had now come to the end of the testimonial part of this book. My next course of action was to complete writing as soon as possible and send the manuscript to the experts for review. However, that took longer than expected because I experienced numerous obstacles and I kept the editors waiting endlessly. Despite the challenges, the mighty hand of God was always on my side dwarfing all the obstacles. This is the reason why I had to rewrite the conclusion of this part of the book, which eventually became the entire chapter that you are reading now.

My music project stalls

To begin with, I temporarily halted my writing to complete the production of my fourth gospel music album. It took about one month to finalize the video shooting. I waited eagerly for the release of the praise and worship album, praying that it would have an impact on the listeners out there. When the waiting period was almost over, I called the leader of the video crew to get an update on the progress. The response I got broke my heart completely. “I am sorry we have been wondering how to tell you this; an electric fault affected the

building and destroyed all the computer data. We have tried data recovery, but all seems to be in vain.”

I could not believe my ears! I had done three albums before without any hitch. Actually, the third one was done by the same crew and was great! I expected even better results this time because my siblings had travelled from different parts of the country to participate and I had also hired professional dancers. The amount of time and money spent on the project was just too much to waste. How could I face all the participants of the project? I wondered.

It took time to come to terms with the reality. However, with all my previous experiences, I easily understood that there was resistance to my project and God would fight for me. I engaged an expert in data recovery but finally realized that I was simply wasting more money as nothing could be recovered. I decided to halt the project and wait upon God. Meanwhile more challenges were to follow.

Our third born son

Do you remember that our third born was still suffering from multiple food allergy? At two and a half, he was still feeding on potatoes and amaranthus only! It is the special baby formula and God’s grace that kept him going. As with the

other conditions in the family, Fr. Anthony had given us a prayer schedule for the boy but this time the prayers did not work immediately. God had already performed many miracles for us and we had no reason to complain this time. We were sure there was a reason for this and the time for healing would come; after all, God answers prayers in different ways and at His own time.

We submitted to the will of God and kept praying. Meanwhile, the allergy became so terrible and confusing. Any contamination of the boy's food caused him untold suffering. His utensils had to be washed separately and his food cooked and kept away to avoid any contact with the rest. The person cooking had to practice regular hand washing when preparing different foods for the family members. Our elder children had to be supervised closely when they ate and they had to wash their hands immediately after, to avoid touching their brother with any of the allergens. Sometimes they ate while hiding and talked about foods and snacks in whispers in order to spare their younger sibling from craving for them. It was terrible!

Whenever our son tasted any of the foods he was allergic to, he reacted with extreme discomfort, restlessness and sweating. He could not calm down until the allergic reaction

was over. Medication did not offer much relief. The restlessness required an adult to monitor him patiently and offer him a shoulder to lean on. It was virtually impossible for a third party to manifest this level of patience. This is why many house helps came and left, some spending just a few hours in the house. The few who managed a couple of weeks failed the test by repeatedly contaminating the boy's food. When we came home later in the evening, we would pay for it dearly through sleepless nights.

The inhuman house help

One day when I was off duty, I decided to feed the boy to ensure no contamination. When I looked at the food closely, the texture looked suspicious. I decided to taste it. Believe me, within five minutes, I was struggling with uncontrollable dizziness! I recovered in about twenty minutes and decided to taste again to clear my doubts. The results were the same! We had heard of such cases through the media, but we never imagined that it could happen to us. The inhuman house help had resolved to be sedating the boy to calm him down! Whatever she used was only known to her because she took off on sensing that her tricks had been discovered.

With that discovery, we decided enough was enough. From that day henceforth, it was either the mother or the father with

the baby. I would only leave for work when my wife returned and vice versa. Most times, I would get to work very late or miss work altogether. My business continued to take a downward trend, accumulating debt after debt. I knew the job required more attention at that time, but I could do nothing about it until my son recovered. It was easier for me to face a sinking business than a suffering son. To make matters worse, my wife could no longer get permission from her employer.

The accident

The challenges we were going through gave us chronic fatigue. One day, my wife received a call from school. Coincidentally, the two kids in school were both sick and required treatment. I had left for some urgent matter at work, leaving the baby with another house help, with the expectation that my wife would return to the house soon. Unfortunately, she now had to pick the other kids from school and take them to hospital for treatment. On the way home, she informed them to sit carefully because she felt too fatigued. True to her words, her strength was failing. Shortly after, she lost control of the vehicle; it veered off the road and landed in a ditch, missing an electric pole by a whisker. The vehicle became a complete write-off on the spot but by God's grace, the airbags opened and protected her from the impact.

Luckily too, the children had heeded her advice and sat carefully in the back seat. They too escaped unhurt. The Lord had protected us from the snares of the devil yet again and we gave Him special thanks.

Our house broken into

Our challenges did not stop with the accident; a while later, our house was broken into. On that fateful night, I picked the Vincentian prayer book "*Christ is all*". When I opened it, my eyes landed on the prayer for family protection. Without giving it a second thought, I called my wife and together we knelt for the prayer. When we woke up in the morning, the armed gang that had been terrorizing residents in the estate had broken into our house using their characteristic methods, carried away electronics and other valuables, but left us sleeping in peace. That night, our last born who used to wake up several times each night, slept soundly until dawn! Even as we counted our losses, we could not stop magnifying the Holy Name of Jesus. Out of His deep love for us, He had instructed us on how to pray so that He could intervene and save us. We obeyed immediately, and He came to our aid. That is how we were saved from the terrible things that had happened to several residents.

Solace in sorrow

It is around this time that I read the book “*Solace in sorrow*” by Steve Thoithi. The book became a great encouragement to me because the author’s experiences had a lot in common with mine. I realized I was not alone in the journey. True to the testimony of many readers of the book, I found it to be life-changing.

One evening as I concluded reading the chapter on forgiveness, I got a call from an old friend who had approached me under false pretence in order to get financial assistance. He was deeply sorry for hurting me and literally broke down in tears in the phone! It was clear that a mighty power beyond his strength had touched his heart. I calmed him down, reassured him of my forgiveness, and wished him a good night.

Towards the end of the book, I read about the spirit of *religiosity*. The book explains that some people may appear very devoted Christians, worshipping for many hours, yet their worship is not in truth and spirit. That same evening when we got home, my wife informed me that she had received a suspicious call from a businesswoman she had briefly met previously, inviting her to join their worship centre. Just like Steve’s *religiosity* friend who always insisted

on meeting him at his (Steve's) home, the woman had volunteered to visit us even though she did not know us well. This was not just another coincidence; the Lord was warning us. Though it is not right to judge others, the fruits of a true Christian devotion must be seen to benefit the followers in every aspect. For example, no true worship can exist in a place where miracles are faked, or worshippers blackmailed to donate their hard-earned assets to the spiritual leaders.

I may not narrate every lesson I learnt from Steve's book, but I also derived accelerated healing and more physical and spiritual strength from reading it.

The healing of our son

Things were now much better for the family except for one lingering problem: Our youngest child was not getting any better. In fact, he got worse and started crying frequently. The cries were disturbing because we could not associate them with anything in particular. We tried more care to rule out contamination, but it was all in vain; he even started rejecting food. Whenever he set his eyes on the only menu he could feed on, he turned away. He was simply bored with the food. Eventually, he had to eat because there was no other option. He would then take several bottles of his special milk between the meals.

The cries of our son made us think hard. We made two decisions: one was to see the doctor while the other was to take him for prayers at the Vincentian Retreat Centre. We saw the doctor first. Upon examination, she recommended admission within three days for further tests. The following day we went for the retreat.

We went through the teachings, praise, worship, and prayers. During the prayers, I closed my eyes tightly as I spoke to my Lord. Tears rolled down my cheeks as I poured all my frustrations to Jesus. Suddenly, something happened that made my heart skip a beat. An image of The Cross appeared in front of my eyes. I focused all my attention on it, thinking it was just a mental image that would fade away. It never did; instead, a crucifix appeared on it! As I gazed at the crucifix in awe, dazzling light appeared and surrounded it, then the entire set-up was lifted slowly out of my sight. I had listened to testimonies of participants who had seen visions during the prayers, but I thought they were meant for special people. That day I realized that we are all special to God and so He can send a message to anyone he chooses.

During break time, my mind was fully preoccupied with the vision. “What was its meaning and purpose?” I wondered. I made up my mind to buy a special crucifix and have it blessed

for use in my prayers at home. “Maybe that is what God wants me to do,” I thought to myself.

Finally, it was time to crown the day with the celebration of Holy Mass. During the homily, the true meaning of the vision became clear to me. Jesus was repeating the passionate call: **“come to me all you who are tired and heavy laden, and I will give you rest.”** Through His cross, Jesus was going to take away all my suffering. Initially, there was the empty cross upon which Jesus was crucified for my sake, and then the dazzling light appeared to signify His glory and victory. Finally, the cross was lifted upwards to signify the lifting away of all my burdens.

Immediately after Mass, we joined the long queue to see Fr. George. Fr. Anthony had left the country and Fr. George had taken over as the director of the Centre. When it was our turn, he prayed with us and blessed our son as well as my crucifix. He then gave us Bible verses to read for forty days. He also instructed us to recite the Divine Mercy chaplet every morning at 3.00 a.m. for the forty days. This symbolized the number of days that Jesus fasted and prayed in the desert after His baptism in readiness for His mission on earth.

Two days later, we reported to hospital for our son’s admission. I was very sure that God was going to heal our

son, but I could not disregard the doctor's advice. This is because God heals most people through the doctors.

At the hospital, all sorts of samples were collected from the boy for the tests. Sigmoidoscopy and other complex procedures were also carried out to rule out any possible ailments. To the surprise of the doctor, all the results were normal. She sent us for food allergy tests and discharged the boy. That is when it dawned on us that our solution would come directly from God and not through the doctors. We disregarded the tests because they would be of no value to us; after all, we already knew what the outcome would be.

We continued praying with great faith. The prayers ended up amazing us greatly. Even though we recited them rather quietly, our son, who slept in a separate room, woke up most of the nights at around three o'clock and came to our room. He mostly woke up just before we started the prayers or immediately we were through. One day due to fatigue, we slept without setting the alarm. Several hours later, the boy came over and woke us up. To our amazement, the time was 3.00 a.m. on the dot! As we recited our prayers in the quietude of the night that morning, our hearts were full of the fear of God. Similarly, on another day, the boy woke us up just before time. He asked for a torch and went searching and

asking for the prayer books! It was not an ordinary scenario for a two-year-old to go looking for prayer books. God's healing grace was evidently working in him in a mighty way and no wonder, halfway through the prayers, the Lord started relieving him of his allergy. He started tolerating rice, fruits and wheat products in that order. His cries and contamination episodes reduced gradually, and he became happy and peaceful. He also developed a healthy appetite, all courtesy of the cross of Jesus Christ.

It is around the same time that my eldest sister, Sr. Sylvia, posted a powerful text to all family members. The text read as follows:

“Dear brothers and sisters, Christ thy kingdom come. My congregation has had a one-week seminar on healing of families where we prayed and carried out some exercises based on healing and breaking of family bondages passed on through ancestors. For this reason, healing of all kind is now taking place already in the family. Please if you notice any kind of healing, either on yourself or your family members in a few days or in the course of the year, please let me know so we can thank the Lord together.”

Did sister know that our son was being healed? No, we had not disclosed it to anyone. Was it mere coincidence? No, it

was God's time. It was great to learn that while we were busy praying for our son, Sister was busy interceding for the entire family.

Sister's message brought in a completely new dimension to the situation and the bigger picture was beginning to unfold. The problem was no longer mine alone; it was now a family issue. Slowly by slowly, the missing link was being unraveled.

We finally came to the last week of prayers for our son. The boy was getting better and better and was now comfortable with more foods including some proteins. We rejoiced in the Lord for this great miracle. At this juncture, God's wonders were manifested again. The special formula milk that our son had been taking for two and a half years suddenly disappeared from the market! As a pharmacist, I used to get it directly from the importer at a cheaper price; however, when we finished what we had in the house, the supplier had none. We looked for it in chemists and supermarkets all over the city and its environs, but we could not get any.

Was this just another coincidence? No! It was God's time again. This is the reason why it happened when our son was

now feeding well. It was a clear indication that God had rubber-stamped the healing of our son and there was no turning back to the supplements. We could not stop imagining what would have happened had the milk disappeared before the healing! However, that was now history. The Lord was manifesting His majesty in a way that filled our hearts with awe. The supplement bounced back to the market about one month later, long after our son had forgotten about it. We were now an allergy free family. We gave glory to our merciful father for relieving us of all the painful experiences.

The extended family dimension

A little while after Sr. Sylvia attended the spiritual retreat and sent us the message, she sent us copies of the book “The Healing of Families” by Fr. Yozefu Ssemakula of Uganda. The book was exactly what I needed at that moment. It gave me a clear insight into my situation and greatly helped in quenching my thirst for knowledge and especially on suffering. This knowledge became very instrumental in compiling the second part of this book and hastened my journey towards unraveling the missing link.

Towards the end of the same year 2015, we received a surprise message from mum. She was busy organizing for a healing Mass at home! Incidentally, neither sister nor I had

discussed the issue with her. All of us were working independently at different levels. While I prayed hard for my family, sister was interceding for all of us. On the other hand, our mother was operating at a much higher level, in order to free the entire family tree from bondage. Indeed, the Holy Spirit was at work. Everyone felt the need to sever the family bondage that had affected us for long. This was the link between the way of life of our forefathers and the fate of their descendants. No wonder, misfortunes such as cancer, childlessness, joblessness, and alcoholism were increasingly affecting the family tree.

The healing Mass was celebrated on 26th December 2015. The celebrant was Fr. Daniel of Nyahururu Diocese. It was a moment of prayer, praise and worship for the family. We prayed for the freedom of the entire family tree.

During that Christmas season, my wife and I watched happily as our children enjoyed all the foods and drinks together with their cousins. It was such a relief; we gave all glory to God.

The final challenges

The year 2016 started on a promising note and especially after the family healing Mass. We were sure that all the challenges were now over. In the real sense, deliverance is not an event

but a process. My family and I were now at the brow of the hill and a few challenges were still on the way. However, the light from the brighter side of life was already shining upon us. We continued praising the Lord for restoring our health, with great hope that we would eventually overcome the remaining challenges. True to our faith, the challenges began to ease one by one.

The generational bondage that had affected my family was eventually broken. I started to regain physical strength and to recognize my inner self that had been hidden for long. It was now exactly two decades since my graduation.

Conclusion

When I eventually emerged from the two decades of anguish, two facts surprised me. The first was that the world was still the same; the sun still rose in the east and set in the west. It was business as usual to everyone but me. I came to realize that bondage is like imprisonment; it locks the door of your heart, keeping all the people away from you. This door is gradually opened when healing occurs. This process is not easy; convincing the people around you to re-enter the door of your heart is a tough process. It takes time for them to understand your new self and relate with you afresh. This is why we need patience, prayer and meditation at this stage.

When the door of my heart got gradually opened, many responsibilities started to knock at my door and soon I was a leader in many spheres.

The other fact that greatly surprised me was that I could manage to wade through the storms of life for two decades without drowning. These storms were like the desert that the Israelites wandered through. When they came close to the end of the journey, God reminded them to be grateful despite the challenges. (Deuteronomy 2:7)

Remember how the Lord your God has blessed you in everything that you have done. He has taken care of you as you wandered through this vast desert. He has been with you these forty years, and you have had everything you needed.

I started to focus on the numerous blessings that the Lord had bestowed upon me, rather than the pains I had gone through. I remembered the commonly narrated story of a God-fearing man who went to heaven after his death. He looked down to the earth and analyzed his journey with God by carefully following the two sets of footsteps. He was disappointed to note that at one point in time, he could only see one set of footsteps, implying that only one individual was walking. He immediately recalled that that was the period when he

underwent tremendous suffering. He was so furious with God. “You promised never to leave me; look!” he complained bitterly. “You deserted me when I needed you most.” God looked at him calmly, and then said to him, “My friend, my love for you is beyond your understanding. The footsteps you see at that point in time are mine. I lifted you up and carried you on my shoulders.” The man was lost for words. All he could do was kneel before God in tears.

For two decades, the Lord had literally carried me on his shoulders, ensuring that all was well despite the challenges. He took full control of my life and continued to bless me. Many of my competitors had closed their businesses, yet mine had survived the tough economic times. My family was greatly blessed; we were settled and happy.

The Lord had covered me with His love, even though for a long time I was not devoted to Him. He carried me along and ensured that I emerged safe from the valley of the shadow of death. He is indeed our Good Shepherd. He sent me signs and wonders to bring me back to His sheepfold, that I may not be lost. No words can describe this magnitude of love. All glory to God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit. Amen.

I will not die; instead, I will live and proclaim what the Lord has done. He has punished me severely, but He has not let me die.
(Psalms 118:17).

SUMMARY OF PART I:

Dear reader, you have completed reading the first part of this book which is basically my testimonial autobiography. We can derive five broad conclusions from it. Firstly, the book encourages parents to parent well by taking care of the physical, emotional, intellectual and spiritual needs of their children. A child who is taught the value of faith will more easily sail through life and achieve their goal compared to one who is not. No wonder Jesus said, **seek ye first the kingdom of God and His righteousness and all these things shall be added unto you.** (Mathew 6:33). Through devotion to God from a tender age, children develop a healthy relationship with God, thus becoming His friends. In return, God gradually bestows upon them the grace to overcome temptations and negative peer influence in their youth. The Lord accords them protection and never allows them to go astray. This part of the book also encourages the youth to value education, discipline, hard-work, faith, talents and national cohesion.

Secondly, the book serves to encourage us in our journey of faith which is full of storms. In actual sense, God does not promise us a storm-free life; rather He promises to walk with us through the storms.

When you pass through deep water, I will be with you; your troubles will not overwhelm you.

When you pass through fire, you will not be burnt; the hard trials that come will not hurt you. (Isaiah 43:2).

Sometimes we erroneously think that a life with God has no storms. We imagine that God exists outside the storms. Therefore, when storms come our way, we conclude that God has abandoned us. How wrong we are! The verse above explains clearly that God is with us in the storms, strengthening us and protecting us from harm. Let us allow Him to hold us by the hand and lead us to the destiny of His choice.

The presence of God in the storms of our lives is manifested in both big and small ways. We must not forget to consider all these. Sometimes we look at the bigger picture of our challenges and conclude that God has deserted us. We forget the smaller pictures, where God carries us along and helps us in every step of our suffering. This is exactly what the Lord tells us through prophet Isaiah. On the other hand, we

sometimes concentrate on the little details of our daily struggles and complain. We forget to look at the bigger picture of success and blessings that the Lord has bestowed upon us despite the storms.

Thirdly, we learn that we are all vulnerable to numerous challenges in the course of our lives, no matter how strong we may think we are. In order to keep going, we must project our vulnerability to God. Being vulnerable before God means to trust Him and to be completely open to Him in prayer.

Fourthly, this book seeks to demystify God's miracles. We should not visualize God's miracles as the historical accounts in the Bible only, or the controversial claims we hear in some churches today. Similarly, we should not perceive them to be the preserve of a few special individuals. God's miracles are real and continuous; they are meant to be experienced by all Christians in their daily lives. Where there is true communion with God, there is the flow of His love, grace and mercy. These three will lead us to miracles of all forms and magnitudes.

Lastly, the first part of this book makes it clear to us that we need deeper understanding of our life experiences. It is with this background that I decided to write the second part of the

book through the guidance of the scriptures and the teachings of the church. May God bless you as you read on.

Even those who are young grow weak; young people can fall exhausted. But those who trust in the Lord for help will find their strength renewed. They will rise on wings like eagles, they will run and not get weary, they will walk and not grow weak. (Isaiah 40:30-31).

PART II

CHAPTER EIGHT: FOLLOWING CHRIST

Thank you for journeying with me through the first part of this book. I now welcome you to the second part, where we shall seek to understand what it takes to be true followers of Christ.

My firsthand experiences have led me to the following conclusion:

The world has very little to offer me. It is up to me to open my heart to the living God, so that He may give me the grace to offer something to the world.

If all of us were to strive to offer something to the world instead of waiting to receive from it, it would be a better place to live in. We can do this by opening our hearts to God, who will in return give us the grace to achieve the following:

- i) To be thankful for all the blessings we receive from Him.
- ii) Follow His teachings and examples and witness to others, in order to win more souls for Christ.
- iii) Understand our destiny and the causes of our suffering and hardships.

- iv) Get spiritual and physical healing and lead others to acquire the same.
- v) Overcome evil and assist others out of it too.

To maintain this state of grace, one requires the guidance of the Holy Trinity. We must follow the footsteps of Jesus Christ, guided by the Holy Spirit in order to please God the Father. To follow Jesus effectively, we need to learn some lessons. I would like to share with you some of the lessons I have learnt along my journey of faith. I have divided them into two broad topics:

- (1) Suffering.
- (2) What God requires from us.

SUFFERING

Suffering means to be in a state of pain or distress. It is an unpleasant state for anyone to be in. There are different forms of suffering, namely physical, emotional and psychological.

Whenever we suffer or face hardships in our lives, we reach different conclusions. Here are some of them:

- 1) God has abandoned us / me.
- 2) This is a punishment from God.
- 3) It is the will of God.
- 4) It is my cross.
- 5) It is my fault; I am paying for my mistakes.

