

THE CHRISTIAN DOCTRINE OF COMMUNION OF THE SAINTS VIS-À-VIS THE CULT OF ANCESTORS IN AFRICAN TRADITIONAL RELIGION

Johnbosco Igwe, Barnabas Nkwuda & Callistus Nwosu

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Studies have shown that most of the precepts, ordinances and rituals in Christian religion are more of resemblances than novelties of what were the cases in the original religion of the African people. The belief in the communion of the Saints, and its surrounding practices stressed especially among the Catholic group is coterminous with the veneration of the Ancestors in this latter religion. The affinity that exists between these two beliefs calls for a special attention, and reinvestigation especially this period when inculturation and proper adaptation of Christian culture are emphasized in the evangelization of people. This study will apply an expository and hermeneutical approach. The study will first delve into a relevant exposition of the Christian belief in communion of the Saints, on the one hand, and of the African, nay Igbo, cult of Ancestors. Then the study will juxtapose these two belief systems in view of showing how both of them can engage in fruitful dialogue. It calls for a new approach to the study of the ancestral veneration, one that refuses an absolute condemnation of the practice.

2.0 THE COMMUNION OF THE SAINTS IN THE CATHOLIC CHURCH: CONCEPT AND MEANING

The Communion of the Saints is one of the essential elements of the Catholic faith. In her Creeds, where the Church gathered all "the essential elements of its faith into organic and articulated summaries"¹, the communion of saints was given a pride of place. In the apostolic Creed², the confession of the belief in the communion of saints immediately succeeds the confession of the belief in the Holy Catholic Church. This is an adequate testament that the confession of the belief in

the communion of the saints is "a further explanation"³ of the meaning of the Catholic Church. The Nicene Creed⁴ also highlighted the importance and indispensability of this article of faith in the Catholic Church. The etymological understanding of the term, Church, is also a suggestion that the Church, in its nature, is a communion of a particular group of Chosen people or believers, otherwise called saints in a general sense as we shall later see. Thus, the word, Church, translated *Ekklesia* in the Greek Old Testament, means "an assembly of the Chosen people of God"⁵. In its Christian usage, *Ekklesia* designates "the liturgical assembly, the local community or the whole universal community of believers"⁶. All these lay credence to the importance of this article of faith.

2.1 Communion

The term 'Communion' (κοινωνία - koinonia in Greek) in its Christian usage, generally refers to "the bond uniting Christians as individuals and groups with each other and with Jesus"⁷. In the New Testament, it is applied in various contexts which readily suggest communion, sharing and fellowship. Catechism of the Catholic Church⁸ presents to us various communions noticeable in the Catholic Teachings. There is Communion in the Faith, which is the faith of the Church received from the apostles. There is Communion of the Sacraments, especially Baptism, which link all the faithful to each other and to Christ. The word "communion" is especially suited in this context for the Eucharist, which distinctively brings about this communion. There is Communion of charisms which are various manifestations given by the Spirit for the common good⁹, and so on.

2.2 Saints

Saints literally means "holy ones"¹⁰ or "faithful ones"¹¹ as translated by biblical Greek and Hebrew Scriptures¹². In the Scriptures, St. Paul sometimes addressed his letters to "the saints" in a particular city¹³. In this context, St Paul speaks of all Christians as the "holy ones," having been made holy by their virtue of baptism into the death and resurrection of Christ. St Paul also teaches that all Christians form a single body of Christ¹⁴. They share in the mystical body of Christ. The Catholic Church also teaches that all faithful Christians are "saints" in the sense that their

vocation to holiness is universal for God generally called all Christians to holiness¹⁵. The Vatican II Council Fathers made it clearer that "The Church, whose mystery is set forth in this sacred council is held, as a matter of faith, to be unfailingly holy. This is because Christ, the Son of God, who with the father and the spirit is hailed as 'alone holy, loved the Church as his bride giving himself up for her sake to sanctify her'¹⁶. Leo Trese, commenting on this, said "every Christian soul, incorporated with Christ by baptism and harboring within himself the Holy Spirit... is saint in the original meaning of the word¹⁷.

In this general sense, all the members of the Church are considered as saints. Thus if all the members are saints and there is a deep sense of communion among them as already highlighted, we can infer that the Church is indeed the communion of saints in its general understanding and original meaning of the word.

