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Bede Uche Ukwuije, C.S.Sp

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Grace & Contradiction

Letter to an Impatient Friend

Bede Uche Ukwuije, C.S.Sp

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Dedication

To all the Victims of Road Accidents in 2010

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Foreword

When Fr. Bede Ukwuije requested that I write a foreword to this dense, thought-provoking book, I felt excited and obliged.

This is a book on grace with a difference in perspective. Whereas the usual Catholic reflection on grace seems to confine it solely on God's exclusive activity- a gift which, as it were, a philanthropist doles out to humanity without any human involvement, Fr. Ukwuije rather visions this grace as man's encounter with the all gracious, loving and mysterious God in awkward events.

The event which triggered this perspective on grace was a fatal accident in which he was involved on Holy Thursday 2010. While the car in which he was the sole occupant was mangled beyond repair, he was providentially saved by God – the author of grace. It was this providence that the traditional Igbo of Southern Nigeria aptly call “Chi na emere m mma” (the gracious One) who permitted the accident to occur near a private hospital, touched the hearts of

numerous rescue teams - the medical team and passersby - to come to the help of a stranger they never met before. Reflections on these intricate linkages constitute what Fr. Bede Ukwuije calls "Grace". In other words, grace for him is an existential experience of God's gracious deeds – loving mercy and providence within the world's daily events especially the awkward ones where we least expect to identify with God's activity. In his very words:

I have come to cherish life as grace, which is an unmerited free gift from God. I have also come to understand that Grace is hidden in contradictions and in things not sought for. An experience human beings consider as negative or catastrophic could turn out to be a salvation history when it is positively interpreted.

In the ensuing four chapters of this book, the theologian, Bede Ukwuije exposes the above convictions in form of a letter to anticipated

audience-future readers. The attractive styles of this work should not escape readers' attention: simple story, biblical reflections and God's salvific encounters with his chosen ones, deep personal reflections on grace as God's revelation in human contradictions epitomized in Christ the saviour of the world, terminating in what may be regarded as an epilogue of concrete advice by a seasoned artistic writer to a listening audience.

Indeed, an empathic reading of this book will no doubt imbue readers with the lively mood which the theologian Bede Ukwuije intends them to exhibit—thanksgiving for God's available grace to mankind in hidden and often unexpected events of daily activities.

In the light of the lucid and exciting manner the contents of this work are presented, I warmly and seriously recommend it to all and sundry, while at the same time I congratulate the author for this job well done.

Rev. Fr. Prof. A. N. O. Ekwunife, C.S.Sp
Spiritans International School of Theology,
Attawu, Enugu

Introduction

Dearly Beloved,

Every Holy Thursday, Christians commemorate the love of God for humanity through the total self-donation of Jesus Christ. This is symbolised by the institution of the Eucharist when Jesus gave his body and blood under the signs of bread and wine (Luke 22:19-20) and by the washing of feet when the Master made himself slave of his disciples (John 13:5-10). This day has taken a new meaning for me since my car accident on Holy Thursday 2010. While Christians adored Jesus Christ in the Eucharist, I was semi-conscious, under severe pains.

This letter is first of all a thanksgiving to God for saving my life. Secondly, it is the fruit of my reflections on the meaning of life. That accident experience transformed my vision of life. I have come to cherish life as grace, which is an unmerited free gift from God. I have also come to understand that Grace is hidden in contradictions and in things not sought for. An experience human beings consider as negative or catastrophic could turn out to be a

salvation history when it is positively interpreted. The truth of this conviction shines out as I reflect on the way God reveals himself to human beings in the Bible. The summit of this revelation is the paradox of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ where God revealed his abundant love for humanity.

I think that this type of experience deserves to be shared. This reflection will help you to reshape your understanding of life, your approach to success, achievements as well as pain, suffering, failure and evil. It will help you to deepen your understanding of God. We are used to recognizing the love of God in agreeable things that happen in our lives, but we have difficulty in associating him with the painful and disagreeable experiences. You will find tips in this letter that will help you manage stress and impatience when you undertake difficult tasks and especially when things are not moving the way you want.