- 6) I am cursed or bewitched.
- 7) I have failed to observe some customs or traditions.
- 8) This is my fate. I have no control over it.

I will not discuss the statements separately; rather, I will leave it to the reader to judge the authenticity of each of them as we go along.

It is extremely difficult to analyse this topic. It requires an entire book, and even then, it is impossible to answer all questions regarding suffering because no human being can understand God's ways. What I am going to share with you is a brief introduction to the topic, hoping it will instill in you the yearning for wider reading.

The origin of suffering:

Suffering was never in the plan of God. He created the earth to extend His love beyond the heavens. Man was created as the climax of creation and in the likeness of God, to help Him take care of the rest of the creation. He was to eat of the fruits of the Garden of Eden forever without suffering or death.

Unfortunately, Satan, a former archangel who was expelled from heaven for rebelling against God, was roaming the earth looking for souls to deceive. In the process, he caught up with Eve in the garden and tricked her into eating the fruit from the

forbidden tree. Eve then proceeded to convince Adam to do the same. This disobedience marked the fall of man and the origin of sin. No wonder this sin is referred to as the original sin; it was the first sin and the origin of all the rest. The great guilt of man after this sin marked the beginning of all suffering. Guilt wounds our hearts and drives us away from God. The further we are driven away from God, the more we suffer.

Adam and Eve took the first step in alienating themselves from God and as a result, God was so furious that He drove them out of the garden. He could not believe that Adam could disobey Him, even after all the good care He had accorded to him and his companion.

As Adam and Eve left the Garden of Eden, God pronounced judgment upon them (Genesis 3:14-19). From that moment, man had to struggle to make a living. It is important to understand that it was God's plan for man to work; work is not a curse. That is why He put Adam in charge of the rest of the creation. However, unlike the serene situation in the Garden of Eden, nature turned disorderly upon judgment. Man had to struggle with failing seasons, calamities, natural and man-made disasters, dangerous wild animals (represented by the snake in the judgment), physical suffering such as labour

pains and sicknesses among others and eventually death. Interestingly, he continued to sin. The subsequent generations became more sinful than their forefathers. God's anger led to destruction of the human race. The most outstanding incidents were the floods during Noah's time and the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. Each time, God expected man to learn and become loyal to Him. However, this was never the case; evil followed man and made him keep sinning against God. Consequently, he (man) continued to suffer.

Suffering today

The sinful nature of man has continued to cause suffering in the world today. The degree of immorality is beyond imagination. Consequently, all forms of suffering including diseases, tragedies, calamities and war have continued to haunt man. There is so much disharmony in nature as well as the human relationships. There is war among nations, communities, tribes and clans as well as family break-ups. As the world embraces more and more immorality, more suffering arises. The worst form of suffering will be eternal hell when God finally draws His own people to Himself and turns away his face from the wicked, thus allowing evil to determine their fate for eternity. Paul explains this in Romans 1:9:

There will be suffering and pain for all those who do what is evil, for the Jews and also for the gentiles.

The souls in purgatory also suffer the consequences of their sins. However, their suffering is not eternal, and they enjoy the consolation of knowing that one day they will see God. Our prayers play a key role in ending their suffering.

Types of Suffering

Different writers have different modes of classification. For the purpose of our discussion, I will elaborate on three broad categories of suffering, namely: -

(1) Our cross

(2) The suffering of Job and some of the Saints

(3) Consequential suffering.

For deeper understanding, I will recommend the book ‘The healing of families’ by Fr. Yozefu B. Ssemakula of Uganda. The books ‘You are not rejected’ and ‘why turn to Jesus’ by Fr. Anthony Parankimalil of the Vincentian ministries are also very resourceful in this area.

OUR CROSS

Fr. Yozefu refers to this category as ‘necessary suffering’. It is the suffering Christians face as they defend their faith or in the process of evangelization. It can broadly be described as the challenges that Christians face while playing their role in the vineyard of God.

Satan brought evil into the world as we have already seen. To fight this evil and bring people back to Christ, a lot of resistance is experienced. Therefore, many Christians suffer as they preach and follow the word of God. This is the kind of suffering that Christ referred to as ‘The Cross.’ God is glorified in this category of suffering.

The suffering of most Bible personalities falls under this category. Good examples include the prophets of Israel, Jesus Christ the son of God, as well as His apostles and disciples. The martyrdom of Stephen and the imprisonment of Paul are also good illustrations of this kind of suffering.

To explain the above, we shall look at two personalities, namely Prophet Jeremiah and Jesus Christ the son of God.

a) Jeremiah

Jeremiah was deeply tormented, both physically and emotionally. He was a simple peace-loving man who loved his people dearly. The thought of having to prophesy doom upon them was unbearable. However, he had to do the will of God who sent him. He suffered so much that he became deeply sentimental. In Jeremiah 15:10, he cursed his own birthday: **What an unhappy man I am. Why did my mother bring me into the world?**

He continued in Jeremiah 15:18:

Why do I keep suffering? Why are my wounds incurable? Why won't they heal? Do you intend to disappoint me like a stream that goes dry in summer?

He complained to God, even though he strongly desired to serve Him and accomplish his mission. This is made clear in Jeremiah 20:9:

But when I say, "I will forget the Lord and no longer speak in His name," then your message is like a fire burning within me. I try to hold it in, but can no longer keep it back.

This zeal for the word of God kept him going despite the challenges.

Jeremiah's case was one of a man who suffered, not for his own sins, but the sins of his people. He had to prophesy doom upon the people of Israel because of their sins. Consequently, he faced fierce resistance. He was arrested and imprisoned, lowered into a well among other tribulations. He even escaped death narrowly in some instances. At one point, he had to walk around with an ox-yoke tied to his legs to illustrate the captivity that awaited the people. The purpose of his suffering was to warn the people of Israel that great suffering awaited them if they failed to repent and return to God. That was Jeremiah's cross. Several other prophets underwent similar experiences.

(b) Jesus Christ

As we saw earlier in the Old Testament, the great wickedness of man greatly disappointed His creator. In Genesis 6:5, God regretted having created man.

When the Lord saw how wicked everyone on earth was and how evil their thoughts were all the time, He was sorry that He had ever made them and put them on the earth.

Even though He later brought floods to destroy the earth, He never intended to wipe humanity out of the face of the earth completely. He longed to have a human race that would obey

and honour Him. That is why He spared Noah and his family. Sadly, the descendants of Noah went back to sin. God had to scatter them by making them speak different languages, thus disrupting the construction of the tower of Babel (Genesis 11).

Eventually, God chose the tribe of Israel through Abraham and made them his own people. He delivered them from the cruel hands of the Egyptians and led them towards the Promised Land. Sadly, along the way, they forgot the good deeds of the Lord and turned to idols. They complained to Moses and even wished they were back in Egypt. They sinned against God in many ways and as a result, they suffered greatly. Many died in the desert and in many instances, God let their enemies defeat them and take them captive. In summary, they suffered greatly because of their sins. It is important to note that whenever they repented, God gladly received them back with love and blessed them.

God's desire to bring humanity back to himself was great. When the messages of the prophets went unheeded, He eventually sent His only son to live in the world as a human being. By living amongst them and sharing in their challenges, it was easier to gather all people to himself in a more loving manner. Unfortunately, humankind rejected Jesus and subjected Him to the greatest suffering ever. Meditating

upon the suffering that awaited him, Jesus was overcome with anguish to the point of sweating, and His sweat was like drops of blood falling to the ground (Luke 22:44). He begged his father in Luke 22:42:

“Father,” he said, “If you will, take this cup of suffering away from me; not my will however but your will be done”.

As a human being, the pain was too much for Jesus to bear, considering that He was innocent. However, He had to fulfill the will of God and complete His mission on earth. He endured all the suffering to the point of death. As a result of His obedience, His death yielded tremendous victory against evil and culminated in His glorious resurrection as prophesied by the prophets of Israel.

Our Heavenly Father loved us so much that He gave us His only begotten Son to Offer to Him as the sacrificial lamb for the atonement of our sins. (John 3:16). When we believe and repent, we do not have to suffer for our sins because Jesus suffered on our behalf. This unconditional love of God is clearly described by prophet Isaiah:

All of us were like sheep that were lost, each of us going his own way. But the Lord made the punishment fall on

Him, the punishment all of us deserved. (Isaiah 53:6).

In Genesis 22, God stopped Abraham from sacrificing his son Isaac, and instead provided him with a lamb for the sacrifice. In the New Testament, God did the opposite; He gave us His son as the lamb for the sacrifice, cancelling all animal sacrifices. This is why the passion of Christ took place when the Jews were commemorating the Passover. During the first Passover in Egypt, each Jewish family sacrificed a lamb and smeared the blood on the doorpost in order to be saved from the wrath of the angel of death. With the passion of Christ, the blood of Jesus became the fountain of our salvation. This proves to us that our souls are so precious and our sins so grievous that the blood of animals cannot atone for them. Only the blood of the son of God can atone for our sins. Therefore, God prepared for Him a human body so that He could become the Lamb for the sacrifice. What a magnitude of love! We read about this in Hebrews 10:4-5:

For the blood of bulls and goats can never take away sins. For this reason, when Christ was about to come into the world, he said to God; “You do not want sacrifices and offerings, but you have prepared a body for me.

Jesus humbly accepted this painful role (Hebrews 10:9). **Then he said, “Here I am, O God, to do your will.** John the Baptist introduced Jesus as the Lamb immediately he set his eyes on Him (John 1:36):

Behold the Lamb of God.

During Holy Mass, we spiritually commemorate the sacrifice of the Lamb of God. This sacrifice took place at Calvary, where we crucified the Lord by our sins, through the cruel hands of the Jews. During this spiritual commemoration, we offer the body and blood of the Lamb of God to God Himself, for our salvation. This happens through the hands of an ordained priest only. When we offer the wounded body and blood of His son to Him, God remembers His mercy and unconditionally forgives the sins of all who repent. Through this sacrifice, we are also able to invoke the mercy of God upon all people. This is the reason why Jesus instructed us through St. Faustina to recite the following Divine Mercy prayers:

(1) Eternal Father, I offer you the body and blood, soul and divinity of your dearly beloved son our Lord Jesus Christ, in atonement for our sins and those of the whole world.

(2) For the sake of his sorrowful passion, have mercy on us and on the whole world.

Jesus does not want His suffering to be in vain because He was sacrificed for a worthy cause. We must pray that God saves the entire human race for the sake of His son's suffering on the cross.

The contrast between Adam and Jesus Christ is clearly depicted in Romans 5:17:

It is true that through the sin of one man death begun to rule because of that one man. But how much greater is the result of what was done by the one man, Jesus Christ! All who receive God's abundant grace and are freely put right with him will rule in life through Christ.

Our cross today

We read about persecution throughout the history of Christianity. Some of the examples include the persecution of the church by Saul who later became Paul, persecution of the apostles, the stoning of Stephen, and the persecution of Christians by pagan Roman emperors. The martyrs of Uganda underwent great suffering before their death. Similarly, Christians are being attacked in various parts of the world

today, and churches are destroyed. Those who attack Christians claim to do so in the name of God. This experience is very similar to that of the early Christians which was foretold by Jesus in John 16:2:

You will be expelled from the synagogues, and the time will come when anyone who kills you will think that by doing this he is serving God.

This suffering is too much to think about and even explain. With our human mind, we would prefer to call it unnecessary suffering. However, when we look at the suffering of Jesus Christ which was the most severe, we get to think twice. Without His death, we would not be who we are today. His suffering was necessary for our salvation.

Let us look at it this way: if an enemy of Christ compels us to deny Him or face death, how would we react? By dying for Christ, we glorify Him through our action of faith. This proves to everyone that Jesus is worthy dying for because He died for us first. By denying Him, we erode His glory and He too denies us. We read about this in 2Timothy 2:12, **If we continue to endure we shall rule with him, if we deny Him, He also will deny us.**

The persecution of both the early and the present-day Christians therefore constitutes their cross. How does this cross glorify God? When we witness or read about the

brethren who died for the faith, we too gain spiritual strength and courage. Therefore, instead of suppressing the church, persecution makes the church grow even more powerful. Indeed, *the blood of martyrs is the seed of the church*. (Fr. Tertullian).

Let me bring you to the more lenient form of suffering that we would prefer to think of. We may be lucky not to face great persecution and tribulations like our brethren in some countries. However, the sacrifices we make in our service to God and fellow human beings constitute our cross. This is our role in the vineyard of God. As Christians, we need to make numerous sacrifices in terms of resources, time and even our own happiness for the sake of Christ and other people. This is the cost of Christian service. The groups of people we need to serve can be classified into various categories, beginning from the most basic.

1) Our dependents:

These include our children, spouses, parents, employees and other beneficiaries who depend on us for livelihood and support. We must never break their hearts because they have no one else to turn to. Sometimes we may feel like our efforts are not appreciated or as though we are being used. Where necessary, we should correct our dependants positively and

forgive them, put the past behind us and continue to play our role. This is our cross.

2) The people we depend on:

These include our parents (when we still depend on them), our employers and leaders. We owe them our support and co-operation. This is the way to help them help us. Sometimes we have to tolerate some unpleasant situations because our superiors are not perfect. Just like us, they are human beings with weaknesses. This is how they become our cross. However, this does not imply tolerating anything that contravenes God's law and human rights.

3) Beneficiaries of our professional services

Our professions become our cross when we use them selflessly for the benefit of other people. It is great for professionals to go out of their way to help their clients. They can do this by giving them enough time, undivided attention, genuine advice as well as being impartial. In addition, being mindful of the less fortunate is the surest way to serve Jesus. Good examples include teachers or principals who assist poor children to access quality education, doctors who hold free medical camps in the slums, lawyers who offer free legal services to the poor, to name but a few.

Generally, all Christians need to carry out their roles with passion and dedication, always seeking to please God. This is

the only way to transform their work into the cross that glorifies God.

3) The people we lead

Political, community and church leaders find themselves sacrificing time and even some of their resources to serve the people. Sometimes they have to make tough decisions and tolerate both fair and unfair criticism. They must remain honest and impartial and serve with love until their term is over. This is their cross.

5) The less fortunate

Acts of mercy or acts of charity constitute the most obvious Christian cross. Using our time or our resources to reach out to the less fortunate and help them access faith, health, education, shelter, human dignity, justice, and other rights is a noble goal. Every action, however small, taken towards this goal earns us blessings. God notices when we do our best.

Conclusion

As true followers of Jesus, we must be involved in all the five categories above. We should not give up in the middle or get involved with the basics only. However, we must attend to the basics properly before we reach out to the rest. This is because the basics define our primary role or vocation. For example, no one should use his resources to feed his neighbours while his own family goes hungry.

The personality Cross:

Our personality is shaped by many factors such as genetic make-up, parenting, socialization, education, faith, and environment to name but a few. None of us is perfect before God and fellow men. Many times, we are also unhappy with ourselves. Paul confirmed this in Romans 7:14:

**For I do not do the good I want to do,
but the evil I do not want to do - this I
keep on doing.**

This is the nature of man. However, despite our weaknesses, we must make deliberate efforts to please God. This is our personality cross.

There are different types of personalities. For example, some people get angry quickly while others are more patient; some easily get along with people while others collide with many people along the way. For the sake of our discussion, the strength of a personality is directly proportional to the degree of positive attributes such as goodness, patience, kindness, humility among others.

In general, personality strength varies from one person to another. The weaker the personality, the greater the effort required to practice Christianity which is all-good. This means the personality cross is heavier. This however does not imply that the individual with a stronger personality has a lighter cross. No! Though their personality cross may be lighter, they

have another cross – to use their strengths to lift the weaker and assist them in their journey of faith. This is why Jesus made the following remark:

To whom much is given, much will be required. (Luke 12:14).

It is very important to remember that however weak our personality may appear to be, all is not lost. Through prayers, Christ helps us to carry our personality cross and transforms our weaknesses into strengths.

Jesus carried His cross faithfully to the very end and sacrificed Himself for our sins. This is how He managed to attain His glory. We must follow in His footsteps to attain the glory that awaits us. (Revelation 7:14). In Mark 8:34, Jesus instructs us to take up our cross and follow Him:

Then Jesus called the crowd and His disciples to him, “If anyone wants to come with me,” he told them, “he must forget self, carry his cross and follow me.”

The above is emphasized in Mathew 10:38 where Jesus says:

Those who do not take up their cross and follow my footsteps are not fit to be my disciples.

Jesus carried the physical cross, which signified the sins of humanity. Our cross comprises the challenges, suffering and responsibilities which we must face as we follow Christ who is the only way to the Father. We are the soldiers of Christ

whom Paul advises in 2Timothy 2:1, **Take your part in suffering, as a loyal soldier of Christ Jesus.**

In the same book, Paul reminds Christians that they must suffer:

Everyone who wants to live a Godly life in union with Christ Jesus Will be persecuted. (2 Timothy 3:12).

We must therefore be ready to carry our cross.

The New Testament looks at the cross (also referred to as trials or tests) in different ways. Let us look at some of them.

a) Sharing in the suffering of Christ

St. Peter tells us in 1 Peter 4:12-14 that our suffering unites us with Christ in His passion:

My dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful tests you are suffering, as though something unusual were happening to you. Rather be glad that you are sharing Christ's sufferings so that you may be full of joy when His glory is revealed.

He uses similar words in 1 Peter 4:1:

Since Christ suffered physically, you too must strengthen yourselves with the same way of thinking that he had, because whoever suffers physically is no longer involved with sin.

Dedicating ourselves to God therefore implies that our suffering is united with that of Christ, purifying us along the way and making us worthy to share in His glory.

b) Suffering as a test of faith and endurance

Tribulations and persecutions are a test of faith. This is why the Bible refers to them as trials. We are all called upon to emulate Jesus Christ who endured all His suffering and passed the test of faith. Through endurance, we get stronger in faith and we receive numerous graces and blessings. Many of the New Testament writers foretold the tribulations and persecutions of God's people. In James 1:12, we are told that when suffering comes our way, we should fight on, with our focus being the reward that God has in store for us.

Happy are those who remain faithful under trials because when they succeed in passing such a test they will receive as their reward the life, which God has promised those who love him.

In James 1:2-4, we read similar words:

My brothers and sisters, consider yourselves fortunate when all kinds of trials come your way, for you know when your faith succeeds in facing such trials, the results is ability to endure. Make sure your endurance carries you all the way

without failing, so that you may be perfect and complete, lacking nothing Just like gold is tested through fire where it ends up purer.

Our faith is tested through trials so that we emerge stronger.

We read In Sirach 2:5: **Whatever happens to you, accept it, and in uncertainties of your humble state, be patient since gold is tested in fire.** Likewise, Peter enlightens us in 1 Peter 1: 6-7:

Be glad about this even though it may be necessary for you to be sad for a while, because of many kinds of trials you suffer. Their purpose is to prove that your faith is genuine. Even gold must also be tested so that it may endure. Then you will receive praise, glory, and honour on the Day when Jesus Christ is revealed.

c) Weighed suffering

God knows the spiritual strength of each of His faithful. He does not allow us to be tested beyond our strength. Therefore, different individuals experience different magnitudes of trials. St. Paul explains this in 1 Cor 10:13:

Every test that you have experienced is the kind that normally comes to people. But God keeps His promises and He will not allow you to be tested beyond your power

to remain firm; at the time you are put to the test, he will give you the strength to endure it and so provide you with a way out.

Let us be encouraged, always trusting the Lord for strength, exit from our suffering, as well as a great reward upon victory.

St. Teresa of Avila made the following observation:

We always find that those who walked closest to Christ were those who had to bear the greatest trials.

THE SUFFERING OF JOB AND SOME OF THE SAINTS

Some form of suffering appears strange and puzzling. It is difficult to visualize how it glorifies God. Good examples include the suffering of Job as well as some of the great saints.

Job

The story of Job is unique. God uses it to teach us several lessons. The most outstanding one is that God does things in His own way and we cannot comprehend even a fraction of His mind. It is therefore difficult to reach any conclusion

regarding suffering. We can only keep revolving around the subject.

The suffering of Job was excruciating, yet we cannot point out the reason. His suffering was not associated with any clear form of evangelization and as such, it cannot be termed persecution. On the other hand, Job had done nothing wrong to warrant the suffering.

However, when we analyse the story more carefully, we learn more lessons, which make us change our mind. We begin to appreciate the significance of his suffering.

Here are some of the lessons:

- 1) Like the suffering in the first category, Job's case was a test of faith and endurance. Satan was granted permission to torment him as a way of testing his faith and endurance. Job never wavered in faith. His resilience became a major source of encouragement, inspiration and motivation to many people who suffer even today.
- 2) The fact that God did not allow Satan to touch Job's soul is a clear indication that Satan has no permission to touch the human soul. It is only the individual who can give such consent. God gave us free will out of His love. Many times, we use this freedom wrongly and give the devil the consent to direct our souls. It is

important to note that Satan does not need direct consent. When we disobey God, we automatically give him (Satan) the consent to take charge. On the contrary, God requires direct consent from us to bless us. He cannot dictate upon us or interfere with our choices.