However, the word saints can be used in its narrow sense. In the Scriptures, Matthew's Gospel refers to the "saints", in its strictest sense, as those who rose from the dead after Christ's resurrection¹⁸. They are the faithful departed ones who were being taken by Christ to heaven. St. Paul also speaks of the "saints" as those who will accompany Christ from heaven when He returns to earth at the end of the world¹⁹. And St. John also uses the same term to refer to the "saints" who are now in heaven praying to God²⁰. The Catholic Church therefore

uses the term "saints" in its narrow sense. It is used to refer to all those who have been perfected and are now face to face with God in heaven and have a share in His divine nature. Thus when the Saints are revered and celebrated as it appeared in the liturgical calendar of the Church, Solemnity of all Saints²¹, these are the saints being honored and venerated, all those human beings who have lived in this world, bore witness to Christ, left this life and are now in heaven with God.

2.3 Veneration and intercession of the Saints

Having lived an exemplary life worthy of emulation,² the Church also teaches that they should be honored and prayed to so that they can pray for brethren who are still in a spiritual struggle on earth. Having united

with God in glory, the Church solicitously sought for their prayers and intercession not in the form of worship but in the form of veneration. This is called the veneration of the saints. Explaining the meaning of veneration of the saints, Catholic Dictionary clearly states that:

“[it is an] honor paid to the saints who, by their intercession and example and in their possession of God, minister to human sanctification, helping the faithful grow in Christian virtue.”²²

The biblical foundation of the intercession of the saints can be found in the biblical episode of the Rich man and Lazarus²³ which indicated the ability of the dead to pray for the living. Also, on the ground of Christ's intercession for believers, who is present at the right hand of God as seen in Paul's letter to Romans and the Letter to the Hebrew²⁴, it can also be argued by extension that other people who have died but are alive in Christ may be able to intercede for those who sought his/her intercession²⁵. The Church therefore teaches and believes in the intercession of the saints. However in order not to misconstrue the honor given to God and the saints, the Church in her wisdom has used various terminologies to express the different degrees and honor given to them. *Latria* is the highest honor given to God while *Dulia* is the honor given to saints (in its strictest sense) who are now in communion with God. A special term has been coined for the honor given to our Blessed Virgin Mary for the special honor of being the mother of God. This is called *Hyperdulia*.

By this doctrinal teaching of the Church on the veneration of the saints, we can clearly adduce that there is indeed a communion between the saints (as understood in its strict sense) and the brethren (saints in the general sense) who are being interceded for. It is only when there is a communion between them that their intercession could be possibly

sought. It is in this sense that we can now understand the proper meaning of communion of the saints.

2.4 Communion of Saints

The communion of saints therefore is the solidarity that exists between the members of the Christ body, the living and the dead. The Living consists of those who are in the pilgrim journey on earth. The dead finally unite with Christ and those who are still being purged before they and to who we pray to for their intercession as already united with Christ are the covenanted people of God who are sharing (the living) in God's body, the Church, those who have shared but are being purged (in purgatory) before they can reunite with the mystic body of Christ, and then those who have shared and have fully reunited (the saints) with Christ. They all form the communion of the saints. The Communion of the Saints is thus:

“... spiritual solidarity which binds together the members of Christ's faithful on earth, the souls of her members who have died and are in Purgatory and the saints understood in its narrow sense, those in heaven....They are “in a constant interchange of supernatural offices”²⁶.

The participants in that solidarity are called saints “by reason of their destination and of their partaking of the fruits of the Redemption (I Cor.1.2)”²⁷. It is this communion that binds the members of the Christ's body that enables them to pray and intercede for each other.

Those who make up the Communion of Saints have also traditionally been designated by three terms. The Church Militants are those who are still fighting the good fight of faith on earth²⁸. Another group called the

Church Penitents (or Suffering) are the holy souls in purgatory. The last group called the Church Triumphants are the perfected saints in heaven. These three groups, by virtue of their baptism and also continual participation in the fruits of the redemption are grouped among the communion of the saints. The communion of the saints remains the exemplification of the solidarity that exists between all those who share in the mystical body of Christ both the living and the dead. They pray and intercede for each other. The Church Militants pray for the Church Sufferers as seen in the liturgical celebration of All Souls (2nd November). The Church Militants also seek for the intercession of the Church Triumphants as seen in the liturgical celebration of All Saints (1st November). Their relationship is in form of a chain.

3.0 WHO ARE THE ANCESTORS?

Africans, generally, believe in life after death. The conviction that the physical death does not have the final say on one's existence is at the core of their beliefs. Opoku supports this fact in his statement that "the dead are believed to be everywhere, at any time; they continue to live but in another kind of existence."²⁹ Talbot correctly affirms this position as well, in his view that the Yoruba are aware that "death does not write *finis* to human life but that the earthly life has been extended into the life beyond-into that place which is believed to be the abode of the departed souls."³⁰ It is upon this conviction on life after death that the African belief in the existence of the ancestors is predicated.