The letter contains four chapters. In chapter one, I revisit that Holy Thursday 2010 car accident as a moment of grace, when God arrested me and transformed my life. Chapter two shows the interplay of grace and contradiction in the history of salvation

through persons like Abraham, Jacob, Moses, Elijah and Peter. Chapter three demonstrates the connection of this understanding of grace with God's revelation of himself as a powerfully weak God in the event of the passion, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ. In the last chapter, you will find some guidelines that will help you to advance in life with total confidence in the Grace of God.

Many people helped to make this letter reach you and I want you to join me in thanking them. Permit me to name a few of them. My sincere gratitude goes to all those who rescued me on the accident scene, especially Mr. Olisa Eze and Rev. Fr. Casmir Nze. I am grateful to the nurses and doctors who took care of me at St Mark's Hospital, Umuapu; Holy Rosary Hospital Emekuku and Annunciation Hospital Enugu.

The members of SIST community, the priests, the scholastics and the sisters excelled in the manifestation of love and care. I am highly indebted to them. The Provincial of Nigeria South East, Very Rev. Fr. Peter Agbonome, C.S.Sp, Frs Augustine Nwosu, C.S.Sp and Emeka Akabueze, C.S.Sp, have

been very supportive. My parents, siblings and my uncle Mr Vigilus Iwu and his family demonstrated an immeasurable concern and support. May they all experience God's ever assuring tenderness every day.

The Ancestor, Rev. Fr. Prof. Anthony Ekwunife, C.S.Sp, accepted to write the foreword of this letter. May God give him many more years. Rev. Fr. Dr. Gabriel Mendy, C.S.Sp read through the letter and offered judicious corrections. Augustine Ibeh, C.S.Sp and Sr. Olisaemeka Okwara, D.D.L, were generous with constructive advice and critiques. May God bless all of them abundantly.

Bede Uche Ukwuije, C.S.Sp

Holy Thursday, 21 April, 2011

1

My Arrest

When I regained consciousness on that Holy Thursday 2010 at St Mark's Hospital, Umuapu, Imo-State, the first thing I said within myself was: *My God, reveal to me why you spared my life.* The search became more pressing when I was shown the picture of the accidented car. It was crushed beyond recognition. Yet I came out with only one hand broken, a light haemorrhage in the left eye and few bruises on my body. Anybody who saw it exclaimed: How did you come out from there? As I am writing you, I still do not know how I came out from there. I don't even remember how the accident happened. The story of how it happened was narrated to me by eye witnesses and those who participated in the rescue mission.

Like in the case of Job, so many people offered explanations on the why of the accident. Certain people did not exclude the possibility of witchcraft that is somebody or some people being after me. Many of them expressed disappointment at my blunt refusal to examine that hypothesis. I still hear them say “Ibu Fada, igaghi aghota”; You are a priest, you will not understand”.

I know that I also disappointed some people who tried to convince me that if God saved me, it must be because God loves me more than others. I do not believe that God loves me more than the middle aged man who died in a car accident or the young lady who died immediately after a fibroid surgery and many others who passed away without even being sick one day. Certainly, I am convinced that God loves me and every day I experience his love, but I don't think that I did anything extraordinary that merited me such a salvation. On the other hand, I don't think that others who died did anything extraordinary that merited them death. My Christian faith taught me, and I believe it firmly, that death is a passage that opens the way for our ultimate encounter with God, so we cannot think of death

fundamentally as a punishment and of being alive as a reward. Death and life belong to the same mystery of creation and our human condition. Our being dead or alive belongs to the eternal wisdom of God. He alone knows why.

Because God alone knows why he does what he does, I was constantly on my knees asking him to reveal to me his reason for keeping me alive. This was my *état d'âme*, when a friend gave me the book of Dr. Scott Peck, *The Road Less Travelled, A New Psychology of Love, Traditional Values and Spiritual Growth*¹, Dr. Peck talks of the *Miracle of Serendipity*, that is “the gift of finding valuable or agreeable things not sought for”². For example, you are getting late to a meeting and your car breaks down, or you miss the bus or the train. An accident occurs and shatters all your plans. A sickness comes and reduces your physical or mental capacities. You lose your job, or fail an examination. Dr Peck argues that Grace is

¹ Scott Peck, *The Road Less Travelled, A New Psychology of Love, Traditional Values and Spiritual Growth*, New York, Touchstone, 1978.