Job teaches us that even in great suffering, we should never disobey God. The Lord is our saviour, our strength and the only way out of our suffering (Habakkuk 3:17-19). This is how Job passed his test of faith.

- 3) When the Lord rescued Job from Satan, He made him more prosperous than before. This story teaches us that there is an end to our suffering and a reward will follow. This is great encouragement to us.
- 4) Just like the suffering in the first category, Job's suffering, though too much, was weighed. God knew that physical suffering would not shake his strong faith. Job proved to Satan that indeed there exists on earth servants who are committed to God.
- 5) Job teaches us the value of forgiveness and prayer. He took his concerns to the Lord and paid attention to Him. He also prayed for His friends and as a result, the Lord blessed him greatly.

When we look at all these lessons, we can conclude that indeed Job evangelized greatly. His suffering glorified God in many ways and has remained a major point of reference for the most severe forms of suffering among Christians today.

Some of the Saints

Many of the popular saints underwent persecution and martyrdom. However, some underwent unusual suffering. Good examples include St. Francis of Assisi and St. Padre Pio. Both had the stigmata (the five wounds of Christ) on their bodies. These caused bleeding and bodily pains which they had to bear till death. These are some of the examples of extreme suffering that is not directly linked to evangelization. Many other saints suffered through sicknesses. For example, one of the most recent Saints, Teresa of Kolkata had a severe heart disease. Similarly, St. Francis of Assisi had eye problems.

Like in the case of Job, by looking closely at these cases of suffering, we see characteristics that make them similar in a way to those in the first category.

- 1) The suffering was a test of faith and endurance too. By enduring to the end, these saints became our models of faith. They became a source of encouragement to many who suffer. The stories of such Saints make us understand that physical and

spiritual health don't always go together. It is possible to be sinful but healthy, or to be highly devoted to God but have a frail body. What matters most is that ultimate victory lies in the hands of the God-fearing.

- 2) The people who came to console these saints were greatly touched by their faith. Their words and actions led to the conversion of many non-believers.
- 3) The suffering of saints presents a perfect image of sharing in the suffering of Christ.
- 4) Some of the suffering is a means of purification and sanctification. Through suffering, many people get more time and reasons to meditate on God, thereby saving their souls. A person who suffers physically for a prolonged period tends to be more prepared spiritually for death compared to one who dies suddenly in a tragic accident. This is how some people are saved as we read in Job 36:15; **But He saves the unfortunate through their affliction, and instructs them through distress.**
- 5) The suffering of saints is weighed in such a way that even in death, it does not make them lose their faith in God. It is documented that some of the saints actually asked for the favour to suffer like Christ.

Once we have considered all the above, we can correctly conclude that the suffering of the saints brings glory to God by transforming both the victims and the well-wishers.

CHAPTER NINE: CONSEQUENTIAL SUFFERING

The third category of suffering is referred to as the consequential type. This is the most common type of suffering in the world today. Fr. Yozefu refers to it as the unnecessary type because we do not have to go through it. This form of suffering is of no value because it does not glorify God; instead, it prevents us from carrying our true cross in order to glorify God. Through lack of knowledge, we erroneously consider it to be the will of God, our cross or our fate. However, when we get to know the truth, we realize that there is much we can do to alleviate this form of suffering which erodes the value of our lives.

The manifestations of consequential suffering can be divided into two broad categories:

(1) Inner wounds

These are negative feelings that we harbour in our hearts for a prolonged period. They are not always easy to detect. They include anger, resentment, rejection, fear, anxiety, shame, guilt, grief, low self-esteem, emotional pain, and revenge among others.

(2) Family Bondage

The suffering in this category is easier to detect because it has physical manifestations. The common cases include illnesses (both physical and mental) that have no definite diagnosis,

origin or treatment, as well as chronic and terminal diseases that follow the family tree in form of genetic disorders. It also presents in form of undesirable traits that recur in the family, such as alcoholism, drug abuse, divorce, adultery, incest and rape among others. Other manifestations include abject poverty and bankruptcy, early deaths, poor school performance, joblessness, childlessness and many others.

It is important to note that inner wounds and family bondage are interconnected. When inner wounds are not checked, they lead to the physical manifestations of bondage. Similarly, when the bondage is not broken, the physical manifestations associated with it lead to severe inner wounds in the family.

In their books, Fr. Antony discusses inner wounds in details, while Fr. Yozefu deals with family bondage very conclusively.

THE ORIGIN OF CONSEQUENTIAL SUFFERING

Just as the name suggests, this form of suffering is a consequence of some actions. These could be our own actions or the actions of the generations before us e.g. parents, grandparents and our ancestors in general. Our own actions can also cause suffering to the generations after us. Most of the suffering we see in the world today is a result of both our actions and those of our ancestors combined.

OUR OWN ACTIONS

Actions that can bring suffering to us and the generations after us include the following: -

- i) Sin
- ii) Unforgiveness
- iii) Holding onto childhood trauma
- iv) Bad relationships

1) Sin

Adam and Eve suffered the consequences of their sin. Similarly, God gave the Israelites the freedom to choose between obedience and disobedience. (Deuteronomy 30:15-18). Obedience would lead to blessings while disobedience would lead to a curse upon them. As we read in Hebrews 12:7, God allows suffering to come our way when we disobey. This is what is termed as punishment from God.

Endure what you suffer as being a Father's punishment; your suffering shows that God is treating you as his children. Was there a child who was not punished by His Father?

In actual sense, God is full of love. He is ready to forgive rather than to punish (Joel 2:13). The suffering we undergo is the consequence of our own actions and not God's punishment. Isaiah 50:1 demonstrates this clearly:

The Lord says, "Do you think I sent my people away like a

**man who divorces his wife?
Where, then, are the papers of
divorce? Do you think I sold
you into captivity like a man
who sells his children as
slaves? No, you went away
because of your sins; you were
sent away because of your
crimes.**

Let us look at the following illustration: Good parents do not desire to cause pain to the children they love; rather, when the children go astray, the parents make them understand the consequences of their mistakes in a serious but loving manner. The purpose of taking such disciplinary measure is to let the children appreciate the effects of the mistakes on their lives, their families, as well as other people. This makes the children stop repeating the mistakes. If a parent, out of rage, purposes to hurt their child either physically or emotionally, they cannot be considered loving. Such a parent may have hidden intentions of destroying the child or may be under the influence of inner wounds. This is not the case with God; He is a loving Father with good intentions for us. On the contrary, Satan desires to destroy everyone. The weirdest fact about him is that he desires to destroy even those who are loyal to him. His intentions are always evil.

Let us look at it from a different perspective: Parents may tell their children not to fight. If the children go on, fight and get

injured, they suffer the consequences of rebellion. Similarly, God gives us his commandments together with the freedom to obey them. When we choose to obey, He blesses us. On the other hand, when we choose to rebel, we automatically fall into Satan's trap. Here we experience suffering which is the only gift we can receive from Satan. This suffering is not God's punishment; it is Satan's gift for wrong choices. God watches sadly as we suffer, but He cannot interfere with our choices and their consequences, until the moment we decide to reverse the process by involving Him. On the contrary, Satan is happy when we suffer; he imagines that this is a sign of victory on his part. He lures people to himself with all manner of pleasures, and then laughs at them as they suffer. When God finally draws His people to himself on the last day, Satan will laugh at those who were loyal to him (Satan) as they suffer in hell for eternity.

2) Unforgiveness

As we shall see in chapter eleven, failure to forgive those who hurt us affects us in many ways. It blocks the forgiveness of our own sins and prevents us from receiving God's grace. As a result, we stagnate in many aspects of our lives and we suffer tremendously.

3) Holding onto Childhood Trauma

Traumatic experiences of childhood can cause great suffering to us later in life if not properly dealt with. The burdens in our hearts can be too difficult to carry if we do not receive the necessary emotional, psychological, social and spiritual support.

Each childhood trauma is unique and must be dealt with according to its nature and severity. For example, a child who loses both parents has greater trauma than one who loses one. Proper emotional support is necessary to help the child overcome the grief and move on with life.

A person who got physically, verbally, emotionally or psychologically abused during childhood needs to forgive the offender(s). In cases where the individual feels they were responsible for the trauma, it is necessary to forgive oneself. This is the only way to move forward. Similarly, a person who experienced violence, war or natural disaster during childhood must stop blaming God and move on with life. It is not easy in all these cases. Sufficient psychological and spiritual counselling is required.

4) Bad Relationships

Human life is one of associations. Man is a social being, and hence every human being has friends, family members and

relatives. We also interact with different people in school, church, neighbourhoods, work places, and other forums.

When our relationships make us disobey God's commandments, the consequences are unpleasant. Every deep relationship gives the people involved not only physical companionship but also spiritual connection. Therefore, individuals with negative or evil spirituality gradually influence their friends if they (the friends) allow it to happen. It is correct to state that the cruel hand of an enemy is better than the sweet words of a deceiving friend. This is the reason why Jesus taught us in Matthew 10:28:

And fear not them that kill the body, but are not able to kill the soul; but rather fear him that is able to destroy both soul and body in hell.

While physical harm spares the soul, spiritual harm does not spare the physical body. It leads it to hell. Therefore, we have to be very cautious about our relationships.

Obvious examples of negative spiritual connections include unhealthy sexual relationships such as fornication, cohabitation, adultery, incest, polygamy, same-sex relationships and pornography among others. It also occurs when we associate closely with alcoholics, drug addicts, thieves and gangsters. Such people may influence us

negatively and lead us to sin. The consequences of sin are painful, as we have already seen.

Some of our friends may also lead us into occult practices where we get ourselves into terrible mess. Association with wizards and witchdoctors has dire consequences as we have heard from many witnesses. Suffering is the hallmark of these practices and getting out of them is no easy task.

Most negative spiritual connections are however not obvious. They develop gradually and systematically, making us lose our values and spiritual gifts. Eventually we become gossipers, full of malice, pride and hatred.

We therefore need to choose our associates carefully and ensure that the groups we get into are godly. This however does not imply that we should despise the people we consider ungodly. No! That would be against the spirit of the gospel. Rather, we are advised to be careful about the connections we make with all people. We should seek to influence others to our faith, rather than allow ourselves to be influenced from every direction.

ACTIONS OF OUR ANCESTORS

Adam and Eve gave their consent to Satan by disobeying God. Even though we were not around to approve the consent, as their descendants, we inherited the sin. Luckily, we are

forgiven this sin through baptism. However, as we saw earlier, the consequences of the sin continue to haunt us.

On a similar note, the disobedience of the Israelites caused their suffering as well as the suffering of their descendants all along the journey in the wilderness and thereafter. This is the most unfortunate fact: that the actions of ancestors can cause suffering to innocent children, simply because they gave wrong consents on their behalf. This is how generational curses and family bondages come about. Isaiah 65:6-7 demonstrates this clearly.

I have already decided on their punishment, and their sentence is written down. I will not overlook what they have done, but will repay them for their sins and the sins of their ancestors. They have burnt incense at pagan hill shrines and spoken evil of me. So I will punish them as their past deeds deserve.

We see descendants lamenting in Lamentations 5:7: **Our fathers sinned and are no more, and we bear their punishment.**

In 2Kings 5:20-26, Elisha's servant Gehazi was cursed together with his descendants for being greedy and telling lies. Similarly, in 1Kings 11, Solomon sinned against God. The

consequences of his sins were manifested during his son's reign.

The second unfortunate fact is that our ancestors may have repented their sins and escaped God's wrath, but the consequences of their actions still linger and make us suffer. We learn this from the story of Ahab, Jezebel and Naboth (1 Kings 21). When Jezebel ordered the murder of Naboth, Ahab immediately acquired his vineyard. The Lord sent Elijah to condemn the action. In 1Kings 21:27-29, Ahab was repentant:

When Elijah finished speaking, Ahab tore his clothes, took them off, and put on sackcloth. He refused food, slept in the sackcloth and went about gloomy and depressed.

The Lord said to the prophet Elijah, "Have you noticed how Ahab has humbled himself before me? Since he has done this, I will not bring disaster on him during his lifetime; it will be during his son's lifetime that I will bring disaster on Ahab's family."

Ahab had committed the terrible sin of murder together with his wife; however, when he repented, the Lord forgave him. Unfortunately, the consequences of this sin were passed on to the children.

There are many related stories in the Bible where evil actions of individuals caused suffering to their descendants. However, we need to understand that God is more interested in blessing than punishing. He made this clear by repeating His words when He gave the Ten Commandments to Moses both times. (Exodus 20: 5-6 and Exodus 34: 6-7). According to these scriptures, God rewards obedient people by blessing thousands of their generations. To those who are disobedient, God's wrath is experienced by a few generations after them. Needless to say, no one would like to see even one of their generations suffer; the only way to save them is to remain obedient to God.

Many people in the world today suffer because of the sins and bad relationships of the generations up their family trees.

Characteristics of Consequential Suffering

- 1) This category of suffering does not glorify God in any way. On the contrary, it blocks our ability to glorify Him. It diminishes our talents and gifts. We spend most time hurting and lamenting such that we are unable to give God meaningful attention.
- 2) It is not "our cross," rather it is the "heavy load" that Jesus described in Mathew 11:28-30:

Come to me all you who are tired from carrying heavy loads and I will give you rest. Take my yoke and put it on you and learn from me, because I am gentle and humble in spirit and you will find rest. For the yoke I will give you is easy and the load I put on you is light.

The consequential suffering is the “heavy load” (burdens) that we carry unnecessarily. It prevents us from identifying and carrying our true cross, which Jesus referred to as “my yoke”. The yoke of Christ is a light load because it is weighed for us and is meant for the glory of God. Christ calls us to surrender all the bondages and inner wounds to Him and He will set us free. Once we are free, we can identify our cross, pick it up and follow Him. This is the only way to know the will of God and to follow it.

- 3) Consequential suffering is not weighed; it is too much to bear and in many cases, it leads to destruction of individuals and families. Where destruction does not occur, it still diminishes the capacity of individuals to contribute positively to the family, the church and the society at large. Consequential suffering is beyond our strength and many people die prematurely from it. A person who dies of family bondage will go to heaven if they obeyed God; however, the premature death will have

prevented them from being more useful to the kingdom of God. That is the intention of the evil one; to disrupt the work of the Holy Spirit.

- 4) Consequential suffering is neither a test of faith nor a way of sharing in the suffering of Christ. It is not meant to bring people closer to God but rather to drive them away from God and destroy them.

WHAT WE NEED TO DO ABOUT CONSEQUENTIAL SUFFERING

(i) Acquire the Knowledge

It is impossible to solve a problem whose nature we do not understand. Therefore, the first step towards our healing is to acquire the knowledge. **The people of God perish for lack of knowledge** (Hosea 4:6). I hope our discussion so far has somehow opened our minds to this knowledge. Wider reading is recommended to broaden this understanding.

(ii) Identify the bondage and inner wounds that affect us as Individuals or families

It is important to note down all the problems that affect our family members and us. We then proceed to categorize these problems into two:

1) Those arising from the individual's wrong choices and peer pressure.

2) Those arising from ancestral bondage. These affect even the innocent people and recur along the family tree.

We will realize that some family members suffer continuously, or they keep going back to the same sinful and harmful habits, yet they do not understand the reason why. Most of the time, we dismiss them as troublemakers without realizing that they are not in control of themselves. They are simply victims of bondage. We have already mentioned some of the common forms of inner wounds and bondage that can help us identify our own.

iii) Identify the Causes of our bondage and inner wounds

Once we have identified the problems that affect us, we are able to find out their root cause. We need to examine our conscience regularly. Have I sinned and failed to repent? Have I failed to meet my obligations to God, the church and fellow human beings? Have I failed to forgive people who hurt me? Have I related deeply with people with negative spirituality? Have I been lured into sin by people I consider my close friends? Have I participated in rituals I do not understand or got into cults? Do I wear charms and “protective” chains and tattoos? Does

childhood trauma still pull me down? These are just some of the questions we need to ask ourselves as we try to find out the cause of our suffering.

In the case of suffering due to the actions of our ancestors, we may not fully understand the genesis of the problem. Our parents, grandparents or the ancestors before them may have given their consent to the wrong spirits, knowingly or unknowingly. They may have made covenants that they did not understand. They may also have been living in sin, thereby making us suffer the consequences. Like us, they too may have been suffering the consequences of the actions of their forefathers. Luckily, there is a way out of all these consequences as we shall see shortly.

v) Involve God: He is the way out

Once we are through with the steps above, we now look for the way out of our bondage. Here we need to understand that only God has the solution.

Our loving Father, in the name of His Son Jesus, takes away all forms of consequential suffering. The only ones that will never leave us are the consequences of the original sin, which God pronounced on judgment. Jesus takes away all the rest and still gives us the grace to face

the consequences of the original sin. He shed His blood to wash away all our sins and consequential suffering (Isaiah 53:4-5). However, there is a condition: God takes away our suffering when we return to Him. This is why He said through Prophet Jeremiah: -

**If you return, I will take you back
and you will be my servants again.**

We find a similar message in Exodus 15:26:

**If you will obey me completely by doing
what I consider right and by keeping my
commands, I will not punish you with any
of the diseases that I brought on the
Egyptians. I am the Lord, the one who
heals you.**

Proverbs 3:7 states:

**Don't be impressed with your own wisdom.
Instead, fear the Lord your God and turn
away from evil. Then you will have healing
for your body and strength for your bones.**

It is clear from the above verses that spiritual healing results to alleviation of many forms of physical suffering.

The prophets wrote numerous messages of hope to the Israelites who were in captivity and other forms of bondage.

God said through prophet Ezekiel:

**I will look for those that are lost, bring
back those that wander off, bandage those**

that are hurt and heal those that are sick.
(Ezekiel 34:16)

This is also portrayed in Zephaniah 3:18:

**I have ended the threat of doom and taken
away your disgrace.**

Isaiah 43:1-2 has a deeper message:

**Israel, the Lord who created you says, “Do
not be afraid! I will save you. I have called
you by name – you are mine. When you
pass through deep waters, I will be with
you; your troubles will not overwhelm you.
When you pass through fire, you will not
be burnt. The hard trials that come will
not hurt you.**

The book of Prophet Isaiah has many such messages. Good examples are Isaiah 41:10, Isaiah 43:1-7, Isaiah 54:4 to mention but a few. To further this notion, Peter tells us in 1 Peter 5:7 that the Lord assures us not to worry because He is in control of every situation: **Leave all your worries to Him because He cares for you.** Paul also passes the same message in Romans 8:31: **In view of all this what can we say? If God is for us, who can be against us?**

In summary, those struggling with heavy burdens such as inner wounds, sicknesses, addictions and obsessions should know that our Lord heals and delivers. Those who are lonely,

rejected, oppressed or abused due to their vulnerability must know that in God they have all the strength they need. In Him, there is a parent for every orphan, a partner for every widow or widower, a doctor for every patient and a loving friend for everyone. In Christ, there is a solution to every problem.

THE PROCESS OUT OF BONDAGE:

We now know that God is the only way out of bondage. Therefore, we need to co-operate with Him so that He can help us. This is by doing what He requires of us as we shall read in the next chapter. However, I will give a summary at this juncture.

a) Seek God in Prayer

We need to make genuine prayers and specify the intentions. It is not enough to request God to get us out of our problems. We need to ask Him to sever the bonds that link us to our dark history; otherwise, our suffering will persist, recur or shift to other family members. Therefore, in the case of family tree bondage, it is important for the entire family to gather and pray together.

b) Repent and Forgive

The moment we identify all our sins through thorough examination of conscience, we must repent them. By returning to God, He relieves us of our suffering. Similarly,

by forgiving the people who hurt us, our burdens are removed too.

We also need to ask the Lord to forgive the sins of our ancestors and save us from their consequences. Once our prayers are answered, we are set free. Baruch 3 and Daniel 9 are very good examples of such prayers.

c) An Extra Mile

We must go a step further if our healing and deliverance is to be realized. One major step is reading spiritual books. Apart from the books I mentioned earlier, there are many other spiritual books of great value. Testimonial autobiographies like the one you are reading now are also very useful because they prove to us that we too can overcome bondage like the authors. The Holy Bible is our reference book and all authentic spiritual literature must refer to it. We must read it regularly as it contains solutions to all problems.

It is also important to note that priests are servants of God endowed with the grace and authority to lead us to healing and deliverance and we should approach them with faith for assistance. We need to listen to them and follow the prayer schedules they give us. In fact, it is recommended that everyone needs to have a genuine spiritual mentor.

One more sacrifice we need to make is to attend spiritual retreats that take us through repentance, forgiveness and

deliverance. Prayerful devotional groups are also very useful. For the Catholics, our pilgrimages through the Holy doors as well as to the various designated shrines are very important. Through such indulgences, the consequences of our sins are removed.

(d) Responding to the voice of God

Having taken the steps above, we now need to progress to the most crucial step of faith. This is to respond to the voice of God. This is the step that determines who gets healed and delivered. It is the most demanding step, yet the most important. Many people give up at this stage and expect results without the sacrifice involved. Eventually, they do not get healed and they end up concluding that the entire healing process is not real.

In summary, responding to the voice of God implies sanctifying every aspect of our lives including work, family lives and relationships. Sanctification means to purify or to make Holy. In our human nature, this process is not easy; no wonder you will find some of the most difficult biblical teachings in this sub-topic.