Among the Africans, there is a strong belief in the existence of ancestors, their forebears with whom they have a special relationship. They believe that the ancestors are still members of their living family, and are very much interested in the affairs of the family, just as when they were still alive. Mbiti makes a strong case for this belief in his description of the ancestors as "living-dead,"³¹ thus, succinctly creating an impression that though they die and cease to exist in this world, they go on to exist in different forms and abode. Arinze making a specific reference to Igbo culture maintains that the family is not made up of only those who are still living in the flesh, as the unseen ancestors are part of the family and

THE CHRISTIAN DOCTRINE OF COMMUNION OF THE SAINTS VIS-À-VIS THE CULT OF ANCESTORS IN AFRICAN TRADITIONAL RELIGION

are very much interested in affairs of their family.³² The same could be said of other African cultures. For instance, the Yoruba believe that the family is made up of both the living members and the ancestors, who constitute the closest link between the world of men and the spirit-world and are believed to be keenly interested in the affairs of their living family.³³ Thus, it becomes evidently clear that African worldview, generally, avoids any sharp dichotomy between the world of the living and that of the dead. Hence, the belief that after death, one could join the rank of the ancestors is not contestable, by any means.

In any event, a careful consideration of the notion of ancestors among Africans would readily reveal that most discussions on our forebears concentrates on the dead men who join the ancestors, with the fate of dead women almost totally neglected. At this juncture, one is constrained to wonder what happens to dead women who fulfilled the conditions for admittance into the abode of the ancestors. Do they vanish into the oblivion after death? If not, where is their abode? Would it be reasonable to think that Africans believe they make it to the ancestral rank, just like their male counterparts? A number of observations would compel us to admit that more emphasis on male ancestors by Africans does not suggest that dead women are not admitted into the ancestral cult.

First, we had earlier on pointed out that Africans recognize only a very thin line between the world of the dead and that of the living. This conviction must lure us to observe how a number of our conceptions about societal organisations in this life go on to influence our worldview of life hereafter. Africans, generally, run a patriarchal society. People trace their origin in a patrilineal pattern, where the emphasis is laid chiefly on men "whereas the women are subsumed under men."³⁴ Consequently, it would not be out of place to argue that this approach to life must have made them accord a similar subordinate status to women, even in the land of the dead. "The position one occupies in the spirit world is believed to be in some way similar to one's position on earth".³⁵ Hence, it is appropriate to reason that "women who are always the companions of men retain the same position in the underworld."³⁶

Apart from this, Onuigbo presents a number of practices and sayings that prove that both dead men and women who join the ancestral cult inhabit the abode of the ancestors.

1. During prayers and worships, the elders normally call on "Good spirits, men and women"
2. There are gods and goddesses which are the points of contact between human beings and spirits in the spirit world, the ancestral world.
3. Since the presence of masquerades is said to be the return of the dead ancestors to the living, and we see male and female masquerades in African traditional practices, African belief in the existence of dead women in the abode of the ancestors is strongly affirmed.
4. During reincarnation, only those in the ancestral world can reincarnate to life. But incarnation is not meant only for dead men, the departed women too, reincarnate.
5. Some names given to female children point to ancestress, such as the Igbo names like *Nnenna* (Father's mother), *Nnanna* (Father's father) *Nnenne* (Mother's Mother) all point to the existence of women in the abode of the ancestors.³⁷

However, we must point out that mere death is not an automatic ticket for one to be admitted into the ranks of the ancestors. What qualifies one to be admitted into the ancestral cult will be considered next.

3.1 Conditions/Requirements for Admittance into the Ancestral Cult

Almost every religious group believes and teaches that there is a place meant for those who lived worthy lives whereas those who lived unworthily have a different home where they will suffer dearly without end.³⁸ Hence, Africans believe in the notion of reward and punishment after death.