² *Ibid.* p. 257.

manifested in part, by such things not sought for. In other words, grace is hidden in contradiction. The problem is that many people do not take advantage of contradiction. They get blocked by a failure or an accident and as a result do not grow. It is also said that what hurts us is not what happens but our response to what happens. In other words, a positive response to an apparently negative event can produce human and spiritual growth. That is why it is said that people who have lost their legs or hands are not just handicapped but physically challenged citizens. The blind are not just blind but visually challenged etc. I also remembered one principle of spiritual growth that says, "Make it an act of faith that what contradicts you is good for you".

The lesson of this book made me change my approach to my experience. I decided to re-examine the event by asking myself what I can learn from it. Of what benefit is that accident to my spiritual growth, my knowledge of God and the way I relate with people and accomplish my mission? After months of reflection, it came clearly to me that that accident was a way through which God "arrested" me and opened me to new life.

Those who know me know that I can get nervous and worried when things are not moving according to my plan. My European training conditioned me to programme and handle many things at the same time with a strong wish to accomplish all of them perfectly without fault. God has blessed me in my life because I had not encountered many failures in my life; this certainly made me take life for granted.

These traits as far as I can remember were at their pick during the period that accident occurred. I had programmed to finish different tasks on my desk: reports for seminarians, candidates to various ministries and vows in the Congregation, correction of exam scripts, publication of the Acts of SIST Missiological Symposium 2009, and redaction of articles including a paper to be presented at CATHAN (Catholic Theological Association of Nigeria), Conference, Abuja 2010. Again, I was filled with a certain desire of ubiquitous presence. I remember that on that Holy Thursday, I was supposed to be at Mater Misericordiae Parish Port-Harcourt for mass at 4pm. I wanted also to attend Chrism Mass at Maria Assumpta Cathedral, Owerri at 9am. I also planned to take lunch with my parents

in my sister's house at Owerri, so that I could spend some time with my convalescent father. I programmed all these in my head without leaving margins for any surprise. The Chrism mass lasted long and I left the mass after post communion prayer. I was afraid of the long announcements.

When I picked my car, there was a very long hold up at the entrance. The gate men refused to open the gate for cars to pass. They explained that they were instructed not to open the gate until the mass was over. The situation was not agreeable. People were cursing them and threatening to beat them up. I understood them, they were doing their Job. However, I explained to them that I had to be in Port-Harcourt for mass, that I don't like being late and moreover, that I would not like to disappoint the people of God who were waiting for me. They gave me concession as a priest and I jumped the line. By the time the gate was opened I saw time galloping like a chronometer. The lunch with my parents was very short. I don't even know whether it lasted 30 minutes. They accepted it; they have learnt to adapt to my programme. They are used to seeing me busy. They were even happy that I was conscious of my

responsibility as a priest and that the people of God should have priority over the family.

When I picked my car and headed towards Port-Harcourt, I still thought I was in control of events. But when I woke up at St Mark's Hospital some hours later, it dawned on me that life is something else beyond agitation, programming, execution of tasks and achievement. Someone else is in-charge. Today, it is clear to me that this event was the way God wanted to surprise me and redirect my understanding of life. Our history belongs to God who directs it according to his will for our own good. Faith is that "abiding astonishment" which helps us to welcome and confess God's work and to allow ourselves to be used by God for his work. This became clearer to me as I revisited the stories of some of our fathers in faith, Abraham, Jacob, Moses, Elijah, Peter, Paul. These men were also arrested by God at some crucial moments of their lives. Their arrest was their salvation.

2

Arrested and Saved Servants

The Circumcision of Abraham

When Abram received God's call in Genesis 12, he was already in migration. There was a famine and Abram, with his father Terah and his wife Sarai left the land of Ur of the Chaldeans and went to settle in Canaan. They stopped at Hara. It was after the death of his father that Abram received God's call to leave his father's house.