Even though we are weak and sinful, we must make deliberate efforts to shake off all aspects of our lives that are against the

will of God. These are the stains that keep us from progressing spiritually, physically and materially. They are the body parts that Jesus described in Matthew 18:8:

If your hand or your foot causes you to fall into sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life crippled or lame than to have two hands and two feet and be thrown into the eternal fire.

We must remove all these stains from our lives because we cannot enter the Kingdom of God with them. They may appear very attractive, but as long as they contravene God's commandments, they lead to destruction.

God calls us to Holiness because He is Holy. **Be Holy because I the Lord your God am Holy** (Leviticus 19:2). St. Josemaria Escriva taught clearly that everyone is called to holiness. He went ahead to clarify that ordinary life is a path to sanctity. We do not have to be exemplary to attain holiness. All we need to do is to obey God at every moment of our ordinary lives.

We cannot receive God's favour if we continue mixing our faith with sin. God will do away with us because we will be of no value to His kingdom.

**So, because you are lukewarm -
neither hot nor cold- I am about to
spit you from my mouth.
(Revelation 3:16).**

We must be fully obedient in order to receive God's favour.

When we sanctify ourselves, the Lord performs all sorts of wonders in our midst. Joshua told the Israelites to sanctify themselves in preparation for God's wonders (Joshua 3:5).

**Joshua said to the people "Sanctify
yourselves for tomorrow the Lord
will perform wonders among you".**

When the people sanctified themselves, the Lord halted the flow of the River Jordan until they had all crossed over to the plains. The river Jordan symbolizes the many difficulties in our lives. Once we sanctify ourselves, the Lord helps us to overcome them.

The process of Sanctification

Responding to the voice of God always involves tremendous sacrifice. This may include getting out of our comfort zones, giving up habits we are used to, changing relationships and friendships, changing lifestyles and the way we conduct our businesses and professional practices among others. This is because some practices may be considered right by society, yet they contravene the very essence of our Christian faith.

Responding to the voice of God may create friction between some people and us. Such people may include our family members, friends, workmates and even fellow Christians.

This is why Jesus said in Luke 12:51

**Do you suppose that I came
to bring peace to the world?
No, not peace but division.**

He then went ahead to explain the divisions, citing the example of family members. This represents all forms of division, including the denominations we see today. Those who stand firm in Christ will differ sharply with those who get compromised. No wonder Paul reminded the Romans about the following words from God.

**Behold, I am laying a stone
in Zion that will make
people stumble and a rock
that will make them fall,
and whoever believes in
Him shall not be put to
shame. (Romans 9:33)**

The stone symbolizes our Lord Jesus Christ. Some people will embrace Him partially, mixing the truth with false teachings. Others will alter His teachings to suit their selfish interests. Such people will despise those who teach the truth, thereby creating divisions. However, only the truth will set us free and make us victors.

John the Baptist gave the best description of sanctification by quoting Prophet Isaiah:

Someone is shouting in the desert, get the road ready for the Lord; make a straight path for him to travel.

The person referred to in this prophesy was John himself. His role was to prepare the way for the Messiah.

Straightening the path for Christ means to level all valleys and hills in our lives (Isaiah 40:4). These constitute our sins of omission and commission. With these sins, Jesus cannot come our way to heal, deliver and bless us.

John went ahead to instruct the people on what they needed to do to sanctify themselves in preparation for the coming of the Lord. Let us relate these teachings to the situation today. We shall do so by looking at some of the common malpractices that need to be eradicated from today's professions.

Public servants

Corruption, tribalism, favouritism, nepotism and lack of commitment to duty among others. References: Micah 2:1-2, Micah 6:8, Luke 3:13-14, Proverbs 11:28, Micah 7:3, Psalms 49:13.

Businesspeople

Raising prices beyond standard, hoarding goods for unfair financial gain as well as tax evasion. Others include sale of expired and counterfeit products as well as products that

promote sin such as alcohol, condoms and emergency pills. Illegal businesses such as prostitution, drug trafficking, human trafficking, and poaching are pure evils by themselves. References: Micah 6:10-11, 1Timothy 6:10, Matthew 6:19-21, I Samuel 8:3, Psalms 49:5-6, Micah 6:10-11, Matthew 6:33.

Employers

Failure to pay employees, abuse or lack of respect for staff, denying staff members the opportunity to attend church service on Sunday in the name of work among others. References: 1Timothy 5:18, Deuteronomy 24:14-15, Malachi 3:5, James 5:4, Romans 4:4.

Employees

Lack of commitment, being unfaithful and untrustworthy in the line of duty. References: Colossians 3:23, Hebrews 13:17, Ephesians 6:5-9, Colossians 3:22-25, Luke 16:10.

The Judiciary

Demanding bribes to cover up crime, averting or delaying justice deliberately, and defending falsehoods among others. References: Micah 6:8, Luke 3:13-14, Deuteronomy 27:25.

Medical practitioners

Helping to procure abortion and mercy killing are probably the worst forms of clinical malpractice. Others include negligence, demanding tips to attend to selected patients, favouring wealthy or prominent patients, as well as lack of

empathy and compassion for patients. References: Deuteronomy 32:39, Matthew 9:12, Deuteronomy 15:11, John 15:12-13, Romans 15:1, Luke 10:30-35, Exodus 20:13.

Teachers and lecturers

Helping to steal or cheat in exams, soliciting for sex in exchange for grades, teaching partially to pave way for hefty tuitions, discrimination against some students, demanding tips in order to give more attention to selected students among other malpractices. References: Proverbs 22:6, Matthew 5:19, Psalms 32:8, Titus 2:7-8, Matthew 25:45.

Church leaders

False prophets who fake miracles to gain financially from their followers will be answerable to their creator for using His name to mislead His people. Such leaders are simply driven by excessive love of money. Some even turn to evil spirits for supernatural powers! Some church leaders also take advantage of the weak members of their congregation to satisfy their evil desires. God forbid! References: 1Timothy 6:5-10, Luke 16:14-15.

Political leaders

Land grabbing, oppression of the weak, corruption, tribalism, nepotism, favouritism, political incitement and crimes against humanity are among the most common malpractices by

political leaders. References: Exodus 22:21-23, Micah 2:1-2, Amos 5:12, 1Kings 21:1-29.

OUR SOURCE OF STRENGTH

We need the strength to overcome all the vices above. Fortunately, God has promised us His help if we ask for it (Isaiah 45: 2-3).

I will go before you and level the mountains; bronze doors I will shatter and iron bars I will snap. I will give you treasures out of the darkness, and riches that have been hidden away, that you may know that I am the Lord, the God of Israel, who calls you by your name. (Isaiah 45:2-3).

When we practice virtues, the Lord helps us to achieve much more than we would ever achieve through dishonest means. In addition, we have no consequences to suffer.

We need to examine our conscience thoroughly in order to identify the areas we need to work on. Mahatma Gandhi described a set of seven social vices that can destroy humanity. All the malpractices in today's professions can be traced in this list:

1. Politics without principles.

2. Pleasure without conscience.
3. Wealth without work.
4. Knowledge without character.
5. Science without humanity.
6. Religion/Worship without sacrifice.
7. Commerce without morality.

These sins reflect the modern society, where many people prefer quick but dubious means of attaining success, disregarding character, human values and the commandments of the Living God. Greed is the driving force that leads to all malpractices. Sanctification neutralizes this greed. It involves assessing the intention, the purpose as well as the means by which we attain success. Once all these are aligned to the commandments of God, we can correctly claim to have attained sanctity.

It is true that many people work genuinely to acquire wealth. Through His teachings and parables, Jesus praised such people. There is no doubt that money is a measure of economic success; therefore, it remains the greatest source of temptation. We are tempted in both the process of making money and spending it. When we love money too much, we easily fall into the trap of the evil one. This is what we should avoid. In 1 Timothy 6:10, Paul describes this love for money

as the root of all kinds of evil. Money is not evil by itself; however, when we adore it, it becomes a conduit for evil into our lives. This is why Jesus taught us to be very cautious about money and wealth. Let us look at some of His teachings:

(i) Matthew 19:21:

**Jesus told him (the young man),
“If you want to be perfect, go, sell
your possessions and give to the
poor, and you will have treasure
in Heaven. Then come follow
me.”**

(ii) Matthew 6:24:

**No one can serve two masters.
Either you will hate one and love
the other; you will be devoted to
one and despise the other. You
cannot serve both God and
money.**

(iii) Mark 10:25:

**It is easier for a camel to pass
through the eye of a needle than
for a rich man to enter the
kingdom of God.**

(iv) Luke 6:24:

**.... but woe to you who are rich,
for you have already received
your reward.**

(v) Luke 12:13-24:

The Parable of ‘The rich fool.’

(vi) Luke 16:19-31:

The Parable of ‘The rich man and Lazarus.’

Selling all that we have implies giving priority to God in our lives while all the other things come second. **But seek ye first the Kingdom of God, and His righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you** (Matthew 6:33).

When we serve God, He gives us the resources we need. On the contrary, when we dedicate all our efforts to making money, we automatically lose sanctity. Prosperity gospel is dangerous because it misleads people to serve God for money. When the money does not flow as expected, they quit service or opt for ungodly means of attaining success. We should not use God’s name to make money; in actual sense, we should use our money to serve God. This is the right investment (Matthew 6:19).

But store up for yourselves treasures in Heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy and where thieves do not break in and steal.

The imagery of a camel passing through the eye of a needle is one of the most difficult to comprehend. It was not any easier for the disciples. To human logic, it is impossible for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle. This automatically means that no rich person can enter heaven. In actual sense, who is a rich person? Think of an ordinary person who struggles to

make ends meet but somehow succeeds. Is he rich or poor? The answer, if any, may not be definite or may vary with circumstances. In other words, there is no clear-cut boundary between rich and poor. No wonder the disciples were so puzzled. They asked one another, “**who then can be saved?**” Jesus clarified the issue to them:

**With man, this is impossible, but not
with God; all things are possible
with God. (Mark 10:27).**

In other words, the grace of God is sufficient to push the camel through the eye of a needle. This means that with God, it is possible for everyone to enter heaven, regardless of whether they are rich or poor. God’s grace enables the wealthy to remain spiritually poor; they therefore seek God’s guidance and use their wealth to serve Him.

When we use our resources to serve God and fellow human beings, we enjoy God’s blessings and become worthy of eternal life. No wonder wealthy men like Abraham and Job remain models of our faith today. They obeyed God’s teachings and sanctified their wealth. Though they were rich, they knew they could not do without their creator. They were spiritually poor and required God’s help. It is to such people that Jesus said, “**Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the Kingdom of heaven.**” (Matthew 5:3) Spiritual poverty is

what Jesus emphasized. It can be attained by everyone, regardless of whether they are materially rich or poor.

The Parables of ‘The rich fool’ and ‘The rich man and Lazarus’ illustrate the other side of the story. These two rich men were selfishly preoccupied with their wealth to the point of forgetting God and fellow men. They were so rich with pride. It is to such people that Jesus said, **“Woe to you who are rich....”** They both ended up losing their souls. This is the kind of wealth that Jesus condemned.

Conscience

In simple terms, conscience refers to the inner sense of what is right or wrong.

Once we have acquired the knowledge of right and wrong, our conscience becomes our judge. Operating against it leads us to inner wounds and bondage. Paul said to Timothy:

Timothy my child, I entrust to you this command which is in accordance with the words of prophesy spoken in the past about you. Use those words as weapons in order to fight well, and keep your faith and a clear conscience. Some people have not listened to their conscience and have made a ruin of their faith.
(1Timothy 1:18-19)

When our conscience speaks to us, we need to listen to it and obey. When we disobey repeatedly, the conscience gradually goes silent and dies off. This is termed ‘dead conscience’. At this stage, the person has fully coexisted with evil and is only awaiting the consequences to take effect.

Unlike Christians, non-believers are not bothered by sin. They may even prosper while violating the commandments of God. Do not envy them. Psalms 92:7-8 describes their fate:

The wicked may grow like weeds, those who do wrong may prosper; yet they will be destroyed, because you, Lord, are supreme forever.

Similar sentiments are echoed in Job 24:24:

For a while the wicked prosper, but then they wither like weeds, like ears of corn that have been cut off.

Even though the weeds may appear to flourish more than the crops themselves, their destiny is destruction. The farmer eventually uproots and destroys them, leaving the crops to prosper. This is what will happen when the Lord, who is the owner of the vineyard, dispenses His justice.

e) We must be Very Patient

Most of our suffering develops slowly and gradually. Therefore, getting out of it may not be an event, but a process involving time and sometimes other people. We must

therefore be patient and keep praying. If we follow the teachings of Christ and the instructions of His servants, we will eventually emerge from our inner wounds and bondage.

LIFE AFTER HEALING

The proof of healing is freedom from inner wounds and bondage. When this happens, we are delivered from our diseases, addictions, sinful habits, and all forms of suffering. At this moment, we have the special grace that enables us to look back at our suffering with gratitude and forgive those who hurt us. The grace also enables us to love all people and increases our kindness and patience towards them.

Once the burdens in our lives have been removed, it is now time to pray and seek the will of God. It is time to surrender to Jesus, gladly taking up our cross and following Him. With this cross on our shoulders, we should march gladly into the vineyard of the Lord ready for His instructions and directions. This is the beginning of our true calling.

We should not forget to do the following:

- 1) Invite the Holy Spirit to strengthen our prayer lives. Only the Spirit of God can fill the vacuum left after deliverance, and help us to avoid drifting back.

- 2) Give special thanks to God, praise Him, and testify about it to others. This glorifies God and encourages others. Our problems may be like Lazarus' illness in John 11:4:

The final result of this illness will not be the death of Lazarus, this has happened in order to bring glory to God and it will be the means by which the son of God will receive glory.

- 3) Every healing, whether physical, emotional, psychological or spiritual, must be used to glorify God. When God heals a person, He makes them healers too.
- 4) We should be aware that Satan is not happy when we are set free. He will keep seeking to get hold of us. This is because he fears our cross and testimonies which make him lose ground. When we give him another chance, he comes back stronger than before. (Luke 11:24-26).

Conquering evil

Jesus assured us that when we have faith in Him, we shall conquer all evil.

- 1) John 10:10:

The thief comes in order to steal, kill and destroy. I have come in order that you might have life – life in its fullness.

2) John 16:33

I have told you this so that you will have peace by being united to me. The world will make you suffer. But be brave! I have defeated the world.

In Ephesians 6:13, Paul gives us a good summary of the requirements for our spiritual war: **Therefore put on the full armour of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand.** This armour comprises the following (Ephesians 6:14-17):

- (i) Belt – The truth
- (ii) Breastplate – Righteousness
- (iii) Shoes – Readiness to witness
- (iv) Shield – Faith
- (v) Helmet – Salvation
- (vi) Sword – The Word of God
- (vii) All these are crowned by prayer as Paul continues to explain in Ephesians 6:18:

Do all this in prayer, asking for God's help. Pray on every occasion, as the spirit leads. For this reason, keep alert and

**never give up; Pray always
for all God's people.**

We cannot march to war with our own strength. We need God's help all through. Only prayers will help us overcome the challenges ahead.

The word of God is the sword of the Holy Spirit, which we must have in our forward march. The Holy Spirit inspires all the Holy Scriptures (2Timothy 3:16). Whenever we read them and repeat the verses relevant to our situations, we get spiritual inspiration and strength. Jesus defeated Satan through His knowledge of scripture. We too must arm ourselves with scripture in order to sharpen our spiritual sword.

The following verses also give us strength in our war against evil:

1) Psalms 37:32-33: **Wicked people watch good people and try to kill them, but the Lord will not abandon them to their enemy's power.**

2) Philippians 4:13: **I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.**

3) Isaiah 54:17: **No weapon formed against you shall prosper.**

**3) Exodus 14:14: The Lord will fight for you and
there is no need to do anything.**

The blood of Jesus protects us against evil. We should invoke it for cleansing, as well as freedom, protection and victory (Revelation 12:11).

**Our brothers and sisters won the
victory over him by the blood of the
Lamb and by the truth, which they
claimed...**

For us Catholics, we cannot underestimate the role of our mother Mary. Through her intercession, we are strongly protected against evil. The Archangel Michael is the leader of the army of God that fights evil (Daniel 10:20-21, Revelation 12:7-8). His intercession as well as that of other angels and saints is very instrumental in our war against evil. The devil also trembles at the sight of blessed sacramentals when they are used correctly and in faith.

CHAPTER TEN: WHAT GOD REQUIRES OF US

In the previous two chapters, we discussed the challenges that face God's people and how to handle them. In the next three chapters, we shall discuss what we need to do in order to withstand the necessary challenges and keep the unnecessary ones at bay. In summary, we can only achieve this by doing what God requires of us (Matthew 5:6). **Happy are those whose greatest desire is to do what God requires; God will satisfy them fully!** Our relationship with God is like two-way traffic. The same way we expect Him to do so much for us, God expects us to fulfill several obligations. In this chapter, I will share some of the most outstanding ones.

I have divided the obligations into three categories, namely, duties towards God, duties towards self and duties towards fellow human beings. It is however important to note that these categories are significantly intertwined with no clear-cut boundaries.

In general, as Christians we are required to have a good relationship with God, then go ahead to spread His kingdom on earth. Our Catechism teaches us that we were created to know, love and serve God, and eventually live with Him in eternity. When we practise the first three, God gives us the grace to live well with our families, friends, church and

community members. Here we get the opportunity to utilize our gifts and talents in co-creation and spreading the kingdom of God. The Christian life is one of devotion, dedication and sacrifice for the sake of our salvation and that of the rest of humanity.

CATEGORY A: DUTIES TOWARDS GOD:

These are the duties of every individual Christian towards God.

(1) SEEK, KNOW AND FEAR THE LORD:

We should always seek the face of the Lord as Isaiah tells us: **Seek the Lord while He may be found. Call Him while he is near** (Isaiah 55:6). A time will come when God will no longer be near.

Christianity is a journey where the pilgrim church on earth works hard to join the triumphant church in heaven, where the angels and saints live in the presence of God forever. While on earth, the saints managed to seek the face of the Lord consistently and finally God revealed Himself to them and declared them worthy to live in His presence. This is our ultimate goal as Christians.

To attain this goal, we should seek the Lord always. David had so much zeal for God that God described him as the man after His heart. David described his zeal in Psalms 42:1-2:

As a deer longs for a stream of cool water, so I long for you o God; I thirst for you the living God; when can I go and worship in your presence?

We all need similar zeal for God. This zeal culminates in devotion to God's work. We can only reach Him through devotion to our Christian faith and especially to the sacraments. Each sacrament gives us special grace that brings us closer to God. Joining devotional groups in the church also helps us greatly in our search for God both as individuals and as a community. The groups help us to nourish our faith, improve our prayer life and serve the church and community better. Every Christian should belong to at least one devotional group.

Devoted Christians should read the Bible regularly to know God and understand His will. St. Jerome stated this clearly: *Ignorance of scripture is ignorance of Christ*. Christians should also carry a prayer book with them to pray during their free time. They should join the small Christian communities and the appropriate church associations in order to strengthen

their faith and that of their brothers and sisters. They should not shy away from witnessing in public; rather they should learn to disregard the opinion of the world when it comes to seeking the face of God.

Paul encourages devotion in several epistles. He wrote to Timothy:

Physical exercise has some value, but spiritual exercise is valuable in every way because it promises life both for the present and for the future. (1Timothy 4:8).

Devotion is the spiritual exercise which every Christian requires in order to remain fit for the kingdom of God. Devoted Catholics ought to go an extra mile beyond attending Sunday Mass. They need to visit the adoration chapel frequently to be with Jesus and attend Mass during days of obligation as well as weekdays whenever they can.

We should emulate Jesus in His devotion to the house of His Father. At the age of twelve, he accompanied his parents to Jerusalem for the festival of the Passover. On their way back home, the boy was left behind without the knowledge of the parents. They found him three days later. He had spent all the time in the temple discussing with the Jewish teachers. When they questioned him, he quickly and confidently asked;

“Didn’t you know I had to be in my father’s house?” (Luke 2:49).

Mary and Joseph could not comprehend the magnitude of Jesus’ devotion at that moment. This devotion to God’s house was similar to that of David (Psalms 84:10).

One day spent in your temple is better than a thousand anywhere else; I would rather stand at the gate of the house of my God than live in the house of the wicked.

By seeking the Lord, even though we do not see Him, we get to know Him. We become friends of the Holy Trinity. We recognize the presence of the Lord and enjoy the peace that comes with this knowledge. The awesomeness of God becomes manifest in our lives and we develop the fear of the Lord. This is the beginning of wisdom as Proverbs 9:10 and Psalms 111:10 account: **the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.** St. Francis de Sales, Bishop and doctor of the church had the following to say about the fear of God: *“We must fear God out of love, not love Him out of fear.”* St. Thomas Aquinas made a beautiful comment that greatly challenges our zeal for God: *How easy it is for a man to desire all kinds of things from the Lord, and yet not desire the Lord Himself! As though the gift could be sweeter than the Giver.* We should not seek God just because we need Him to

provide for us and heal us; we should do so because it is beautiful to know Him and become His friends. Healing and blessings follow us when we are united with our loving Father.