Consequently, Africans believe that those admitted in the abode of the ancestors are those who lived exemplary life, persons of good standing who had lived through a complete life cycle, died at an old age, had an

unblemished body, and were morally dignified³⁹ In addition, successfulness shown in one's possession of a wife (or wives) and children, especially sons, and enough material possession, good death, which must be accompanied by a befitting burial form part of the requirements. There is normally an initial ceremony of burying the dead, and later, a 'second burial' follows. It is with this second burial that the dead man is received in the land of the spirits by the ancestors.⁴⁰ Therefore, cases like childlessness, bad death-accident, suicide, death from violence, unclean diseases like epilepsy, lunacy, dropsy, leprosy, immoral life, death at young age, haphazard burial, and so on, automatically disqualifies one from being an ancestor. By implication, it is not all the dead that make it to the rank of the ancestors. For a dead person to become an ancestor, he has to pass the test of these conditions. Accordingly, it is believed that there are some dead individuals who are not ancestors.

Furthermore, African belief in ancestors is closely connected with their notion of reincarnation. Africans believe that when a dead person has joined the rank of the ancestors, there is every possibility that he will reincarnate, as a baby, and begin another life on earth.⁴¹ Nevertheless, this is not to assume that every baby must be one of the ancestors who have come back to life. Reincarnation becomes a reward or benefits enjoyed by the ancestors. Conversely, bad fellows who die, and hence, could not join the ancestors are believed to be reincarnated in "lower animals and birds, and wander about in neglected and lowly places."⁴² In fact, in Igbo Traditional Religion, it is believed that dead people who could not meet up with these conditions for admission into the ancestral cult become disgruntled spirits, known as *akalogoli*, who molest and harm innocent people.⁴³ Such people do not enjoy the benefits of reincarnation.

3.2 The Nature of the Relationship between the Living and their Ancestors

Much of our discussion so far has supported the view that ancestors are very much interested in the affairs of their living descendants. The

THE CHRISTIAN DOCTRINE OF COMMUNION OF THE SAINTS VIS-À-VIS THE CULT
OF ANCESTORS IN AFRICAN TRADITIONAL RELIGION

African family is made up of both the living members and the ancestors, who constitute the closest link between the world of men and that of the spirit. The nature of Africans' relationship with their ancestors is to a great extent influenced by their communal approach to life. Africans place much importance on community life. The ancestors, thus, form the supernatural part of the human community. Consequently, Africans dare not neglect them in any of their activities.⁴⁴ They do all they can to maintain a healthy link with the ancestors, because of their closeness to God, and the consequent favours they depend on them to get from God. The male head of each kindred, known as *okpala* in Igbo Traditional Religion plays a very significant role in the maintenance of a family's link with their ancestors. He holds the *ofò*, the ancestral symbol of authority, because he represents the ancestors and forms the link with them.⁴⁵ Onuigbo submits that it is to avoid severing this link that the Igbo do not bury the dead in alien soil but at home, where they will be united with their living members of their family.⁴⁶ It is believed, as well that "the spirit can never find rest in alien surroundings."⁴⁷

This relationship is by no means one-sided. It is symbiotic as each group has a part to play for mutual benefit. Metuh described the relationship as being governed by the principle of reciprocity.⁴⁸ In other words, while the living offer sacrifices, and accord honour and respect to their ancestors, the ancestors, are in turn expected to return the favour in some ways. The expectations of the living members of the ancestors' families from their ancestors range from abundant harvests, fertility, healing, material favours to maintenance and sustenance of the traditions and customs of the land, conflict resolution and exercise of protective power over them. "They [ancestors] are felt to be still present, watching over the household, directly concerned in all affairs of the family and property, giving abundant harvests and fertility."⁴⁹

By the same token, the ancestors are believed to be very much interested in the stability of the customs, laws and traditions of the land. Hence, they could punish anyone who defies the laws and customs of the land. Hence, violation of these customs and laws becomes a sheer disregard of the ancestor's power and authority, and do not go unpunished.

Consequently, the ancestors, together with the earth goddess, *Ani*, in Igbo tradition are referred to as the guardians of public morality.⁵⁰

It is obvious that while the Africans venerate and offer sacrifices to their ancestors, they do not place them at the same pedestal with the deities, much less, God. This suggests that there must exist some level of difference between the worship given to the deities, and that given to the ancestors, though some comparisons exist. This disparity must be clear in view of the fact that the Africans approach the ancestors, not as those who have ultimate power over them, but as intermediaries, on whom they rely to get favours from God. As Metuh does well to clarify, in many African societies, even though the ancestors acquire greater powers which put them next to the deities in the ontological order, making them mediators between God and man, they are still members of their families. As a result of this, the living members of the family approach them in the same way they did while they were alive.⁵¹ Thus, interaction with them takes the look of a normal family gathering, with the form of prayer being direct; the requests, straightforward. The tone of submission and supplication as in the case of prayer to God and the deities are practically absent.⁵² In fact, in some cases, the ancestors could be rebuked for failing to intervene in one case or another, even threatened of starvation, for one omission or another. But this can never be heard of in the worship of God and the deities.