The difference between the first migration and the second is significant. The first migration was for an economic reason, search for greener pasture in the

context of famine. It was a personal survival strategy, calculated and executed. The second migration was a call from God. Abram was called to journey to the unknown, a country that God would show him. His future depended on the promise of God alone. We must be ready to move even though we have been on the move for a long time or so many times. We must be ready to allow God to change our personal strategies and use us for his mission.

At Canaan, Abram encountered two major events. He had to move to Egypt because of famine (Genesis 12:10-20). He was afraid of his life, so he mounted another personal survival strategy. He convinced his wife Sarai to present herself as his sister. When Pharaoh spotted the beautiful lady and asked Abram who she was, Abram said "She is my sister". Pharaoh took Sarai, but before something grave happened, God intervened and threatened Pharaoh with death. He gave Sarai back to Abram and begged him to leave.

Chapter 16 narrates another personal survival strategy in the life of Abram and Sarai. They had no Child. We know how tormenting such an experience

could be for a woman. One understands why it was Sarai who proposed the survival strategy. She asked Abram to take Hagar her maidservant so that she could give him a descendant. She wanted to please her husband in order to save her marriage. Abram did not think twice; he acted and Ishmael was born. One would think that their problems would end and they would rest since they have a bouncing baby boy. But God's plan is always different. Sarai became jealous of Hagar and wanted to get rid of her. She proposed another survival strategy to Abram who accepted and sent Hagar and Ismael away.

From the way the story was moving it was clear that the history of Abram and Sarai was in serious jeopardy. They were ready to mount a new survival strategy to solve every new problem. Perhaps they would have jeopardized their future. Martin Luther the reformer, said: "We thank you Lord for not leaving our salvation in our hands. We would have destroyed it". God intervened to save the history of Abram and Sarai. The decisive moment which always escapes the readers of the Bible is the circumcision of Abram (Genesis 17). Through this event, God took control of his history. Circumcision

symbolizes limitation and purification that leads paradoxically to overture of an unlimited future. Abram's identity was radically changed. He was given the name Abraham, father of nations. Sarai (my possession) became Sarah my princess. Circumcision becomes a sign of God's promise that opens a history that will never close again. If God had left the history of salvation to the personal survival strategies of Abram and Sarai, they would have closed it through mismanagement. They would have shaped it to correspond to their personal visions and fear. God positions his actions beyond human expectations, beyond the horizons of human control.

The story of Genesis 18:1-15, shows that Abraham understood the divine lesson. Abraham was sitting at the entrance of the tent during the hottest part of the day (Genesis 18:1). One would argue that it was better to sit at the entrance of the tent when it is hot inside. But there is a theological message here. Sitting at the entrance of the tent is a way of saying that Abraham was ready and attentive. The tent was not closed the household did not give up all hope rather their hearts were thirsting for God. "My soul is waiting for God, more that the watchman waits for

daybreak” (Psalm 130:6). Waiting for God, Abraham was able to recognize the three strangers as God and welcome them to his tent. He saw three men and addressed them as one person: “My Lord...I beg you, if I find favour with you, kindly do not pass your servant by” (Genesis 18:3). It was unthinkable that a man and woman who have passed the age of child bearing could give birth to a child but God did it. God saved a history that was apparently closed. Through Abraham and Sarah, God opened a future for a nation and for the whole humanity. Today, God continues to keep open the possibilities of human history beyond our expectations. He does this most of the time against the human inclination which naturally tends towards over confidence in human capacities and giving up at the eve of life when all hope seems lost.

The Wound of Jacob

This grandchild of Abraham was a smart and fast guy. He started quarrelling with his brother Esau right from their mother’s womb (Genesis 25:22). He came out from the womb grasping his brother’s heel, probably because he hated coming out in a second

position. The whole family life will be a total display of what is later depicted in the mythology as Oedipus complex, namely, the desire to be the most beloved in the family. This led Oedipus to kill his father Laius, King of Thebes and marry his mother, Jocasta. Esau was his father's pet while Jacob was favoured by his mother. Jacob wanted his breakthrough immediately. He mounted his personal survival strategy. First, he stripped Esau of his birth right the day the later was "dying of hunger" by giving him bread and lentil soup. One may argue that Esau was foolish but Jacob was smart and mischievous. Second, Jacob connived with his mother and stole his father's blessing to the detriment of Esau (Genesis 7).