(2) OBEY GOD’S COMMANDMENTS

As members of God’s family, we must adhere to his commandments so that He can fulfil His promises to us. Every organization is stabilized by rules and regulations.

Paul told Timothy, **“An athlete who runs in a race cannot win the price unless he obeys the rules** (2 timothy 2:5).

God gave the following instructions to the people of Israel through Moses:

Now people of Israel, listen to what the Lord your God demands of you: Worship the Lord and do all that he commands. Love Him, serve Him with all your heart and obey all his laws.” (Deuteronomy 10:12).

They could only enjoy God’s promises after obedience.

Obey all the laws that I have given you today. Then you will be able to

cross the river and occupy the land that you are about to enter (Deuteronomy 11:8).

The promises of God lead to joy as we read in Psalms 128:1; **Happy are those who obey the Lord, who live by His commands.** Obedience sets us free (John 8: 31-32):

So, Jesus said to those who believed in Him, “If you obey my teachings, you are really my disciples; you will know the truth and the truth will set you free.”

It is by obeying God’s commandments that we become His friends: **you are my friends if you do what I command you to.** (John 15:14).

The Commandments

Moses was given the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20), plus many other laws and regulations that the Israelites were required to follow. In Christianity however, we mainly observe the Ten Commandments. All Christian teachings are based on these commandments.

In the first commandment, God instructs us to worship Him alone. When we do so, He fulfils His promises to us. We read about these promises in Exodus 23:25-26:

If you worship me, the Lord your God, I will bless you with food and water and take away all your illnesses. In your land no woman will have a miscarriage or be without children. I will give you long lives.

The worship of images and ungodly spirits, excessive desire for wealth and power as well as lust, are all forms of idolatry. These practices and desires become substitutes for the worship of the one and true God. Paul tells us so in Philippians 3: 18-19.

I have told you this many times before, and now I repeat it with tears: there are many whose lives make them enemies of Christ's death on the cross. They are going to end up in hell, because their god is their bodily desires. They are proud of what they should be ashamed of and they think only of the things that belong to this world.

The second and third commandments are closely related to the first, in that they teach us to honour God. The rest of the commandments teach us how to relate to one another.

Jesus summarized the Ten Commandments into these two categories in Mathew 22:37-40:

Jesus answered, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul and with your entire mind; this is the greatest and most important commandment. The second most important commandment is like it; Love your neighbour as you love yourself.”

The entire law is based on LOVE. If we love God, we shall obey all His commandments: **If you love me, you will obey my commands.** (John 14-15). Through love, we shall worship Him alone, honour His name and observe the Sabbath. On the other hand, by loving our neighbour (fellow man) we shall obey all the other commandments (fourth to tenth). This is clearly stated by Paul in Romans 13:8-10:

Be under obligation to no one – The only obligation you have is to love one another. Whoever does this has obeyed the law. The commandments, “Do not commit adultery; do not commit murder; do not steal; do not desire what belongs to someone else”- all these, and any others besides, are summed up in the command, “Love your neighbour as you love yourself.” If you love someone, you

**will never do them wrong: to love,
then, is to obey the whole law.**

Love overcomes all offences as we read in Proverbs 10:12:

Hate stirs up trouble, but love overcomes all offences.

Love also overcomes all fear as we read in 1John 4:18: **There is no fear in love, but perfect love drives out fear.**

In the first letter of St. John, we find the true essence of love:

**Dear friends, let us love one another,
because love comes from God. Whoever
loves is a child of God and knows God.
Whoever does not love does not know God
for God is love.” (1 John 4:7-8).**

After seeking and knowing God, the Holy Spirit fills our hearts with love. Love is the driving force that enables us to follow his commandments to the letter.

Love today

There is great misconception about love. The word has been used extensively in place of lustful passion (Eros). On the other hand, brotherly love (Philia) is a characteristic of all animals. Members of the same species coexist because of this love. To human beings, brotherly love is great because it makes people care for one another. However, it is conditional; we love and assist only those who will help us in future. This

kind of love is not special in any way. It is only natural. Even atheists, gangsters, terrorists, and drug addicts pool together and assist one another.

The world focuses less on the unconditional love of God (Agape), which enables us to make a difference as Christians. The love of God enables us not only to love our family members and friends, but also our enemies and those whom the world considers unlovable. God leads by example. Even though our sins make us unlovable, His love for us remains constant (Isaiah 54:10). **“Though the mountains be shaken, and the hills be removed, yet my unfailing love for you will not be shaken, nor my covenant of peace be removed,” says the Lord who has compassion for you.**

Jesus taught us to love our enemies in Luke 6: 27-28.

But I tell you who hear me; love your enemies, do well to those who hate you, bless those who ill-treat you. Surely, if we love only those who love us back, how different are we from pagans?

St. Paul also gives us a similar message in Romans 12:20;

If your enemies are hungry, feed them; If they are thirsty, give them a drink; for by

doing this you will make them burn with shame.

Proving to our enemies that we have nothing against them makes them change their attitude towards us and slowly by slowly, the ice is broken, and reconciliation is achieved. Such are the works of love as St. Gregory the Great stated: *The proof of love is in the works. Where love exists, it works great things. But when it ceases to act, it ceases to exist.*”

Love is the summary of all the Christian teachings and the greatest fruit of the Holy Spirit. Paul preached love in all his epistles and especially in 1 Corinthians 13 and 14. A good summary is found in 1 Corinthians 13:13;

Meanwhile these three remain: faith, hope and love; and the greatest of these is love.

The opposite of love is hatred. Hatred is so grievous that it is equated to murder:

“Whoever hates his brother is a murderer and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him.” (1John 3:15).

What do we need to do?

In conclusion, let us always obey God’s commandments. Disobedience leads to dire consequences as we have already

seen. Leading others into disobedience has even more profound consequences as Jesus teaches us in Matthew 5:19:

So then, whoever disobeys even the least important of the commandments and teaches others to do the same, will be least in the kingdom of heaven.

Without the Holy Spirit, we cannot succeed in obeying the commandments. Therefore, we should join the psalmist in the following prayer:

Create a pure heart in me, O God, and put a new and loyal spirit in me. Do not banish me from your presence; and do not take your Holy Spirit away from me. Give me again the joy that comes from your salvation, and make me willing to obey you, then I will teach sinners your commands and they will turn back to you (Psalms 51:10-13).

The Holy Spirit gives us His fruits which include love. Love enables us to obey all the commandments of God.

For the Catholics, let us not forget the six commandments of the church too. They guide us on how to remain devoted to our faith.

(3) PRAISE

Praise refers to the expression of approval for the achievements or qualities of someone or something. Praising God involves hailing Him for His majesty and great deeds. The angels and saints in heaven praise Him unceasingly (Revelation 19). We too as the pilgrim church should praise God for all He does for us. Praise is the expression of both worship and thanksgiving.

Praise can be in the form of prayer, speech, music or poetry. The book of Psalms is mainly a collection of poems of prayer, thanksgiving, praise and worship. In Psalms 103, the writer challenges his soul:

**Praise the Lord my soul, all my being,
praise His Holy Name. Praise the Lord my
soul and do not forget how kind He is. He
forgives all my sins and heals all my
diseases; He keeps me from the grave and
blesses me with love and mercy. He fills my
life with good things so that I stay young
and strong like an eagle.**

Psalms 34:1-2 has the same message:

**I will always thank the Lord; I will never stop
praising Him. I will praise Him for what he
has done; may all who are oppressed listen and
be glad.**

Similar words are echoed in Isaiah 25:1:

**Lord, you are my God; I will honour you and
praise your name; you have done amazing things,
you have faithfully carried out the plans you made
long ago.**

We should recite these psalms as though we composed them ourselves. Indeed, the Lord has been gracious to all of us. He has blessed us greatly, and we should praise Him in one voice. This is what the Psalmist emphasizes all through his book. His poems are meant to mobilize all the people to praise the Lord. This is clear in the following verses: Psalms 47:1: **clap your hands for joy all peoples, Praise God with loud songs.** Psalms 67:3: **May all the peoples praise you o God; may all the peoples praise you.** Psalms 33:1-2: **all you that are righteous shout for joy for what the Lord has done; Praise Him all you that obey Him; Give thanks to the Lord with harps, sing to Him with stringed instruments.**

It is indeed our mandate to praise God. The Lord our God is jealous and requires our worship and praise (Exodus 34:14). He does not tolerate rivals and cannot share His glory with any other god. In the Lord's Prayer, Jesus taught us to praise God before we continue with the rest of the petitions. **Our Father who art in Heaven, hallowed be thy name.** This is perfect praise.

Jesus explained the benefits of praising Him in John 12:32: **When I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw everyone to me.** This verse may be taken in four different contexts. The first one is the crucifixion of Jesus. John was convinced that Jesus was referring to this one. During the crucifixion, Jesus was literally lifted on the cross for the entire human race to witness. His arms were outstretched as a sign of love. By approaching the cross with a repentant heart, Jesus embraces us and draws us to Himself on behalf of His father. This is also explained in Isaiah 52:13-15:

See my servant shall prosper; he shall be raised high and greatly exalted. Even as many were amazed at him, so marred was his look beyond that of man, and his appearance beyond that of mortals – so shall he startle many nations.

Secondly, the verse points at the exaltation of Jesus Christ on the Day of Judgment. The Lord will appear in the sky and draw all men and women of faith to himself, leaving the earth to the prince of the world and his followers.

The third context is the ascension of Jesus to heaven. He was lifted as the apostles watched in amazement. By the power of the Holy Spirit who took charge when Jesus returned to His

Father, men and women are drawn to God every day; so that they may finally occupy the place He went to prepare for them.

The fourth context points at praising the Lord Jesus. By praising Him, we lift Him above all beings and creatures. As we do so, He is pleased with us and He draws us close to Himself. In the process, He answers our prayers, heals our diseases and blesses us. In the Catholic liturgy, Jesus is lifted in the Blessed Sacrament immediately after consecration and during exposition for all Christians to adore and praise Him.

In Hebrews 13:15, Paul teaches on praise:

Let us then always offer praise to God as our sacrifice through Jesus, which is the offering presented by lips that confess him as Lord.

Luke 19:40 tells us that God must be praised in all circumstances. As Jesus entered Jerusalem, the Pharisees asked Him to calm his disciples who were praising Him loudly. **Jesus answered, “I tell you that if they keep quiet, the stones will start shouting.”** Similar imagery is found in Psalms 96: 11-13;

Be glad earth and sky!

Roar sea and every creature in you!

The trees in the woods will shout for joy when the Lord comes to rule the earth.

The poem shows clearly that God deserves the praise of all His creation for He is the one who sustains them. The psalmist was so moved that he finished his book on a praising note:

“Let everything that has breath praise the Lord. (Psalms 150:6)

In actual sense, only living human beings can praise the Lord on behalf of all creation (Psalms 115:17-18). However, if they abdicate this responsibility, the Lord has the power to order the rest of creation to do so because He must be praised. Will we wait to see the animals praise and dance for the Lord? Can you imagine the life-less stones shouting in praise as you listen? Let us arise and play our role.

It is widespread practice to praise our leaders when we are happy with them or when we want a favour from them. We should praise God much more because He sustains us in every way and gives us joy and hope.

What do we need to do?

In summary, this is what we ought to do: share testimonies about what the Lord has done for us, shower the Lord with praise and honour during prayers, and compose poems and music in praise of His name. Gifted singers should join the choir because here they have a wonderful opportunity to praise the Lord and lead the rest of the congregation in doing the same. We should also praise God in our families and small Christian communities through Psalms and songs. Psalms of praise are either sung or recited during every celebration of Holy Mass. Indeed, nothing pleases God more than an assembly of worshippers praising and magnifying Him. However, an individual can also praise God during prayers or through music. When we attend spiritual retreats, we get enough time to praise God together with other Christians.

Considering all the above opportunities, we can correctly conclude that all human beings have enough time and opportunities to praise the Lord. We have no excuse for failure to meet this obligation.

When we praise God, He is pleased with us and He comes closer to us, thereby listening to our prayers, healing our diseases and alleviating our suffering. As we said earlier, praise is an external expression of worship and thanksgiving.

When we forget to thank God for what He has done for us, we lose numerous blessings and our problems resurface easily.

Praising in distress

It is important to praise God even in distress. Paul and Silas were delivered from prison because of their songs of praise. They focused on God rather than their problems. The two evangelists teach us that no problem is too big for God. When we focus on Him, He is able to get us out of any kind of trouble. Actually, we get better results when we concentrate on praising God than when we keep repeating our petitions to Him. Through praise, God gives us the strength to withstand our difficulties until He gets us out of them. We get this lesson from prophet Habakkuk:

**Even though the fig trees have no fruit,
and no grapes grow on the vines, even
though the olive crop fails and the
fields produce no corn, even though the
sheep all die and the cattle stalls are
empty, I will still be joyful and glad
because the Lord God is my saviour.
The sovereign Lord gives me strength.
He makes me sure-footed as a deer,
and keeps me safe on the mountains.
(Habakkuk 3:17).**

We get strength from the Lord through prayers, praise and worship, as well as reading the scriptures. The strength

enables us to smile even when we ought to be drenched in tears, to laugh when we ought to cry, and to encourage others when we need encouragement ourselves.

(4) TITHES AND OFFERINGS

In the Christian context, tithing refers to the act of giving ten percent of one's income to the church or congregation of worship. On the other hand, offerings refer to the gifts we present to God for the purpose of prayer, worship and thanksgiving. Since these three acts are the hallmark of our relationship with God, the teaching on tithes and offerings has remained relevant since time immemorial. For the purpose of clarity, praise is the offering we give to God by our lips. However, we are required to give physical gifts too. In this subtopic, we shall discuss these gifts and their spiritual significance.

TITHES

God instructed the people of Israel to tithe in Leviticus 27:30 and 32:

One-tenth of all the produce of the land, whether grain or fruit, belongs to the Lord. One out of every ten domestic animals are counted, every tenth one belongs to the Lord.

Failure to tithe is synonymous with cheating or robbing God.
Malachi 3:8-10 states this fact:

I ask you, is it right for a person to cheat God? Of course not, yet you are cheating me. How? You ask: In matters of tithes and offerings. A curse is on all of you because the whole nation is cheating me. Bring the full amount of your tithes to the temple, so that there will be plenty of food there. Put me to test and you will see that I will open the windows of heaven and pour out on you in abundance all kinds of good things.

From the verses above, Malachi teaches us three lessons:

- (i) God requires us to tithe.
- (ii) Failure to tithe faithfully has serious consequences.
We never become poor because of tithing; neither do we get richer because of failure to tithe. In actual sense, failure to tithe makes our financial situation worse.
- (iii) By tithing fully, we receive blessings from God's abundance.

OFFERINGS

God requires our offerings as Malachi 1:11 teaches us:

For from the rising of the sun, even to its setting, my name is great among the nations. And everywhere they bring sacrifices to my name, and a pure offering. For great is my name among the nations, says the Lord of hosts.

There were many laws regarding offerings especially in the books of Leviticus and Numbers. Several days in the Jewish calendar were dedicated for these. Examples of these include the harvest festival (Leviticus 23:15 and Numbers 28:26) and New Year festival (Numbers 29) which were meant for thanksgiving. Others like regular offerings, Sabbath offerings and the festival of shelters, all found in Numbers 28 and 29 were dedicated for worship and prayer. During the Day of Atonement, offerings were made as a sign of repentance. (Leviticus 23:26-32).

Remember, all Jewish offerings were in form of domestic animals and farm produce. A portion of the farm produce was presented, while animals were sacrificed at the altar by the priests. This is referred to as blood sacrifice or burnt offerings.

Offerings Today

(The Holy Mass)

The Holy Mass is the centre of all offerings today. It remains the best way to give thanks to God. Once, St. Teresa of Avila was overwhelmed by God's goodness and asked our Lord, "How can I thank you." Our Lord replied, "ATTEND ONE MASS."

During every celebration of Mass, we offer bread and wine to thank God for blessing the work of our hands. This practice started in the olden days of the priest Melchizedek and has remained relevant to date. It represents the offering of our farm produce just like the Jewish people did. However, the shedding of animals' blood is no longer required. This is because God gave us His son Jesus as the lamb for the sacrifice. This is the entire mystery of the Eucharist. The priest begins by consecrating the bread and wine to God. Through the priest's prayers and blessings (The words of institution), the bread and wine become the body and blood of the Lamb of God (Transubstantiation). Through the hands of the priest, we proceed to offer the same body and blood of Christ to God the Father for our salvation.

The bread and wine become the species through which the Lamb of God is manifested to the world in the spiritual sense. It is through these species that we are able to eat His flesh (our spiritual food) and drink His blood (our spiritual drink). This precious sacrifice is the essence of Holy Mass.

In John 6:51, Jesus faithfully and humbly accepts to be the sacrificial lamb for our salvation: **...If anyone eats this bread, he will live forever. The bread that I will give him is my flesh, which I give so that the world may live.** He affirms this in Luke 22:19: **...This is my body, which is given for you....** and continues in Luke 22:20: **...This cup is God's new covenant sealed with my blood, which is poured out for you.** This is the cost of our redemption. Unlike the Israelites, we no longer have to shed the blood of animals to have our sins forgiven. The blood of Jesus shed on the cross is sufficient for this purpose. Paul tells us so in Hebrews 9:12:

When Christ went through the tent and entered once and for all into the most Holy place, He did not take the blood of goats and bulls to offer as a sacrifice; rather, He took His own blood and obtained eternal salvation for us.

This verse reminds us that the crucifixion of Jesus will not happen a second time. It happened once and for all. However,

whenever we attend Holy Mass, the Calvary sacrifice is renewed in our hearts. This gives us the opportunity to tap the grace that came with this sacrifice two thousand years ago.

The following quotation from St. John Vianney demonstrates the greatness of Holy Mass:

All the good works in the world are not equal to the Holy sacrifice of the Mass because they are the works of men; but the Mass is the work of God. Martyrdom is nothing in comparison, for it is but the sacrifice of man to God; but the Mass is the sacrifice of God for man.

During the breaking of the bread, we are spiritually able to recognize the presence of Jesus. In Luke 24:30-31, the two disciples who were walking to Emmaus could not recognize Him until He broke the bread. That is when their spiritual eyes were opened. We too have the opportunity to recognize the Lord during:

(i) Consecration

(ii) Adoration of the Holy Eucharist.

The final part of Mass is the subsequent ‘feast of the Lamb of God’ where we receive the body and blood of Jesus whom we sacrificed. This feast is referred to as Holy Communion. To commune means to be closely united for the purpose of

sharing. During the last supper, Jesus shared one bread and one cup with His disciples. Holy Communion is celebrated in memory of this act of sharing. During Holy Communion, we share one source of Grace and love, which is the body and blood of Christ. Through receiving Christ, each individual is united with Him, and then the entire community of Christians is bound together in His love and grace.

This spiritual food fills our hearts with the strength to continue living with God, in God and for God. The Holy Eucharist is the wonderful stream that Ezekiel described in his book (Ezekiel 47). The stream emanated from the temple and flowed towards the sea. All sorts of fruits grew along its banks and all types of fish multiplied in its waters. When it entered the sea, it turned the salty water into fresh water. The Eucharist gives us tremendous grace and a new lease of life that helps us to overcome sin and transform the world. No wonder Jesus had so much to say about the Eucharist long before He instituted it (John 6:35-58). He said of those who receive His body:

- They will never go hungry or thirsty
- They will never die
- They have eternal life
- He will raise them on the last day

- They remain in Him while He remains in them.

All Christians should therefore aspire to participate in the Holy Communion. By embracing the sacraments of baptism, matrimony and reconciliation, we become worthy to participate in this refreshing sacrament of the altar. St. Ignatius of Antioch demonstrated his zeal for the Holy Eucharist when he said, *“I hunger for the bread of God, the flesh of Jesus Christ; I long to drink of His blood, the gift of unending love.”*

Other Offerings

Other offerings in form of cash, food and other materials needed for the continuity and upkeep of the church are presented during Mass. The church also requires us to give seasonal offerings such as during lent and advent. The practice of giving special offerings for specific intentions by individuals, families, small Christian communities or bigger groups is also very important. In a nutshell, it is crucial to support the church. This is one of the commandments of the Church.

The use of Tithes and Offerings

All tithes and offerings are used in the church for the upkeep of the ministers, supporting church development projects and promoting evangelization. Part of it is used to assist the poor. This was the commandment of God to the Jews in Exodus 30:11-16:

Collect the money from the people of Israel and spend it for the upkeep of the tent of my presence. This tax will be the payment of their lives and I will remember to protect them.

LESSONS ON OFFERINGS

(i)They should be genuine

We should offer authentic gifts to God, not leftovers or rejects. In Genesis 4:3-5, Abel was blessed for giving the best while Cain was cursed for presenting an offering that did not please God.

(ii)Give with a contrite heart.

The Lord only receives gifts from a contrite heart. Offering gifts while our hearts are full of sin or with the wrong intentions is of no value. Jesus taught this in Mathew 5:23-24:

So, if you are about to offer your gift to God at the altar and there you remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar, go at once and make peace with your brother, and then come back and offer your gift to God.