To say the least, veneration given to the ancestors cannot be called "worship" in the strict sense of the term. Rather, the term, veneration is better suited for portraying their status, since they are venerated owing to the power they acquire because of their closeness to God, and the consequent hope and expectation that they will intercede to God on behalf of the living for one favour or another. Though the ancestors are sacrificed to and honoured, it is clear it is not the same type of worship and sacrifice offered to the deities. Onuigbo observes a striking difference between the two cults. For him, the deities have shrines where they are consulted and worshipped, the ancestors on the other hand, have no shrines or any form of representations where offerings are offered to

them.⁵³ This claim seems to lack general acceptance among scholars, as could be gleaned from the views of Metuh, from whom we learned that Igbo morning offering, addressed to God, the deities and the ancestors takes place at the ancestral shrine, *Okpesi*.⁵⁴ Be that as it may, common sense and sound reasoning would definitely compel us to tip the scale in favour of the later, for if the ancestors are venerated, they must be a place meant for their veneration. But we must be quick to add that the worship given to both cannot be same.

Whatever may be the case, one thing is clear. The Africans give more attention to their ancestors in daily and annual worship than the Supreme Being. The reason is not far-fetched. Being members of their family, they are called upon to be present and participate in most family activities, such as sharing in the kola nut communion, participation in the naming ceremonies, marriages, funeral rites, and so on.⁵⁵ Apart from these, there is also among the Igbo, the annual festival known as *Ilo mmuo*, in which the ancestors are venerated. This marks the time for family reunion. The family ties with the ancestors are equally strengthened. Moreover, it is worthy of note that the veneration of the ancestors is not limited to the family setting. One can venerate them in their farms, work places, and so on.

In the final analysis, it becomes evident that the living owes a duty to the ancestors, and the ancestors owe one in return: each is expected to look after the interests of the other, and a number of ceremonies and rituals are employed by man to honour and renew this contract.⁵⁶ Capping this position up, Onuigbo avers that "the world of the ancestors and the world of the living are mutually enhancing and supportive."⁵⁷

4.0 VENERATION OF THE SAINTS VIS A VIS ANCESTRAL WORSHIP IN IGBO RELIGION

We have explained the meaning of ancestors and from that we can deduce why they are venerated in Igbo religion. The veneration of ancestors is made manifest in the way the traditional Igbo people pray. This is because, the ancestors are believed to be living even though they

are physically dead, they are invoked in the prayers of the Igbo people. We hear prayer of this pattern from many Igbo person⁵⁸:

Chukwu, biko taa oji: God please eat kola

Chineke, biko taa oji: Creator please eat kola

Ala taa oji: Earth Deity eat kola

Nna anyi ha taa oji: Our forefathers eat kola

Ndi mbu ndi egede tanu oji: Those who were at the beginning of time, eat kola

In the prayer aforementioned, one discovers that the ancestors (forefathers) are found in the hierarchy of spirits beginning from the Supreme Spirit. They are invited in the Igbo prayer session and petitions are sent to them. In some areas in Igbo land it is forbidden not to keep some food in the pots around the house lest these family members from the other world come and find the pot empty. Shrines are made for them where libations are poured in their honour and petitions are sent to them. Nwala, recaptures this fact thus: "ancestral shrines are quite common in several Igbo communities. The shrines are severally called *Ndiichie*, *Ngwu*, (*Ngwu* is in the shape of a mud pyramid with clay plate or pot on top of it and a small building to shelter it."⁵⁹ The ancestors in Igbo religion are intermediaries between the living and the deity. They intercede for them and protect them from harms.

Most of what were discussed here about the ancestors both in the elucidation of the concept and in the discourse on their veneration have their resemblances in Catholic devotions. For instance: the help which the saints render include surely the help of protecting the faithful, especially those who invoke the saints in their devotions. Hence we hear of patron saints of various places and conditions. Petitions are sent to these saints as done to the ancestors. Their relics are kept as symbols of their presence in chapels dedicated to them. This act is not far from the practice of *Ngwu* in the ancestral veneration pointed by Nwala in our earlier exposition.