As we have seen, personal survival strategies work for some time and quickly end in an impasse. Esau hated Jacob and sought to kill him. Jacob ran towards the north of Haran and settled with his maternal uncle, Laban. There he married the two daughters of Laban, Leah and Rachel and had children. Then he decided to go back to his home country. Being smart, he proposed a deal to Laban to his own favour. Laban allowed him to take a greater share of his property. But Laban and his children

later turned against him when they discovered the dupe. Laban pursued Jacob and the latter had to run away.

God always waits for a favourable moment to convert us. Jacob had to experience his fragility and vulnerability. It is not possible for one to escape from one's shadow. Again as the Igbo would say one cannot run faster than his *chi* (destiny). To go back home, Jacob had to cross his brother Esau's territory (Genesis 32). He searched once more in the reserve of his personal survival strategies. He chose to negotiate with his brother, trying to impress him with his wealth. He thought that perhaps Esau would allow himself to be duped again. Rather, message was sent back to him that Esau was waiting for him with an army of four hundred men. Afraid and distressed, Jacob mounted his last strategy. He lined up all his possessions in different groups and made them go before him as "bullet proofs". He sent his servants in advance with gifts for his brother Esau.

It was at this juncture that God surprised Jacob and turned his strategies upside down. This is narrated in the famous scene where Jacob wrestled with God

(Genesis 32:23-32). They wrestled until daybreak and Jacob proved tough and invincible. God had to arrest him with force; “seeing that he could not master him, (he) struck him in the socket of his hip, and Jacob’s hip was dislocated as he wrestled with him”. Jacob’s wound recalls the circumcision of Abraham. If God had left him, Jacob would have locked himself up in his illusion of intelligence, calculation, possessions, power on one hand and his fears and distress on the other. Wounded, Jacob asks for a blessing: “I will not let you go unless you bless me”. This blessing was not the stolen one. It is a free one which goes with conversion and total confidence in God. This transformation is symbolized by the new name, Israel, given to him.

The Jacob who goes to meet his brother Esau is a wounded, vulnerable but transformed man. The two brothers threw themselves in the hands of one another and experienced the joy of reconciliation that God alone gives. It is not violence or power that saves, but the absolute mercy of God (Cf. Romans 9:16)

The Shoes of Moses

Moses' life started as an intervention of divine providence in the dramatic history of Israel (Exodus 1-2). The oppression of the enslaved people in Egypt became more dramatic when there emerged a Pharaoh who did not know Joseph. Moses was saved from water. He grew up in Pharaoh's court and was instructed in Egyptian wisdom.

Moses' mission was inaugurated with a failure. His people's life was unbearable to him and he felt that he had to do something to liberate them. One day, he killed an Egyptian who was maltreating a Hebrew and hid the corpse in the sand (Exodus 2:11-13). This personal survival strategy seemed to have worked. Unfortunately for him, his brothers used it against him. The following day, when he tried to settle a quarrel between two of his brothers, he was asked: "Who appointed you [...] to be prince and judge? Do you intend to kill me as you killed the Egyptian?" (v.14). Moses was disappointed. Reality resists ideas. Isolated, rejected by his brothers, pursued by Pharaoh, Moses fled into the desert of Midian and became a stranger. He had to learn to face the density of reality. From the court of Pharaoh, Moses became

shepherd of the flocks of Jetro, what the Igbo would call "boy boy".

The turning point of the story is God's self-manifestation to Moses at Mount Horeb. This manifestation is also the arrest, limitation, purification and conversion of Moses. The bush was blazing with fire but was not burned up (Exodus 3). The intelligent and strategic Moses decided to move round and check why the bush was not burning. God would not allow him to deploy his personal strategies this time. He called him from the middle of the bush and demanded a significant gesture from him: "Take off your shoes". Moses had to strip himself of his resistance, his personal search for security and encounter God as he is, in confidence and faith. The mission he will now carry is God's mission and not his personal ideas or desires. He will set the people of God free. This helped him a lot because whenever he had problems he reminded God that it was God himself who brought the people out of Egypt and that the people belong to him (Cf. 32:17-14).