The characteristics of a contrite heart are well demonstrated in Micah 6:6-8:

What shall I bring to the Lord, the God of Heaven, when I come to worship Him? Shall I bring the best calves to burn as offerings to Him? Will the Lord be pleased if I bring Him thousands of sheep or endless streams of olive oil? Shall I offer Him my firstborn child to pay for my sins? No, the Lord has told us what is good, what He requires is this: to do what is just, to show constant love, and to live in humble fellowship with our God.

The two lessons above complement each other, in that we are required to give our best with a contrite heart. Giving leftovers is unacceptable to God even if we had a contrite heart. Likewise, we may present many valuable gifts to God but without a contrite heart, it remains a mere pious exercise. The Lord will not accept them. This is the reason why St. Augustine said, *“God bestows more consideration on the*

purity of the intention with which our actions are performed than on the actions themselves.”

The Holy Mass is very well organized. It starts by giving us the opportunity to repent our venial sins and forgive one another before we proceed to listen to God’s word and offer our gifts with a contrite heart.

(iii) We cannot pay God through tithes and Offerings.

We cannot pay God for all His kindness and blessings. We cannot afford to foot the bill through offerings and tithes. They are too meager! **No one can pay God the price for his life** (Psalms 49:7). Similarly, we don’t do God a favour by giving back to Him. This is our obligation whose purpose is to thank, worship and praise Him for His love; after all, everything we own belongs to Him. According to His promise, He will bless us at His own time and discretion. We cannot ‘bribe’ Him through tithes and offerings.

(iii) We should give cheerfully.

We should always present our offerings joyfully, without grumbling and complaining; God loves a cheerful giver (2 Corinthians 9:6-7). The moment we part with our tithes and offerings, they cease to be ours. It is important to know how

the church uses them; however, when we concentrate too much on this issue, we easily lose focus. We need to play our part and let our pastors play their part too.

It is worth mentioning that tithes and offerings are not synonymous with charity. While tithes and offerings are our direct obligations to God (category A), charity is an obligation to our fellow human beings (category c).

CHAPTER ELEVEN: CATEGORY B - DUTIES TOWARDS SELF

I have placed this category in the middle because it links the other two. When we take care of our inner selves, God gives us the grace to know Him and to reach out to fellow men. In other words, duties towards self are the steps we need to take in order to prepare ourselves for duties towards God (category A) and humanity (category C).

(1) REPENTANCE

Repentance refers to the Act of being remorseful for wrongdoing. When a person repents, they proceed to confession, which refers to admitting one's wrongs. In the Christian context, we confess our sins to receive God's forgiveness. Sin refers to the violation of God's commandments.

God instructs us through the Bible and the church to repent and confess our sins. This is through the sacrament of penance. Penance refers to the reparation we make for our sins. Through this sacrament, our sins are forgiven, and we are reconciled with God and the Holy church. 1 Peter 2:1-2 tells us to rid ourselves of sin: **Rid yourself then of all evil; no more lying or hypocrisy or jealousy or insulting language.** As long as we are part of the pilgrim church on

earth, we are all sinners. This is explained in the following Bible verses:

- (i) Romans 3:12: **All have turned away from God; they have all gone wrong; no one does what is right, not even one.**
- (ii) Romans 3:24: **For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.**
- (iii) Psalms 51:5: **I have been evil from the day I was born; from the time I was conceived, I have been sinful.**
- (iv) 1 John 1:10: **If we say that we have not sinned, we make God out to be a liar, and His word is not in us.**

Effects of Sins in our Lives

Sin is dreadful. It leads to guilt, which in turn leads to shame and anxiety. Psalms 38:18 declares this: **I confess my sins, they fill me with anxiety.** Sirach tells us to flee from sin:

My son, have you sinned? Do not do it again, and ask for forgiveness for your previous faults. Flee from sin as from a snake. If you approach it, it will bite you,

its teeth are lion's teeth, and they deprive men of their lives.

Romans 6:23 confirms this further: **For the wages of sin is death; but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.** Sin drives us away from God and isolates us into spiritual death and misery.

Proverbs 28:13 tells us that sin blocks our prosperity:

He who conceals his sins prospers not, but he who confesses and forsakes them obtains mercy.

This proves to us that indeed many problems we experience today are consequences of sin.

What happens when a good person sins?

A good person should continue doing well because when they commit sin, the good they have done is forgotten. Sin masks all our good actions and erodes our blessings. Luckily, when a sinner repents, all his sins are forgotten too. This is well articulated in Ezekiel 33:12:

Now, mortal man, tell the Israelites that when someone good sins, the good he has done will not save him. If an evil person stops doing evil, he won't be punished and if a good person starts sinning, his life will not be spared.

This implies that God wants us to rid ourselves of sin at every moment of our lives. What matters most is not our past but the present moment.

What is the effect of repeating the same sins and postponing repentance?

The Bible warns us against repeating sins. We should not be so confident of forgiveness that we keep repeating sins. Similarly, we should not postpone repentance. We should repent immediately we realize our sins. This is written in Sirach 5:4-8:

Do not say, “I sinned, yet what happened to me?” For the Lord is slow to anger. Do not be so confident of forgiveness that you add sin to sin. Do not say, “His mercy is great, he will forgive the multitude of my sins”, for both mercy and wrath are with him, and his anger will rest on sinners. Do not delay to turn back to the Lord, and do not postpone it from day to day; for suddenly the wrath of the Lord will come upon you, and at the time of punishment you will perish.

God shows both mercy and wrath. All those who work hard to obtain His mercy will receive it. However, those who don't

will receive His wrath instead. God's mercy is not a leeway to sin; therefore, we should have the spiritual will to confess whenever we sin and avoid drifting back to the same sins after confession.

St. Augustine had the following to say about failure to confess:

In failing to confess, Lord, I would only hide You from myself, not myself from You.

We can never hide ourselves from God. However, we can hide God from ourselves by accumulating sins. When we do so, we experience spiritual misery.

What happens when we sin willfully?

Committing sin knowingly and in full consent (making the wrong choice when we know the truth) is a grave matter. This is mortal sin. Such sin is only forgiven through the sacrament of penance when we decide to make a new beginning.

However, without the resolution to transform our lives, the confession remains largely useless. We shall keep sinning willfully and end up in spiritual death as Paul tells us in Hebrews 10:26: **If we sin willfully after having the**

knowledge of the truth, there is now left no sacrifice for sins.

St. Catherine of Genoa had the following to say regarding the same:

Oh, what peril attaches to sin willfully committed! For it is so difficult for man to bring himself to penance; and without penitence, guilt remains and will ever remain, so long as man retains unchanged will to sin, or is intent upon committing it.

It is humanly impossible to acknowledge, confess and avoid sin. Only Christ can help us to do so. This is written in 1John 3:6: **So everyone who lives in union with Christ does not continue to sin, but whoever continues to sin has never seen Him or known Him.** Only Christ can give us the grace to live in the spirit rather than in the flesh. The desires of the flesh will always lead us back to sin while those of the spirit will lead us to righteousness.

Righteousness or holiness is the state of having no sin. Though we are sinners living in an evil world, the grace we receive through penance and other sacraments is sufficient to make us righteous. Jesus paid for our sins; all we need to do is to repent and we will be made Holy. We must strive for

righteousness in order to see God. **You must be Holy because I am Holy** (1 Peter 1:16). No speck of sin will enter heaven (Revelation 21:27). Since none of us would prefer hell or purgatory, we should all strive to enter heaven. We can achieve this goal through participating regularly in the sacrament of penance and attending Holy Mass. By so doing we will be assured of forgiveness for all our mortal and venial sins.

God Calls us to Repentance and Promises us His Forgiveness

In John 6:37-39, Jesus has kind words for us. He affirms that God wants us back to himself. He sent His son to bring us back to His kingdom:

Everyone whom my Father gives me will come to me. I will never turn away anyone who comes to me because I have come down from heaven to do not my own will but the will of him who sent me. And it is the will of him who sent me that I should not lose any of those he has given me, but that I should raise them all to life on the last day.

There is extraordinary joy in heaven when a sinner repents. This is expounded in the parables of ‘the lost sheep’ and ‘the lost coin’ in Luke 15:7 and 15:10 respectively. These parables

clearly demonstrate the immense value of the human soul. The Lord uses all possible means to reclaim each lost soul. This is a manifestation of the love of God. He calls us to repent and assures us of his pardon as we read in the following verses:

- (i) Hebrews 10:17: **Their sins and their evil doing I will remember no more.**
- (ii) Isaiah 43:25: **and yet, I am the God who forgives your sins, and I do this because of who I am, I will not hold your sins against you.**
- (iii) Isaiah 1:18: **Come now, let us talk this over, says Yahweh. Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red as crimson, they shall be like wool.**
- (iv) 1 John 1:9: **But if we confess our sins to God, He will keep his promise and do what is right; He will forgive our wrong doing.**
- (v) Psalms 103:12: **As far as the east is from the west so far does he remove our sins from us.**
- (vi) Ezekiel 33:11: **Tell them (the Israelites) that as surely as I, the Sovereign Lord am the Living God, I do not enjoy seeing sinners die. I would rather see them stop sinning and live.**

In these verses, God extends an olive branch to us. He desires that all people are reconciled with Him through repentance. No wonder the sacrament of penance is also referred to as the

sacrament of reconciliation. Through this sacrament, we are reconciled with God and the Church.

Results of Repentance

Paul teaches us in Romans 4:7-8 that when we repent our sins; God answers our prayers and fills us with Joy:

Happy are those whose wrongs are forgiven, whose sins are pardoned! Happy is the person whose sins the Lord will not keep account of.

James 5:16 tells us that the prayers of a repentant heart are powerful; God listens to them and answers them.

So then, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, so that you may be healed. The prayer of a good person has a powerful effect.

To prove this, the psalmist gives his testimony in Psalms 66:18-19:

If I had ignored my sins, the Lord would not have listened to me. But God has indeed heard me; he has listened to my prayer.

What do we need to do?

In conclusion, we should heed God's call to repentance. The church gives us the opportunity to save our souls through the sacrament of penance. Remember, we can only save our souls while on earth (Pilgrim or militant church). The souls in purgatory (suffering church) cannot do so; they rely on our prayers to shorten their suffering. The souls in Heaven (triumphant church) need no repentance because they have won the race. On the other hand, the souls in hell have totally lost the battle!

(2) FORGIVENESS

Forgiveness refers to the act of pardoning. This means to waive any negative feelings or desire to punish someone who has wronged another. Forgiveness is rarely treated with the significance it deserves. It is only mentioned in passing by most preachers, yet without it, we can never encounter God's grace and forgiveness.

As social beings, we are frequently offended by those we interact with. When we fail to forgive, the pain remains in our hearts and becomes inner wounds. These wounds keep piling up and before we know it, our spiritual life is so frail that our emotional and physical well-being is already affected.

We need to forgive to be forgiven

Failure to pardon those who trespass against us is synonymous to living in sin. The effects are similar. The two are linked by the fact that God cannot forgive us our sins if we do not forgive others. Jesus confirmed this teaching in Mark 11:25:

And when you stand and pray, forgive anything you may have against anyone, so that your father in heaven will forgive the wrongs you have done.

We have to forgive in order to be forgiven, as Jesus also taught us in the Lord's Prayer: **Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who trespass against us** (Luke 11:4).

He also cautioned us in Luke 6:37:

Do not judge others, and God will not judge you; do not condemn others and God will not condemn you; forgive others and God will forgive you.

Do you remember the parable of the unforgiving servant in Matthew 18: 21-35? His forgiveness was revoked because of his unforgiving nature.

Paul tells us in Ephesians 4:32: **Instead, be kind and tenderhearted to one another, and forgive one another as God**

has forgiven you through Christ. We cannot therefore underestimate the significance of forgiveness. Unforgiveness may be the reason why we suffer so much and our prayers go unanswered. We have failed to forgive and therefore our sins are not forgiven even after confession!

Unforgiveness is a block that locks the grace of God out of our lives. By forgiving, even if the offender has not begged our pardon, our sins are forgiven and our hearts are opened to God's grace and blessings.

Are there trespasses we should not forgive?

The greatest evil one can plan against another is probably murder. Jesus went through great suffering before His death in the hands of the Jews. Despite the excruciating agony, He had the spiritual will to pray for their forgiveness. This is the mark of His great love for humanity as described by St. Mark the ascetic: *The sign of sincere love is to forgive wrongs done to us. It was with such love that the Lord loved the World.*

Likewise, as stones continued to rain on St. Stephen, he had the spiritual strength to pray for the forgiveness of his persecutors. Isn't this extraordinary? When He forgave them, the doors of Heaven were opened to him.

These distinguished role models of our faith show us that no sin is unforgivable. In the same way the Lord forgives us all our sins except the sin against the Holy Spirit in Mark 3:28-29 (This refers to total rejection of God), we too need to forgive others for all their trespasses.

How many times should we forgive?

When Peter asked Jesus how many times one should forgive a brother who keeps trespassing, Jesus answered, “**No, not seven times, but seventy times seven.**” Peter thought seven times was already too much, but Jesus multiplied it seventy times over (uncountable). This means forgiveness should be limitless and unconditional. However, it is necessary to evaluate the intentions of others so that we don’t keep giving them the opportunities to wrong us.

What do we need to do?

To get rid of all inner wounds arising from unforgiveness, we need to quietly relive our lives since childhood and highlight all our offenders. One by one, we should forgive them and release them from our hearts. We will be surprised at how much unnecessary trash we carry. We will realize that it is not only our enemies who hurt us, but even those we consider close and significant to us. In the real sense, those close to us

hurt us more easily compared to our enemies. The list may include our parents and grandparents, spouses, children, siblings, relatives, general friends, girlfriends or boyfriends, fiancées, teachers, schoolmates, churchmates, neighbours, workmates, employers, employees, mentors, professionals and even church leaders; the list is endless. On the other extreme, there are criminals who hurt us deeply including thieves, robbers, murderers, arsonists, terrorists, rapists, instigators and perpetrators of crimes against humanity, as well as those who abuse and exploit us due to our vulnerability, leaving us unnecessarily traumatized. We must forgive them all in order to set our hearts free. This is not easy as we saw earlier. A lot of psychological, emotional and spiritual support is required. It is very important to seek justice where necessary in order to help transform the offender and protect other potential victims; however, justice does not remove the inner wounds left in us, only forgiveness does.

Surprisingly, we need to forgive ourselves too for the many occasions we have blamed ourselves unfairly, thereby being the obstacles to our own progress. We also need to confess the many times we have blamed God for our misfortunes, because God is never the author of harsh destiny.

The consequences of unforgiveness are dire as we saw earlier. Therefore, when we realize how much unforgiveness we have been harbouring in our hearts, we need to confess and rid ourselves of all the burdens and blocks. The person who forgives benefits more than the one being forgiven.

It goes without saying that we also need to ask for forgiveness from the people we have offended. Reconciliation is a path to peace. It helps the people we hurt to forgive us and rid themselves of unnecessary burden, thereby attaining God's mercy. Therefore, by failing to ask for forgiveness, we also become the source of blocks in other people's lives.

(3) HUMILITY

Humility is the virtue that enables people to consider others more important than themselves. They may be high ranking, more gifted, educated or wealthy, yet they treat others with respect and gentleness, considering them better than themselves. The opposite of humility is pride.

Humility is the nature of Jesus as manifested in His entire life on earth. It is best portrayed in Philippians 2:3-8:

**Do not do anything from selfish ambition
or from a cheap desire to boast but be
humble towards one another, always**

considering others better than yourselves; and look out for one another's interests, not just your own. The attitude you should have is the one that Christ Jesus had:

He always had the nature of God, but he did not think that by force he should try to remain equal with God. Instead of this, of his own free will he gave up all he had and took the nature of a servant. He became like a human being and appeared in human likeness. He was humble and walked the path of obedience all the way to death - His death on the cross.

Even though He was the son of God, Jesus sacrificed His glory to become man. He experienced human life with all its challenges, and eventually accepted death in its most shameful form, crucifixion, all for the sake of man. At no time did he consider human beings worthless; rather, He looked at them as precious beings worth dying for. Jesus is our model of humility; that is why He advised us to learn from Him: **Take my yoke upon you and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart and you will find rest for your souls.** (Matthew 11:19).

Humility and Service

Only humble people can serve God. Humility enables them to submit to the will of God and to obey His commandments.

Such people seek to glorify God rather than themselves. They are selfless and do not mind the opinion of the world, neither do they seek the world's approval in their service to God and fellow men.

John the Baptist

John the Baptist was a good example of a humble servant of God. Even though he was the great precursor of the Messiah, John considered himself just a voice shouting in the desert. In Mark 1:7, he considered himself unworthy of bending down to untie the Messiah's sandals. His deep humility is also expressed in John 3:30 where he spoke of Jesus: **He must become more important while I become less important.** Earlier in the same gospel, John had baptized Jesus and introduced Him as the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. The following day, John's disciples left him and followed Jesus. John did not mind all these; he continued with his ministry of baptism as usual. He felt greatly honoured to usher in the Messiah. Such is the nature of a humble servant of God, who allows the Lord to use them as a stepping-stone to His (God's) glory.

The same principle applies in our service to humanity. It is impossible to serve without humility. Jesus explained that to be great, one has to be humble (Luke 22:26):

But this is not the way it is with you, rather the greatest one among you must be like the youngest and the leader must be like the servant.

Humble people resemble little children in nature. This is the nature of those destined to inherit the kingdom of God as Jesus stated in Matthew 19:24:

Let the children come to me and do not stop them, because the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these.

As servants of God, we must pray. There can be no prayers without humility. Jesus demonstrated this clearly in the parable of ‘The Pharisee and the tax collector’ in Luke 18:9-14. The tax collector was justified for praying with humility and acknowledging his sins. On the other hand, the proud Pharisee was not justified. He did the exact opposite. God loves humble servants who will always cry to him for help. (Zephaniah 3:12):

I will leave there a humble and lowly people, who will cry to me for help.

As far as human relationships are concerned, humility leads to harmony in the society. Through it, spouses can listen to one another and children can obey their parents who will in return pay attention to them. Leaders can listen to those they lead and respect their views. Without humility, there can be no reconciliation or forgiveness. Similarly, peace cannot prevail because no one would appreciate the role of the other. That is how valuable humility is.

How to Acquire Humility

Humility is based on the following realizations:

- (i) Everything we have belongs to God. We are just stewards or custodians. John the Baptist emphasized this in John 3:27: **No one can have anything unless God gives it to him.** We become custodians for a short while, only to leave with nothing. **For we brought nothing into this world, and it is certain we carry nothing out.** (1Timothy 6:7).
- (ii) It is only through God's love and mercy that we possess what we do. We are no better than others. Others can rise above us if we boast about it.
- (iii) Only God is omnipotent; however powerful we may be, we cannot compete with Him. Kings David and

Solomon knew this. They worshipped God and obeyed Him.

- (iv) Only God is omniscient; however educated we may be, we can never compete with Him in terms of knowledge. The Three Wise Men knew this. Even though they were highly learned, they understood that the unique star was leading them to the saviour of the world.

In Genesis 11, God disrupted the construction of the Tower of Babel to prove to humanity that no one can reach Him or attain His knowledge.

- (v) No one is self-sustaining. We all need God as well as other people.

The above realizations help us to understand that we have no right to boast about our wealth, education, knowledge, social status, physical beauty or well-being, as well as gifts and talents. We should instead use these blessings with humility to glorify God and to benefit others.

The Results of Humility

God uplifts the humble and favours them. This happened to Jesus Himself as Paul explains in Philippians 2: 9-11:

For this reason, God raised him to the highest place above and gave him the name that is greater than any other name; and so, in honour of the Name of Jesus all beings in heaven, on earth and in the world below, will fall on their knees and all will openly proclaim that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Mother Mary

Our mother Mary also serves as a key role model. She was a humble servant of God who never expected any favour. Remember her humble submission to Angel Gabriel in Luke 1:38:

“Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord, let it be to me according to your word.”

God saw her humility and purity and chose her to be the most blessed woman, the mother of our Lord and saviour. Indeed in her canticle, the magnificat, Mary took note of this fact. She said: **“He has brought down mighty kings from their thrones and lifted up the lowly”**.

King David

David was a great king, yet he was so humble in nature. He loved God so much that he did not care about the opinion of the people. As the Ark of the Covenant was being brought into Jerusalem, David danced his heart out. He did not care about his self-image as king. His wife Michal, the daughter of

Saul, could not believe her eyes. She said to David in 2 Samuel 6:20:

How the King of Israel has distinguished himself today, going around half-naked in full view of the slave girls of his servants as any vulgar fellow would.

David answered her in 2 Samuel 6:21:

It was before the Lord who chose me rather than your father or anyone from his house when he appointed me ruler over the Lord's people Israel – I will celebrate before the Lord. I will become even more undignified than this, and I will be humiliated in my own eyes. But by these slave girls you spoke of, I will be held in honour.

Even though he was the king, David was not bothered by the reaction of the people. His aim was to please God. Consequently, the Lord made Him the greatest King of Israel. On the contrary, Michal was cursed and she remained childless until her death.

In 1 Peter 5:6, Peter advises us to remain humble.

Humble yourselves, then, under God's mighty hand, so that he will lift you up in his own good time.

Jesus taught us the same in Matthew 5:5:

Happy are those who are humble, they will receive what God has promised.