In both venerations of the ancestors and the saints, there is a familiarity. While that of the former is the family-tie, the latter is about the

familiarity of faith relationship. The underlying belief behind the Christian cult of saints is that there is a communion between the *noumena* (the incorporeal world) and the *phenomena* (the material world). This is not far from the Igbo belief in the existence of two worlds: the physical and the spiritual worlds which are though distinct from each other have an essential link that man cannot really continue his existence without the other. It is important to note that the practice of the ancestor veneration in Igbo culture and religion stems from this belief. While there are scholars who believe that a link exists between ancestor veneration and the communion of the saints, Ela (1995) insists that it is deceptive to think that such a resemblance exists. He says:

We should not think for a minute that veneration of the saints can be an African substitute for communion with the ancestors! That will just be one way to lead converts away from their culture.⁶⁰

The reason given by Ela against any form of inculturation in this area is based on the African identity crisis. He seems to be afraid that the assumption that the ancestors are the saints, and, therefore, are to be venerated in the stead of the saints is another way of selling and battering African identity. Hence he notes: "today, when Africans search for their identity, the question is not to imitate a particular saint from the Roman calendar, but to situate the ancestors within the mystery of the Christian faith".⁶¹

However, after all the polemics on the issue of the veneration of the saints and that of the ancestors in Igbo religion, the simple fact is that a communion with the dead who are believed to be alive exists in the two religions. Again, there is a marked agreement in these two religions that one has to meet a given set of criteria to qualify to be venerated either as a saint or an ancestor. While the approaches and the rituals involved in living the communion existing in both religions may differ, belief in the intercessory functions of both saints and ancestors is present in both religions. Hence a link exists between the veneration of the saints and the ancestors.

Because of this link which we have proven, there is urgent need for inculturation. A delay or total rejection of African ancestral cult simply prepares a good ground for "syncretical" Christianity to thrive. With this, Christianity becomes that which Mbiti, describes as "contact religion."⁶²

Contact religion according to him is the type of religion "in which a person feels no contradiction in holding a mixture of belief and practice from two or more religious traditions in Africa." He adds that in this situation, the person's "unconscious life is deeply traditional, but his waking life is oriented towards one of the world's religions."⁶³

Conclusion

It goes without saying that harmonizing the details of African ancestral cult with those of Christian cult of saints is a delicate task. However, the work denounces the pessimism of some scholars who dismiss the task as being completely misguided. Mbogu, for instance, holds that ancestor veneration or more specifically in his words, "ancestor Christology" "may hinder individuals from understanding the true implication of Christ for their lives."⁶⁴ Instead of posing such obstacles as posited by Mbogu, this work is optimistic that a proper and well-intended attempt at inculturation in this direction will promote a deeper appreciation of the Catholic liturgy among African believers. It will also ensure authenticity in Christian worship in Africa.

Recommendations

First, we are at home with the fact that there is an annual feast of All saints of Africa, which has been officially approved by the Church. This takes place on the 3rd of November, every year. No doubt, this is not only a step in the right direction towards giving recognition to saints of African origin, but as well, a veritable inculturation initiative aimed at giving the Africans a sense of belonging in the Church. However, this celebration needs some qualification, as regards those who actually

constitute the saints being celebrated on the said date. This qualification becomes necessary in view of some observable tendencies on the part of some African Christians to limit those celebrated to those good persons who were Christians during their life time on earth. But we know that the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council stress that "Those who, through no fault of their own, do not know the Gospel of Christ or his Church, but who nevertheless seek God with a sincere heart, and, moved by grace, try in their actions to do his will as they know it through the dictates of their conscience-those too may achieve eternal salvation."¹⁹⁶⁵ Consequently, it follows that some of our ancestors who lived good life stand a chance of attaining eternal salvation, even those of them who were not Christians. If that is the case, such ancestors are obviously among the saints being commemorated. The African Christians should be properly catechized on this, so as to enable them make the celebration their own. This will go a long way in helping to bridge the gap between African culture and the Christian message.

Furthermore, still as a way of bringing this celebration nearer to African culture, the common action of killing of fowls and other rituals could be done as family feasts after a prayer session. Also, if possible, the Mass in which the names of the ancestors are mentioned; praying for and with them in words that indicate that if they are in a place of joy, they should pray for the gathered family members who are commemorating them that day may be observed. This prayer could be made mentioning the names of those ancestors whose names are still known by their family members. This is not too far from the feast of Halloween celebrated in the United States every 31st October. This feast which many believe to be of pagan origin from the ancient Celtic pagan feast called *Samhain*, pronounced as *sah-win*, is today commemorated in the Church liturgies in a Christian way in America. The feast was not only a feast of harvest for the Celtic, but also a feast that expresses the belief of the ancient Gaels that on the 31st October, the boundaries between the worlds of the living and the dead overlapped and the deceased would come back to life to cause havoc.