Despite Moses' transformation, he was not free from the temptation inherent in the search for immediacy;

the temptation to solve existential problems once and for all. However, God cannot be mastered. Our encounter with him requires constant conversion. Moses experienced this very closely and it remains a lesson for the whole people of Israel. When God encountered him at Sinai, God presented himself as “the God of your fathers”, but when Moses enquired more about the name of God, he received the answer “I AM WHO AM”[...]Thus shall thou say unto the children of Israel, I AM has sent me to you” (Exodus 3:13-14). Again after accomplishing a wonderful task for God, Moses wanted to become more familiar with God. He asked to see the face of God (Exodus 33:18-23). God refused and promised Moses that he will only see his back. Gregory of Nyssa, a 4th Century Church Father noted that before Moses made his request, he had already walked a long distance to Sinai. Nevertheless, God refused his request. The Cappadocian Father sees this as a call to follow the transcendent God whose desire in us never ceases. Our search for him encounters contradictions and obstacles that strengthen our desire for him. St Augustine also remarks that it is for our own good that God sometimes does not answer our prayers immediately. God waits for our heart to dilate so that

it can contain the grace God will give. The paradox is that sometimes, we have to accept to be stripped of our desires for these same desires to be accomplished. When we accept this self-stripping, God gives us infinitely more than we ask of him. The Bible submits this paradox to our meditation:

Some things are achieved only when they are surrendered. Happiness follows the forgetting of one's desire to be happy and living in such a way as to foster the happiness of others. Holiness follows the desire to live in harmony with God's will in selfless praise and thanksgiving. It is best pursued indirectly³.

The Correction of Elijah

Elijah's encounter with God in 1Kings18-19 is very interesting for our reflection. Contemporary interpretation of this story in the context of competition and fight for supremacy among religions

³ Donald Cozzens, *The Changing Face of the Priesthood*, Collegeville, Minnesota, The Liturgical Press, 2000, p. 28.

or powers and principalities has led to a total misunderstanding of the theological point of the story. They seem to suggest that the God of Elijah is the God of fire, ready to deal with enemies. A popular song in Nigeria says: "God of Elijah, send them fire". Princess Njideka, the musician popularized the story of Elijah with her interpretation of it as victory of the Christian God over powers and principalities that want to destroy the children of God. This eclipses the fact that the story is not first of all that of the almighty, all-powerful God but fundamentally that of the conversion of Elijah the prophet.

Elijah was filled with zeal for Yahweh. Right from Chapter 17, Elijah demonstrated that he was a powerful prophet. He challenged King Ahab, foretold drought, multiplied flour and oil for the widow of Zarephath, raised the widow's son. After these exploits, Elijah engaged a terrible battle with the prophets of Baal. Elijah was vindicated by Yahweh who sent down fire to consume his offering while Baal did not show up. Confident in his victory, Elijah ordered the slaughter of the Prophets of Baal.

The rest of the story narrates the disenchantment of the Prophet of Yahweh. Elijah was being pursued by Ahab and Jezebel. Apparently he had no one to defend him. Yahweh was silent and seemed to have abandoned him. The prophet relived the experience of Moses' exile in the desert. The experience was so devastating that Elijah attempted what looks like a suicide.

He [...] went on into the wilderness, a day's journey, and sitting there under a furze bush and wished he were dead. And he said, "Yahweh, I have had enough. Take my life: I am no better than my ancestors. Then he lay down and went to sleep (I Kings 19: 4-5).

It is at this point that God took over the history of Elijah to give it a future. The Lord sent an angel to feed him; he regained strength and walked for forty days and forty nights until he reached Horeb, the mountain of God.

The experience of Horeb was exactly the opposite of Elijah's triumph at the encounter with the prophets of Baal. Yahweh was not in the wind, nor in the earthquake, nor in fire. Yahweh came in "the sound of a gentle breeze" (I Kings 19: 11-14). Yahweh sent Elijah back to the city to accomplish missions that he would not have chosen himself.