In Luke 14:11 He said:

For all those who make themselves great will be humbled and those who humble themselves will be made great.

It is better to cultivate humility rather than wait to be humbled. Being humbled is synonymous with eating humble pie or being forced to swallow one's pride.

Blessed Giles of Assisi had this to say about humility: *"No man can attain the knowledge of God, but by humility. The way to mount high is to descend"*

An anonymous also said, *"Humility brings Heaven down to earth and lifts the earth to Heaven."*

Is Boastfulness Ever Justified?

Apostle Paul justified boastfulness in a few situations. However, when we look at them critically, they do not contradict the spirit of humility.

(i) 1 Corinthians 1:31:

**So then, as the scripture says,
whoever wants to boast must
boast of what the Lord has
done.**

This teaches us that we should proudly testify about God's work in our lives instead of boasting about what we think we have achieved by ourselves.

(ii) Philippians 2:16:

**...as you hold on to the word of
life, so that my boast for the
day of Christ may be that I did
not run in vain or labour in
vain.**

This verse indicates that on the day of Christ, victorious Christians will be proud of the fruits of their works of faith as they proudly march into the kingdom of God.

(iii) 2 Corinthians 12:9:

**But he (the Lord) said to me
(Paul), "My grace is sufficient
for you, for power is made
perfect in weakness." I will
rather boast most gladly of my
weaknesses in order that the
power of Christ may dwell with
me. Therefore I am content**

**with weakness, insults,
hardships, persecutions and
constraints for the sake of
Christ, for when I am weak
then I am strong.**

Humility is not a weakness. On the contrary, considering our weaknesses is a sign of humility. We need to understand them so that we can work on them as we build on our strengths. St. Francis de Sales emphasized this when he stated: *“Do not lose courage in considering your own imperfections but instantly get about remedying them”*.

Indeed, if God were to give us strength and success all the time, we would end up forgetting Him. Therefore, no human being is perfect; we all have limitations. When we understand the weaknesses and shortcomings that make our Christian lives difficult, we automatically remember to pray for God’s strength. The Lord loves such people who surrender to Him in prayer. He gives them strength in their weaknesses and protects them against evil. This is why Paul boasted about his weaknesses.

When God called Moses, Jeremiah and Isaiah to His service, they all acknowledged their weaknesses. They were all humble men who needed God’s guidance and strength. No

wonder Moses became a great leader while Jeremiah and Isaiah became great prophets of Israel.

It is important to note that humility is not synonymous with fear. While fear is instilled by the evil one, humility is a fruit of the Holy Spirit.

PRIDE:

Pride is the opposite of humility. Proud persons regard themselves as more important than others. They are so cautious about their self-image that they are ready to disregard acts of faith to protect it.

Pride makes people selfish, and as a result, they mostly focus on themselves rather than God and other people. They cannot serve God and fellow men because it is impossible for them to deny themselves and follow Christ. Instead of denying themselves to follow Christ, they would rather deny their true selves to imitate the powerful, the educated and the wealthy.

Proud people are poor leaders because they cannot withstand corrections or objections to their ideas. According to them, they know it all and others have little to offer.

Pride kills love and charity by diminishing our capacity for compassion and kindness. Proud people cannot put

themselves in other people's shoes or go out of their way to help them. Whatever charity they practice is not an act of mercy but a means of boosting their ego and self-image. Such people consider God's blessings to be a result of their own efforts and see others as lazy and undeserving. They keep yearning for more, not for the glory of God but theirs. They easily trample on the rights of many people along their way.

Pride is a sin against the First commandment. It makes us worship ourselves, people of high profile, and material things instead of the one and true God. The main causes of pride are mentioned in Ezekiel 28. They include riches, physical beauty and well being, as well as wisdom and knowledge (intellectual pride). There is also pride associated with political power and social status, as well as spiritual pride where one thinks they are better than others in God's sight. Jesus used the parable of 'The Pharisee and the tax collector' to help us appreciate the difference between humility and spiritual pride.

The results of pride:

Pride leads to doom as prophesied upon the Israelites:

Now then, this is what I, the Sovereign Lord am saying; because you think you are as wise as a god, I will bring ruthless enemies to attack you. They will destroy

all the beautiful things you have acquired by your skill and wisdom. (Ezekiel 28:6-7).

Pride causes pain and suffering. Paul experienced this in 2Corinthians 12:7:

But to keep me from being puffed up with pride because of the many wonderful things I saw, I was given a painful physical ailment, which acts as Satan's messenger to beat me and keep me from being proud.

Pride is the first cardinal sin to be mentioned and is closely related to the other six: envy, gluttony, lust, anger, greed and sloth.

Jesus spoke against the pride of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law. They loved to sit in places of honour in the synagogues and to be greeted in the market places (Luke 11:43). He advised them to go for the least positions so that they would be honoured at the right time. Many Jews who believed in Jesus could not confess their faith because they feared the Pharisees. **For they loved the praise from men than praise from God (John 12:43).** This is pride.

Lucifer was the author of all pride. He was an archangel who wanted to be equal to God. His pride led to his expulsion from heaven together with all his supporters. Today he roams the earth, causing all the evils we see. All pride is inherited from him and leads to destruction. As an example, Cain's pride led him to murder Abel and to be rude to God. As a result, God cursed him.

What do we need to do?

As descendants of Adam and Eve, we have all inherited some form of pride. Since pride poses a threat to our faith, we need God's mercy and strength to overcome it. By renouncing Satan, we reject his pride and pave way for the humility of Jesus in our hearts.

Maintaining humility is not an easy task; it requires the grace of God. We should constantly pray for the grace and recite the Litany of humility, which helps us to examine our attitude regularly and to overcome all pride.

(4) PRAYER

Prayer refers to communication with God. This means talking to and listening to God. As children of God, we must talk to Him frequently and listen to his counsel in all situations.

You may wonder why I opted to place prayer in this category instead of category A. Without prayer, one can never know God. The only way to know Him is by seeking His face; but how can we seek His face without prayer? It is therefore more logical to classify prayer under category A. However, when we look at it critically, prayer is a duty towards self because it is the source of strength for the soul. It also links the other two categories because firstly, communicating with God makes us know Him better, and secondly, interceding for others is the greatest duty we have towards humanity and the most crucial tool in evangelization.

I also placed the topic fourth in category B because without forgiveness, repentance and humility, our prayers cannot be effective.

In the Bible, God repeatedly invites us to pray and promises to answer our prayers.

Such examples include:

1) Psalms 91:15:

**When they call to me I will answer them;
when they are in trouble, I will be with
them; I will rescue them and honour them.**

2) Jeremiah 33:3:

Call to me, and I will answer you; I will tell you wonderful and marvelous things that you know nothing about.

The psalmist confirms the promises of God in Psalms 116: 1-2. **I love the Lord because he hears me; he listens to my prayers. He listens to me every time I call to him.** St. Paul also encourages us to pray in Philippians 4:6:

Don't worry about anything, but in all your prayers ask God for what you need, always asking him with a thankful heart.

The son of God crowns it all in Luke 11:9-10:

And so I say to you, ask and you will receive; seek and you will find, knock and the door will be opened to you.

All these verses confirm to us that God listens to our prayers and therefore we should take our joys, needs, concerns, pains and worries to Him.

We have distinct physical and spiritual natures, though both are interdependent. While our physical nature is nourished through the basic needs, our spiritual nature is nourished by the spirit of God through prayer, devotion and the word of God. It is important to realize that each nature requires time to grow and develop. We cannot work or study all the time, neither can we pray all the time. During physical work, the

spirit allows the physical nature to concentrate on the work. Similarly, during prayer and meditation, the physical body should relax and give the spirit the opportunity to communicate with the supreme spirit of God. This is the only way to experience a breakthrough in prayer. Such breakthrough opens the heart of God as St. Padre Pio stated: *“Prayer is the best armour we have, it is the key which opens the heart of God.”* Once we open the heart of God through prayer, He gives us joy and inner peace. This is how our hearts find rest in Him.

How does God answer our Prayers?

God answers our prayers in three different ways: -

(i) Directly

This is where the Lord answers our prayers in the exact way we request of Him. For example, Jesus healed many sick people directly. God granted children to Sarah, Hannah and Elizabeth in miraculous ways. Through faith, God can grant us the desires of our hearts if only it is for our greater good and to the glory of His name.

(ii) Indirectly

When the Israelites complained to Moses and wished they were back in Egypt, God was angry with them. As a consequence of their rebellion, snakes emerged and bit many of them to death. The people quickly realized their mistake and cried to Moses with a repentant heart. Moses prayed for them and the Lord heard Him (Numbers 21:4-9). The Israelites expected God to take away the snakes, but instead, He instructed Moses to make a bronze snake and place it up on a pole. Anyone who was bitten by a snake and looked at the bronze snake was spared death. This is an example of an indirect answer to prayer.

There are many instances in our lives when God answers prayers indirectly, in the way He considers best for us. I may ask for food, but He gives me a job instead; I may ask for healing, but He sends a doctor to treat me well. In other words, God creates indirect avenues through which our dreams come true.

As human beings, we tend to ask for material things most times. When we don't get them, we conclude that God does not answer our prayers. We forget that the life, peace and health we enjoy are already indirect answers to prayer. We need them to achieve all the other goals in life. We must stop

equating blessings with material possessions only, and instead be thankful to God for His grace and peace. These are much more valuable than any material possession.

In both direct and indirect answers, God eventually answers our prayers. At no time does He become the bad father who gives his son a stone when he asks for bread or a snake when he asks for fish (Luke 11:11).

(iii) No answer at All

In some instances, the Lord does not answer our prayers. This could be due to several reasons:

(a)To protect us

God knows what is best for us and will deny us answers to protect us or lead us towards our true destiny.

(b)Lack of patience on our part

Sometimes we get no answer to our prayers because of impatience. When God does not answer our prayers quickly, we give up. Even though Sarah, Hannah and Elizabeth were blessed with sons, they had to pray patiently for a long time.

God answers our prayers when we persist. This is evident in the parable of ‘The widow and the unjust judge’ in Luke 18:1-

8. When the widow persisted in her quest for Justice, the unjust judge eventually gave in. You can imagine how gladly our just Heavenly Father will eventually answer our prayers when we persist.

Sometimes we are not in prayer mood; we feel as though our prayers do not make any impact. We should never give up. None of our prayers ever goes to waste.

(c) Spiritual obstacles

Obstacles to effective prayer include sin, unforgiveness, family bondage and lack of faith. Others include failure to thank God for prayers answered previously, as well as failure to give tithes and offerings. This list of obstacles is endless as it includes failure to do all that the Lord requires of us.

(d)Praying with wrong motives

Sometimes our prayers are wrong and selfish as James 4:3 states:

And when you ask, you do not receive it because your motives are bad, you ask for things to use for your own pleasures.

In some instances, we pray to test God. This is wrong as we read in Matthew 4:7:

It is written, “Do not put the Lord your God to the test.”

(e)Wrong prayers (Lack of focus)

It is important to know what we need to pray for and remain focused. A good example is healing and deliverance. When a sickness arises due to family bondage, we need to pray for both healing and deliverance. Without deliverance, healing may fail to occur, or the illness will keep recurring.

Contents of a good prayer

We have already seen that prayer involves talking to and listening to God. It encompasses many of the other topics we have already discussed. This is why I mentioned at the beginning that these categories have no clear-cut boundaries. Many of the topics are components of prayer as evidenced by our rich liturgy. The Holy Mass is the most perfect prayer as Pope Paul VI stated. It consists of all the components of prayer and in good order. These include:

- (i) Repentance and submission to God.
- (ii) Singing and praising.
- (iii) Listening to God’s word.
- (iv) Prayers of the faithful.

(v) Offerings and thanksgiving.

(vi) Worship and adoration (The Eucharist).

During Holy Mass, Christians are cleansed from venial sins and given spiritual food (The word of God and The Holy Eucharist). They present their petitions to God as they praise and worship Him, while offering Him gifts as a sign of thanksgiving. All these are components of a good prayer. The Lord's Prayer that Jesus taught us in Luke 11:1-4 is a good summary of these components.

Levels of prayer:

(i) Individual prayers

One offers these prayers alone, as communication between God and self.

(ii) Family prayers

In this type of prayer, family members gather to pray. A family that prays together stays together.

(iii) Community prayers

There are various levels of community prayers, ranging from the small Christian communities and neighbourhoods, to congregational, interdenominational, national and

international levels. The Holy Mass is the most perfect community prayer.

It is important to note that each level of prayer is very important and cannot be substituted for the other. Strong individual prayer lives should lead to strong family prayers, which should in turn enrich the community prayers.

Modes of Prayer

(i) Silent prayers

This is where one speaks to God silently. It may be an individual or a group of people who decide to pray silently.

(ii) Verbal prayers

In this mode of prayer, audible words are used to address God. This is the case with family and community prayers. An individual may also pray audibly in private.

(ii) Contemplative Prayers

Contemplation means to think deeply about something in a meditative manner and for a prolonged period. In contemplative prayer, we meditate deeply about God and calmly listen to his voice without haste. In actual sense, we beseech Him and listen to Him in equal measure.

Contemplation requires a quiet environment such as the adoration chapel, a quiet church or recollection grounds. However, the more we practice contemplation, the more we can achieve it even in less quiet environments.

Most of the great saints spent hours in contemplation. Contemplation relaxes the mind, releases stress and gives us inner peace. During these prayers, the spirit of God flows freely into the soul, giving us tremendous joy and peace that no words can describe. This state of grace makes Christians desire to contemplate longer and more regularly, in order to enjoy the presence of God and get strengthened spiritually. Grace is the reason why prayerful Christians experience joy even when faced with numerous challenges and suffering. It also helps them to renew the fruits and gifts of the Holy Spirit in their lives.

Grace is attained through contemplative prayer as James 4:8 states: **Come near to God and he will come near to you.** We come near to God through contemplation and in return God comes near to us through grace. Remember, a prayer that does not touch your heart is unlikely to touch the heart of God.

How often should we pray?

Muslims pray five times daily while the Jews pray thrice a day. How about Christians? The Bible narrates to us about many prayerful men and women. However, Christians are not compelled to follow a particular prayer schedule. With the coming of Christ, we are no longer under the law. However, this does not mean that we do not have to pray much. The church guides us by giving us prayers for different hours and seasons. For example, there are prayers for morning hours, noon, three o'clock, six o'clock and night time. There are also prayers for seasons such as Lent and Advent, as well as rosary months (May and October). The church also gives us prayers for different needs. Our own spontaneous prayers are also very important because they are the proof of open communication between God and us.

In a nutshell, every moment is a prayer moment for Christians. The kingdom of God never goes silent. This was the teaching of Paul in 1 Thessalonians 5:17:

Pray all times, be thankful in all circumstances. This is what God wants from you in your life in union with Christ Jesus.

It is also echoed in James 5:13:

Are any of you in trouble? You should pray. Are any of you happy? You should sing praises.

Even though Jesus was the son of God, He had to pray many times to remain in union with His Father and show us the significance of prayer. In Luke 5:16, He prayed many times; **but he would go away to lonely places, where he prayed.** He fasted and prayed for forty days in the desert after his baptism. We also remember his regular prayers on the Mount of Olives (Luke 22:39). He was indeed very prayerful.

We should follow the example of Jesus and the guidance of the Holy Spirit and the church, by creating enough time for prayer. It is good to carry prayer books while travelling or to the office so as to turn moments of idleness into moments of prayer. We should create time to visit the adoration chapel, attend Holy Mass and participate in spiritual retreats. When our prayers are granted, we should not stop praying. We should give thanks to God and continue praying for other courses and for other people.

Duration of prayer

Jesus taught us the Lord's Prayer, which is short, precise, and a summary of the contents of a good prayer. Similarly, church prayers are mostly short and precise. St. Benedict of Nursia

made this clear in his statement, “*Prayer ought to be short and pure unless it is inspired by divine grace.*” This does not contradict the teaching on persistent prayer. It simply encourages us to pray regularly, but in all cases, our prayers should be precise and to the point.

The last part of the Saint’s statement explains that divine intervention does prolong prayers. The best examples of prolonged prayers include the Holy rosary, which was presented to St. Dominic by our Lady herself and the Divine Mercy chaplet, which was presented to St. Faustina Kowalska by Jesus Himself. The main purpose of these long meditations is to make us contemplative intercessors. These prayers lead to the salvation of many souls both on earth and in purgatory. They are also very instrumental in both inner and physical healing of individuals and families and assure us of God’s grace, peace and protection from evil. Jesus prayed and fasted for hours and days in lonely places like the desert and the mountains. He was interceding for humanity.

Through different devotions, the church has come up with similar prolonged prayers such as novenas, devotions to different saints, litanies, other rosaries and chaplets. All these prayers are useful at individual, family and community levels.

Praying for Others

Christians should not be selfish in prayer. We are called to intercede for the rest of humanity. Praying for others is the most powerful practice in evangelization. When we do so, the Lord listens to our own prayers and blesses us more. We should pray for:

(i) Each other

We need to pray for one another, so that we can grow in faith together. This is the surest way to strengthen one another along the journey to heaven. This is the encouragement we get from Ephesians 6:18:

**Do all this in prayer asking for God's help.
Pray on every occasion as the spirit leads;
For this reason, keep alert and never give
up; pray always for all God's people.**

We need to pray for our spouses, children, parents and all family members, mentors and mentees, friends, neighbours, workmates, fellow Christians, professionals and all those who request us to pray for them. Instead of being jealous, we should thank God for the success of others and pray for the victory of those who are struggling.

(ii) Non-Believers

Our prayers can save the souls of sinners by drawing them to God. In the Divine Mercy chaplet, we invoke the Lord to have mercy on us and the whole world. Through our prayers, many non-believers can be converted. By praying for such people, we receive God's grace and blessings. Job's friends tried to corrupt his mind but he would not be shaken. When he prayed for them, the Lord blessed him greatly. This is well articulated in Job 42:10:

Then after Job prayed for his three friends, the Lord made him prosperous again and gave him twice as much as he had before.

(iii) Souls in Purgatory

Many souls languish in purgatory simply because those who can pray for them do not believe or do not understand the teaching on purgatory. We should pray for these souls so that the Lord shows them His mercy and welcomes them to heaven. Many of our prayers are answered when we pray for the souls in purgatory. According to the book 'Healing the Family tree' by Dr. Kenneth Mc All, who was surprisingly an Anglican clergyman, members of our families who are still in purgatory sometimes cause turbulence in our lives. This is a

way of reminding us to pray for them. Once they enter heaven, the turbulence ceases. These souls rely solely on our intercession for their salvation. Once in heaven, they now intercede for us. This practice of praying for the dead is found in 2 Maccabees 12:38-45.

(iv) The Disadvantaged

We should pray for all disadvantaged and vulnerable members in our society. These include the needy, the sick, the physically and mentally challenged, the lonely and rejected, the orphans, widows and widowers, the unemployed, addicts of harmful substances and habits, as well as the refugees and victims of violence. We should also pray for all those who have no one to pray for them.

(v) Leaders

We need to pray for our leaders in order to have a prosperous nation where the rights of all are respected. We get this teaching from 1Timothy 2:1-2:

First of all then, I urge that petitions, prayers, requests and thanksgiving be offered to God for all people, for kings and all others who are in authority, that we may live a quiet and peaceful life with all

reverence towards God and with proper conduct.

We need to pray for all families, church and political leaders as well as our country. Daniel exemplified this in chapter 9. He earnestly prayed for his country, asking the Lord to show mercy upon the people.

(vi) Those who hurt us

Praying for our aggressors and enemies is a difficult spiritual exercise. Both Jesus and St. Stephen prayed for their persecutors, asking God to forgive them. On many occasions, we find it hard to pray for those who hurt us, even unintentionally. We wish them misfortunes instead. We end up putting many blocks in our lives and fail to receive the graces that God has in store for us. By forgiving and praying for our aggressors and enemies, we are set free to receive these graces and our prayers are answered too.

Praying with others

Jesus taught us that praying with a friend, family members or as a group has great value.

And I tell you more! Whenever two of you on earth agree about anything you pray for, it will be done for you by my Father in Heaven. For where two or

**three come together in my name, I am
there with them** (Matthew 18:19).

This explains the value of family and community prayers.

CHAPTER TWELVE: CATEGORY C - DUTIES TOWARDS OTHERS

(1) CHARITY

Charity refers to acts of kindness towards others. It is mainly understood to mean generosity towards the needy. Provision of food, clothes and shelter remains the most obvious form of charity. However, offering professional services like free healthcare to the poor, free legal services to the oppressed or free counselling to traumatized people is great charity work too. It is also noble to visit the sick and the prisoners, to mourn with the bereaved as well as to sacrifice some time for the sake of those in need of our attention. In summary, charity involves all forms of support, including material, health, intellectual, emotional, psychological and spiritual. In the context of the church, these practices are referred to as works of mercy. For details on these acts, refer to the teaching of the church on corporal and spiritual works of mercy.

Charity is built on the realization that we live for God as well as for our brothers and sisters. It is worthless living in isolation without making any impact on others, as that would make us similar to the lesser creatures. By virtue of being created in the image of God, we are all able to practice some form of charity because we have some resources, knowledge,

skills, talents and/or time to share with someone in need. This is why Pope John Paul II stated: *No one is so poor that he has nothing to give and nobody is so rich that he has nothing to receive.* We all have something to give. Similarly, we all become needy at some point and turn to others for assistance.