Similarly, the Mexican feast of the dead which was celebrated on 31st October is now part of the Church's feast of all souls. It now begins from 31st October and ends on the 2nd November when the universal Church celebrates the feast of All Souls. Part of what is done in this feast is the Mass for the dead where each individual and family communes with the ancestors and prays for and with them. Some of the rituals that usually accompany this feast were incorporated into the Church service while others were done outside the liturgy as a continuation of the feast in a social way.

Again, it is sad that despite the ecclesiastical approval given to the feast, it is yet to be adequately popularized among the African Christians. The pastors of souls should own it up as a duty to catechize the faithful on the significance and import of the feast in their lives as Christians, and as Africans.

Finally, it is not unheard of that in this sort of attempts to enforce inculturation, the faithful often have the tendency to fall into some syncretistic practices, all in the name of inculturation. To guard against such temptation on the part of the African faithful to equate the feast of All saints of Africa with the pagan commemoration of the ancestors, or even to think that all their ancestors are saints, thereby engaging in one form of syncretistic practice or another, there is a genuine need for them to be properly catechized and enlightened, so that they do not derail.

END NOTES

¹ The Catechism of the Catholic Church (Revised Edition), n.186 (New Delhi: St Pauls, 1994), p. 69.

² Apostolic Creed, is rightly considered to be the faithful summary of the apostles faith and which is taken to be the creed of the Roman church, the See of Peter, c.f. Catechism of the Catholic Church., n.194, p. 70.

³ Catechism of the Catholic Church (Revised Edition), n. 946, p. 222.

⁴ ,Nicene Creed is the more explicit, more detailed articulation of the faith. It is even common to all the great Churches of both the East and the West. c.f. Catechism of the Catholic Church., n.194, p. 70

⁵ Catechism of the Catholic Church., n.751, p. 183.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid

⁸ Catechism of the Catholic Church., nos. 949-953, pp. 222-223.

⁹ (1 Cor 12:7)

¹⁰ (Acts 9:13)

¹¹ (1 Samuel 2:9)

¹² Paul Thigpen, "What is the Communion of the Saints; why should we pray and venerate them" Available at

<https://www.osv.com/Article/TabId/493/ArtMID/13569/ArticleID/15445/What-Is-the-Communion-of-Saints.aspx>, Accessed, 18th January 2018.

¹³ Cf Eph 1:1; Col 1:2

¹⁴ C.f Rom.12:4-13, 1 Cor. 12

¹⁵ We all are called to be holy for it was written "Be holy because I [am] holy" (see 1 Pt 1:14-16, Lev. 19:1).

¹⁶ Vatican II Council, Dogmatic Constitution of the Church *Lumen Gentium*, *The Conciliar and Post-Conciliar Documents*, Austine Flannery ed. (21st December, 1964), no. 39.

¹⁷ Leo Trese, *The Faith Explained*, (Lagos: Colour Connections Ltd, 2007), p. 192

¹⁸ (Mtt. 27:52-53)

¹⁹ (1 Thes 3:13).

²⁰ (Rv 5:8; 8:3,).

²¹ (November 1)

²² "Veneration of the Saints", The Catholic Dictionary, Available at

<https://www.catholicculture.org/culture/library/dictionary/index.cfm?id=37057>, Accessed on 18th January 2018.

²³ Luke 16:19-31

²⁴ (Romans 8:34; Hebrews 7:25)

²⁵ (John 11:25; Romans 8:38-39).

²⁶ "The Communion of the Saints" Catholic Encyclopedia, Available at

<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/04171a.htm> Accessed on 18th January 2018

²⁷ Ibid

²⁸ (2 Tm 4:5)

²⁹ Kofi Asare Opoku, *West African Traditional Religion*. Jurong: FEP International Private Limited, 1977, p. 36.