In Matthew 10:8, Jesus tells us that we need to share our gifts freely... **You have received without paying. So, give without being paid.** This is elaborated by Paul in Hebrews 13:16: **Do not neglect to do well and to share what you have; God is pleased with sacrifices of that kind.** Most religions preach love and charity towards humanity. In Christianity, it is a sin of omission to neglect charity. We read about this in James 4:17:

Anyone, then, who knows the good he ought to do and doesn't do it, sins.

There are situations where only we can help. We should not let go of these opportunities if we have the ability to help and the action glorifies God and improves the welfare of the beneficiary.

Charity is a useful tool in evangelization. The missionaries knew that to win souls for Christ they had to help the people in all ways. They brought in education and technical skills

while offering healthcare and other needs. James approved of this practice in James 2:16-17:

What good is there in your saying to them, “God bless you! Keep warm and eat well!”- If you don’t give to them the necessities of life? So it is with faith: if it is alone and includes no actions, then it is dead.

Some of the most elaborate illustrations on charity that Jesus gave us include the parables of ‘the Good Samaritan’ in Luke 10:25-37 and ‘Lazarus and the rich man’, which is found in Luke 16:19-31. The Good Samaritan was praised for his act of mercy towards the victim of robbery whom even the religious leaders had failed to help. On the contrary, the rich man was condemned to hell for being merciless towards poor Lazarus.

Charity as Part of the Marking Scheme for Judgment

Our charity towards others will be considered greatly during the final judgment as Jesus taught us in Mathew 25:34-36:

Then the king will say to the people on his right, “Come, you that are blessed by my Father! Come and possess the kingdom which has been prepared for you ever since the creation of the world. I was hungry and you fed me, thirsty and you gave me drink; I was a stranger and you received me in your homes, naked and you clothed me; I

was sick and you took care of me, in prison and you visited me.

In these verses, Jesus gives examples of acts of charity, based on the basic human needs. According to this teaching, the King (Jesus Himself) is represented on earth by all the needy we see around us; those in need of care, love, kindness, attention and assistance. These are the people we consider least important. This is why Jesus used the same words in Mathew 25:45-46:

The king will reply, “I tell you, whenever you refused to help one of these least important ones, you refused to help me.” These then will be sent off to eternal punishment but the righteous will go to eternal life.

How should we Practise Charity?

(i) Make it Private:

Jesus teaches us how to practise charity in Mathew 6:2-4:

So, when you give something to a needy person, do not make a big show of it as the hypocrites do in the houses of worship and on the streets. They do it so that people will praise them. I assure you, they have already been paid in full. But when you help a needy person, do it in such a way that even your closest friend will not know

about it. Then it will be a private matter and your father who sees what you do in private will reward you.

This is a powerful teaching. Many people in the world today practice charity to gain praise and recognition. It is a widespread practice for political activists and aspirants to invite the media to cover their charity events. This is not charity; it is merely using the needy to gain political mileage and other selfish ends. Jesus taught us that such people have already received their reward through the fame and praise they get from people. On the contrary, a person who practices charity in private will receive the true reward from our Father in heaven.

(ii) Give to Those who cannot pay you back:

True charity should be directed towards the needy, without expecting anything in return. Giving only to the people who will pay us back amounts to no charity. Even pagans do that. Jesus taught this in Luke 6:33-35:

And if you do well only to those who do well to you, why should you receive a blessing? Even sinners do that! And if you lend only to those from whom you hope to get back, why should you receive a blessing? Even sinners lend to sinners, to get back the

same amount! No! Love your enemies and do well to them; lend and expect nothing back. You will then have a great reward, and you will be children of the highest God, for He is good to the ungrateful and the wicked.

We should emulate our heavenly Father who is good to all. Our charity should be directed to all the needy persons without discrimination. They don't have to be our friends or belong to our family, tribe, clan, race, political party or religion. Even our worst enemies can be in desperate need of our help. We should never discriminate against them. The greatest models of charity in recent times include Blessed Sister Irene Stefani from Kenya and St. Teresa of Kolkata, India. The two acquired the Holy titles through exemplary charity. They served far from their countries of birth and never discriminated against any needy persons no matter their condition, attitude or religion. They sacrificed greatly to bring comfort to suffering humanity, even at the point of death. We should emulate these great women of faith. When we give without expecting any returns, God continues to bless us so that we may bless others even more.

(iii) Give Cheerfully:

We should not give while grumbling as though under coercion. God loves a cheerful giver. This was effectively taught by Paul in 2 Corinthians 9:7: **You should each give, then, as you have decided, not with regret or out of a sense of duty; for God loves the one who gives gladly.**

(iv) Never give up

Charity is about going out of our way to help the needy. We should never give up or get tired along the way. Paul teaches us so in Galatians 6:9:

So, let us not become tired of doing good; for if we do not give up, the time will come when we will reap the harvest.

The Fruits of Charity

Apart from our final reward on the judgment day, acts of charity yield blessings, as explained by Jesus in Luke 6:38:

Give to others and God will give to you. Indeed, you will receive a full measure, a generous helping, poured into your hands, all that you can hold. The measure you use for others is the one that God will use for you.

God protects the generous and fills them with joy. The psalmist explains this in Psalms 41:1-2:

Happy are those who are concerned for the poor; the Lord will help them when they are in trouble. The Lord will protect them and preserve their lives; he will make them happy in the land; he will not abandon them to the power of their enemies.

Paul uses similar words in Acts 20:35:

I have shown you in all things that by working hard in this way we must help the weak remembering the words that the Lord Jesus Himself said, “There is more happiness in giving than in receiving.

What do we need to do?

It is clear from these Bible verses that by giving we receive God’s reward. This is a package containing our needs. Even if we do not acquire plenty of material things, we receive the grace of God which is sufficient for us. Let us therefore aspire to be charitable. Christian families are encouraged to go out of their way to help others. They can take care of an orphan, adopt or foster a child, pay school fees for a poor child, help a disabled person or a poor family, employ someone, partner with an orphanage or any other institution for the less fortunate among other options. The choice depends on our capacity and generosity. We do not give because we have a surplus; rather we take delight in sharing the little we have because of love. We should not be discouraged when we

cannot afford to give as much as we would like to. Even ‘little’ acts of charity practiced in good faith glorify God. This is why the youthful St. Dominic Savio said, *“I am not capable of doing big things but I want to do everything, even the smallest things for the greater glory of God.”* Today, he is a great Saint.

(2) WITNESSING / EVANGELIZATION

In the Christian context, Evangelization means telling others about Christianity, while witnessing refers to testifying about the works of God. The purpose of evangelization is to make Christ and His saving works known by all nations. This knowledge brings all people to the fullness of God’s grace. In Mathew 28:19-20, Jesus commissioned His disciples:

Go then to all peoples everywhere and make them my disciples; baptize them in the name of the Father, the son and the Holy Spirit; and teach them to obey everything I have commanded you. And I will be with you always to the end of the age.

Are we all called to Evangelize?

When we think of evangelism, we visualize the pope, the bishops, priests, pastors, missionaries, the religious and the catechists. These are the recognized ministers and

evangelizers. We also have lay evangelists who help a great deal in spreading the gospel. These are the people who take it upon themselves to share their convictions, talents and gifts for the benefit of the church. They work hand in hand with the clergy to spread the love of God to humanity.

The above categories of evangelizers have their responsibilities well defined. I would like to concentrate on the rest of the Christians who constitute the wider congregation. Do we have any role in evangelization? Yes, we do. Each one of us is called to witness and evangelize in our own 'small' ways.

It is our role to spread the gospel to the people we interact with. As we saw earlier, the most powerful tool we should use in evangelization is prayer. We must keep praying for the well being as well as the conversion of all people. The second most powerful tool is our actions. Actions speak louder than words and send strong signals about our faith. Most people are transformed by actions rather than words.

The third tool is verbal witnessing. Many Catholics (if not majority) shy away when called upon to witness to a gathering or even to a few people. The fact is, even though we are not encouraged to force our faith on others, we should proudly profess it whenever the opportunity arises. This is how to win

souls. Indeed, there is always an opportunity for the light of Christ in our hearts to shine upon the world. All great saints gladly seized such opportunities. Remember, simple phrases like ‘God loves you,’ ‘God cares,’ ‘God bless you,’ and many others have an impact on the human soul and we should use them in our conversations.

In Luke 12:8-9, Jesus teaches us that when we tell others about Him, He too talks to the angels about us:

I assure you that for those who declare publicly that they belong to me; the son of man will do the same before the angels of God. But those who reject me publicly, the son of man will also reject them before the angels of God.

How great it is for the son of God to talk to the angels positively concerning us! Won’t that make the angels take exceptional care of us? Yes, it will. On the other hand, how sad it would be to be rejected by Christ in the assembly of the angels!

To Witness / Evangelize, we need the Holy Spirit

Every baptized Christian is an evangelist. This is in line with our Priestly, Kingly, and Prophetic roles given to us during baptism. Through the sacrament of Confirmation, we are

filled with the Holy Spirit who gives us the strength and courage to evangelize. No one can evangelize without the guidance of the Holy Spirit. This is the reason why Jesus ordered His disciples to remain within Jerusalem until the Spirit comes upon them. He knew they would not have the authority or courage to evangelize by their own strength. This is found in Acts 1:4:

And when they came together, he gave them this order; “Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift I told you about, the gift my father promised.

Before His ascension to heaven, Jesus concluded (Acts 1:8)

But when the Holy Spirit comes upon you, you will be filled with power, and you will be witnesses for me in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.

Jesus was right. The disciples had so much fear of the Jews that they lost all courage. Not only did they remain within Jerusalem, but they stayed indoors. When the Holy Spirit came upon them on the Pentecost day, they gained the courage to leave the house and proclaim the gospel.

Paul told Timothy in 2 Timothy 1:7

For the Spirit that God has given us does not make us timid; instead, his Spirit fills us with power, love and self-control.

Indeed, love, power and self-control are the most important qualities we need as evangelists. Why do we need courage and power? It is because the world will not receive our message kindly. Jesus warned the apostles in Matthew 10:16: **I am sending you out like sheep among wolves...** Why do we need love? Love enables us to win souls for Christ. On the other hand, self-control keeps us focused on our mission.

Talents

Talent refers to our natural (inborn) aptitude or skill. It is the unique tool that the Lord gives to each individual to work in His (God's) vineyard. Talents differ from one person to another; however, it is a fact that all of us are endowed with some talent(s). These include teaching, preaching, counseling, listening, consoling, mentorship, leadership, organizing events, serving/helping, reconciling, singing, dancing, writing, acting, poetry, art, and sports, to name but a few. All these are God-given and useful to the church and the community. They are different methods of communicating God's love.

Gifts of the Holy Spirit

Our talents become effective when we work together with the Holy Spirit. He gives us His gifts which include wisdom, understanding, counsel, knowledge, fortitude, piety and the fear of God (Isaiah 11:2). Once we have these gifts, we are ready to evangelize with our talents. If all Christians mobilized their talents this way, no single soul would be lost.

Charisms of the Holy Spirit

Some Christians are endowed with the charisms of the Holy Spirit, which include messages of wisdom and knowledge, faith, gift of healing, miraculous powers, prophesy, discernment of spirits, tongues and ability to interpret them (1Corinthians 12:8-10). These charisms are useful in specific missions of the church, such as healing and deliverance.

Fruits of the Holy Spirit

When we walk in the light of the Holy Spirit, we bear His fruits. These fruits include Love, Joy, Peace, Patience, Kindness, goodness, faithfulness, humility and self-control (Galatians 5:22). These qualities are the hallmark of true Christianity.

We need to be careful about talents, gifts and charisms

When used correctly, talents, gifts and charisms are of immense value to the church as demonstrated by many saints and Bible personalities. They boost the faith of many Christians and lead to the conversion of many non-believers. However, when used wrongly, they can cause pride, leading to the downfall of believers and creating unnecessary divisions in the church.

Division occurs when we boast or consider our talents, gifts and charisms to be superior to those of our brothers and sisters. Consequently, we desire to use them for selfish gain rather than for the benefit of the entire church. We forget that we too need the gifts of the other Christians to complement ours.

In order to keep away from pride and divisions, we need to understand a few facts:

1. All talents, gifts and charisms are given by the same Holy Spirit.

Paul teaches this in 1Corinthians 12:11:

But it is one and the same spirit who does all this; as he wishes, he gives a different gift to each person.

The same Holy Spirit gives us different gifts to enable us to spread the kingdom of God. With His help, we should therefore mobilize our talents, gifts and charisms with humility and love, for the benefit of the one Holy Church.

2. All talents, gifts and charisms are equally important

This teaching also comes from Paul. The following verses emphasize that all gifts and talents are necessary and equally important.

(i) 1 Corinthians 12: 17 – 20

If the whole body were just an eye, how could it hear? And if it were only an ear how could it smell? As it is however, God put every different part in the body just as He wanted it to be. There would not be a body if it were all only one part. As it is, there are many parts but one body.

(ii) 1 Corinthians 3:7

The one who sows and the one who waters do not really matter. It is God who matters because he makes the plant grow. There is no difference between the one who sows and the one who waters, God will reward each

according to the work each has done.

In these verses and many others, Paul teaches us that no talent, gift or charism is superior to the other. Therefore, Christians should be careful not to worship any of them. This is how cults are formed.

3. The fruits of the Holy Spirit are paramount

As we mentioned earlier, the fruits of the Holy Spirit are the Hallmark of true Christianity. In other words, talents, gifts and charisms cannot get us to heaven without the fruits of the Holy Spirit. In fact, as we have already seen, talents, gifts and charisms can destroy the fruits of the Holy Spirit in us if used wrongly. It is therefore most important to ask the Holy Spirit to give us His fruits. When we have the fruits in us, the gifts and charisms will flow easily according to God's plan for us. Similarly, we should ensure that we use our talents, gifts and charisms to promote the fruits of the Holy Spirit in us and in the other people.

The following verses emphasize on the importance of the fruits of the Holy Spirit compared to the gifts and charisms.

(i) Matthew 7: 22-23:

Many will say to me on that day, “Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name and in your name drive out demons and in your name perform miracles? Then I will tell them plainly, ‘I never knew you. Away from me you evil doers.’

(ii) Luke 10:20:

But do not be glad because the evil spirits obey you; rather be glad because your names are written in heaven.

(iii) 1 Corinthians 13: 8-10:

Love never ends. As for prophecies, they will pass away; as for tongues, they will cease, as for knowledge it will pass away. For we know in part and we prophesy in part; but when the perfect comes the partial will pass away.

(iv) 1 Corinthians 13:1-2:

If I speak with tongues of men and of angels but do not have love, I have become a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophesy and know all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith so as to move mountains but do not have love, I am nothing...

What do we need to do?

The parable of the three servants in Mathew 25:14-30 warns us that failure to use our talents amounts to sin of omission. It will lead to condemnation on the Day of Judgment. Let us

emulate the faithful servant who gladly received the following judgment:

Well done you good and faithful servant. You have been faithful in managing small amounts, so I will put you in charge of large amounts. Come on in and share my happiness!

In conclusion, we should use our talents to profess our faith, witness Christ and assist others in their journey of faith. We should not belittle our talents. The Disciples of Christ belittled the two fish and five loaves of bread that the little boy had with him. To their surprise, Jesus used them to feed more than five thousand people. As narrated in John 6:8-13, the boy did not object. Like him, let us bring our talents to Jesus; He will multiply them for the benefit of the church and the community. Our talents may appear as small as the mustard seed in Matthew 13:31. When we let the Holy Spirit nurture them, they will grow into enormous trees where people of all walks of life will come to rest in their shadows, being encouraged, comforted and blessed.

Let us not be complacent. We should arise and find out what contribution we can make in evangelization. We can start from our families, neighbourhoods, work places, churches, small Christian communities, ministries, ecclesial groups and church associations. It is never too late to enter the vineyard

of the Lord. As we read in ‘The Parable of the workers’ in Matthew 20, those who came late received the same wages as those who reported early in the morning. Jesus concluded the parable with these words: **so, the last will be first and the first will be the last.’**

We also need to develop our talent(s). This may be through attending seminars or enrolling for some courses. It is important to join the church association that befits us, plus a ministry or devotional group that shares our convictions. This will give us a platform to slowly develop ourselves. Above all, let us pray earnestly that the Lord makes us instruments of His work. This is the only way to use our talents for His glory. Talents get nowhere without His blessings. Who knows, we may be so blessed that our talents become our greatest source of income.

Pope Benedict XVI made the following statement: *The world promises you comfort, but you were not made for comfort. You were made for greatness.* In other words, no one becomes great through comfort. It is through sacrifice and works that we become great.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN: PRAYERS FOR GUIDANCE

Praise to the Holy Trinity

Praise to you Heavenly Father who created Heaven and earth and formed us in your own image. Praise to you Lord Jesus Christ who died on the cross to set us free. Praise to you Holy Spirit who always walks with us, to give us strength and courage. PRAISES...PRAISES...PRAISES...

Seeking the grace to forgive those who hurt us

Abba Father, no one has ever hurt us the way we hurt your son. Soften our hearts so that we may unconditionally forgive all those who hurt us in any way. This is the only way to receive your mercy and the grace to rise to your call. We ask this through Christ our Lord... **AMEN.**

Confession prayer

My God, I am sorry for my sins with all my heart. In choosing to do wrong and failing to do well, I have sinned against you whom I should love above all things. I firmly intend, with your help, to do penance, to sin no more and to avoid whatever leads me to sin. Our saviour Jesus Christ suffered and died for us. In His name, my God, have mercy... **AMEN**

Prayer for Deliverance from Bondage:

Lord, will you be angry with us forever?

Will your anger continue to burn like fire?

Do not punish us for the sins of our ancestors.

Have mercy on us now, we have lost all hope.

Help us, O God, and save us;

Rescue us and forgive our sins

for the sake of your own honour.

Then we your people, the sheep of your flock will thank you
forever

and praise you for all the time to come. **Amen.**

(Selected verses of psalms 79).

Prayer for healing

Dear Lord, you created us in your perfect image and put your
pure spirit in us. However, the spirit you put in us has been
stained with sin and your image has been tainted by many
pains and sicknesses. In your mercy, hear us as we cry for

your forgiveness and healing. Thank you Jesus, Praise you Jesus... **AMEN.**

Prayer for protection

Dear Jesus, by my own strength I can do virtually nothing. I cannot even move a step! Evil surrounds me from all angles with the aim of destroying my faith and blessings. Protect me with your armour and send angels to shield me. Cover me with your precious blood, so that I may resist evil and keep the enemy at bay always. In the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit... **AMEN.**

Prayer for those who suffer

Dear Lord, look upon your children who suffer; comfort them, give them the strength they need to endure their suffering, and free those who suffer unnecessarily. Look Jesus, with your eyes of mercy, upon the Christians being persecuted throughout the world today because of their faith in you. Give these wonderful men, women and children the grace they need to face their tribulations without denouncing you, so that they can meet you face to face. Through them, may the light of your face shine upon their persecutors and transform them. We make our prayer through Christ our Lord...**AMEN.**

Seeking a prayerful heart

Dear Jesus, make my heart like yours - so prayerful and committed to the will of the Father. Teach me how to pray and to spend quality time with you my best friend and brother, our Heavenly Father who is the source of all wisdom, and the Holy Spirit who is the source of all strength... **AMEN.**

Prayer for obedience

Abba Father, my heart thirsts for you, for your love and mercy endure forever. My soul seeks you day and night, for in you I find my rest. Take away from me my stubborn heart of stone and give me an obedient heart so that I may burn with zeal for you all the days of my life **AMEN.**

Prayer for humility

My Father in Heaven, help me to overcome pride. Through your Holy Spirit, make my heart like that of your son – so full of humility. May I decrease while you increase for that is why you created me... **AMEN.**

Prayer for offerings

Our Father in Heaven, we can never pay you back for what you have done for us. Every moment you bless us in many

ways. If you were to send us the bill, even our entire lives would not pay for it. Accept our offerings as a sign of thanksgiving, and do not allow us to miss the joy of giving back to you the much we can. We pray this through Christ our Lord. **AMEN.**

Prayer for the needy

Lord Jesus, today you ask us so many questions through the people we encounter. Through the destitute, the rejected, the abandoned, and the street families – who loves me? Through the hunger-stricken, the displaced, the prisoners, the sick, the homeless and the refugees – who cares about me? Through the poor, widows and widowers, the orphans, the physically challenged and the elderly – who will help me? Through our youth and children – who has time for me? Give us the spirit of charity to reach out to these people according to your plan for us, for in doing this to them we do it unto thee. We make our prayer through Christ our Lord. **AMEN.**

Prayer of St. Francis of Assisi

Lord, make me an instrument of thy peace.

Where there is hatred, let me sow love;

Where there is injury, pardon;

Where there is doubt, faith;

Where there is despair, hope;

Where there is darkness, light;

And where there is sadness, joy.

O, Divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek to be
consoled, as to console;

To be understood as to understand;

To be loved, as to love;

For it is in giving that we receive; it is in pardoning that we
are pardoned;

And it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.