- ³⁰ J. Omosade Awolalu, *Yoruba Beliefs and Sacrificial Rites*. Harlow: Longman Group Limited, 1979, p. 53.
- ³¹ Mbiti, *Ibid.*
- ³² Francis A. Arinze, *Sacrifice in Igbo Traditional Religion*. Onitsha: Brothers of St. Stephen, 2008. p. 35.
- ³³ J. Omosade Awolalu, *Yoruba Beliefs and Sacrificial Rites*. Harlow: Longman Group Limited, 1979. p.61.
- ³⁴ Nnamdi S. Onuigbo, *The Three Words in Igbo Traditional Religion*. Enugu: Delta Publications (Nigeria) Limited, 2009, p. 84.
- ³⁵ G.T. Basden, *Among the Ibos of Nigeria*, London: Frank Cass. 1966, p. 46.
- ³⁶ Nnamdi S. Onuigbo, *The Three Words in Igbo Traditional Religion*. Enugu: Delta Publications (Nigeria) Limited, 2009 p. 84.
- ³⁷ *Ibid.*, p, 85.
- ³⁸ *Ibid.*
- ³⁹ H. Norvin et al, *Religions of the World*, 3rd Ed, New York:St. Martin's Press, Inc. 1993,p. 39.
- ⁴⁰ Josephat O. Oguejiofor, *The Influence of Igbo Traditional Religion on the Socio-political Character of the Igbo*, Nsukka:Fuladu Publishing Co.,1996,p. 80.
- ⁴¹ Nnamdi S. Onuigbo, *The Three Words in Igbo Traditional Religion*. Enugu: Delta Publications (Nigeria) Limited, 2009, p. 86.
- ⁴² J. Omosade Awolalu, *Yoruba Beliefs and Sacrificial Rites*. Harlow: Longman Group Limited, 1979, p.89.
- ⁴³ Francis A. Arinze, *Sacrifice in Igbo Traditional Religion*. Onitsha: Brothers of St. Stephen, 2008, p. 111.
- ⁴⁴ Kofi Asare Opoku, *West African Traditional Religion*. Jurong: FEP International Private Limited, 1977, p.38.
- ⁴⁵ Francis A. Arinze, *Sacrifice in Igbo Traditional Religion*. Onitsha: Brothers of St. Stephen, 2008,p. 36.
- ⁴⁶ Nnamdi S. Onuigbo, *The Three Words in Igbo Traditional Religion*. Enugu: Delta Publications (Nigeria) Limited, 2009, p. 81.
- ⁴⁷ G.T. Basden, *Among the Ibos of Nigeria*, London: Frank Cass. 1966,p. 46.
- ⁴⁸ Emefiele Ikenga Metuh, *God and Man in African Religion*. Enugu: SNAAP PRESS, 1981, p. 122.

- ⁴⁹ Geoffrey Parinder, *West African Religions*, London: Epworth Press, 1977, p.125.
- ⁵⁰ Francis A. Arinze, *Sacrifice in Igbo Traditional Religion*. Onitsha: Brothers of St. Stephen, 2008, p.36.
- ⁵¹ Emefiele Ikenga Metuh, *God and Man in African Religion*. Enugu: SNAAP PRESS, 1981, p. 122.
- ⁵² Ibid.
- ⁵³ Nnamdi S. Onuigbo, *The Three Words in Igbo Traditional Religion*. Enugu: Delta Publications (Nigeria) Limited, 2009, p. 82.
- ⁵⁴ Emefiele Ikenga Metuh, *God and Man in African Religion*. Enugu: SNAAP PRESS, 1981, p.124.
- ⁵⁵ Ibid., pp.123-124.
- ⁵⁶ B. Davidson, *African Kingdoms*, New York: Time Inc., 1996, p.126.
- ⁵⁷ Nnamdi S. Onuigbo, *The Three Words in Igbo Traditional Religion*. Enugu: Delta Publications (Nigeria) Limited, 2009, p.79.
- ⁵⁸ EI Ifesieh, "Prayer in Igbo Religion: Some Traditional Models" in Uzukwu, Elochukwu (ed), *Religion and African Culture*. Nsukka: Spiritan Publications, 1988, p.71
- ⁵⁹ TU Nwala, *Igbo Philosophy*, Lagos: Literamed Limited, 1985, p.119.
- ⁶⁰ Ela J-M, *My Faith as an African*. New York: Orbis Books, 1995, pp. 28:29-30.
- ⁶¹ Ibid., pp.28-29.
- ⁶² Mbiti JS, *African Religions and Philosophy*, London: Heinemann, 1985, p. 275.
- ⁶³ (NO CITATION WAS GIVEN HERE...)
- ⁶⁴ Mbogu NI, "Christian Eschatology and Ancestor Christology: How Compatible?" in Nwachukwu, Mary-Sylvia (ed), *African Journal of Contextual Theology* Vol.3, Lagos: Change Publications Ltd, 2011, p.160
- ⁶⁵ Vatican II Council, Dogmatic Constitution of the Church *Lumen Gentium*, *The Conciliar and Post-Conciliar Documents*, Austine Flannery ed. (21st December, 1964), no.16.