The Experience of the prophet is a symbol of the journey of faith we are called to make. We tend to search for God in extraordinary phenomena, miracles, demonstrations of power. We are tempted to call down fire on those who oppose us and think differently from us. Pentecostals have conditioned people to think that the true pastor or believer is one who calls down Holy Ghost fire on the enemies. They make people neglect the gentle way to God, the journey of faith. This journey cannot be accomplished without submitting to the will of God. The Founder of the Holy Ghost Congregation, Claude Poullart des Places always prayed, "Lord that I may walk on the way you will show me". Many times, in order to save us, God blocks the way we have chosen ourselves. We naturally choose the cheapest way, the way of triumph and search for

immediacy, but God prefers the way of slow and patient germination. We want the demonstration of power but God prefers the mystical “sound of a gentle breeze”.

The Contradiction of Peter

I would also like you to discover a fundamental experience of the great apostle Peter originally called Simon. I say fundamental because Luke 5: 1-11 presents it as an experience that led to the vocation of Simon Peter. In this story we see the relationship between grace and contradiction displayed in a fantastic manner.

Simon and his companions encountered Jesus when they thought they had finished their work. The night was not wonderful. They did not catch any fish. They had gone out of their boats and were washing their nets. They had given up. Jesus came with his trouble. “He got into Simon’s boat and asked him to put out a little from the shore” (v.3) Jesus was not invited. He did not take permission from Simon; somehow he imposed himself. Peter must have been surprised by this man. He was tired and would have loved to go

home and rest. However, he obeyed without complain.

“He (Jesus) sat down and taught the crowd from the boat” (v.3). We do not know how long the teaching lasted. However, after his teaching, one would have expected Jesus to demonstrate some courtesy by saying, “Thank you very much, Simon, for lending me your boat, I am sorry for wasting your time”. Rather he went further to challenge Simon, He proved to be more demanding. “Put out into deep water and let down your nets for a catch” (v.4). Here Simon was obliged to react: “Master, we worked hard all night long and caught nothing” (v.5). Peter is tired, frustrated. Moreover, as a professional he knows that this is not the time for fishing. If they got no fish all night long, what guarantees that they will get fish in the morning? Simon’s patience is on trial. He has to wrestle with himself. His professionalism is questioned. His whole experience has hit a limit and something else is required of him.

That thing is in the second part of Simon’s statement, “but if you say so, I will pay out the nets”. Confidence; faith. Simon seems to know Jesus; he

calls him master”. A paraphrase of his words could be: Master, professionally and humanly speaking, we have tried. Let alone, we would like to go home. But if you say so, let’s give it a try. I will let down the nets. You are in-charge; whatever comes out of it is your responsibility. “And they netted such a huge number of fish that their nets began to tear” (v.9). The result was overwhelming.

Simon came face to face with contradiction. His professionalism was challenged. His patience was tested. His pride was pushed to the wall. Let alone, he would not have made that choice. But Jesus first had to make difficult demands on him, for his own good. Martin Luther, the reformer, while speaking of the primacy of God’s initiative in our salvation said that we are lucky that God did not put our salvation into our hands; if he did, we would have spoilt it. No one naturally and spontaneously chooses what contradicts him/her. It requires an act of faith and confidence in Jesus Christ to transform this contradiction/grace into a salvation story.

Consider this story in connection with your life experiences especially the situation in which you find

yourself now. You are tempted to give up the project you have at hand because you have encountered and still encounter so many obstacles. You are tired and you no longer see meaning in what you are doing. Jesus comes with his trouble/contradiction and asks you to lend him your boat. Jesus needs that boat you want to park. He wants to sit on it and teach his people. He wants to sit on it and bring the Good News to the poor, liberty to the captives, sight to the blind. He wants to climb on that boat and set the downtrodden free. Jesus wants to use you to announce the year of reconciliation to his people. The same instrument you want to condemn is still valuable from the point of view of God.

Jesus is not content with borrowing that boat, that instrument that you are. He is making more demands: "put out into deep water". Mission does not end on a failure. We have so many reasons for not taking risks in our respective apostolates. We line up professional, material, cultural, economic, traditional, and even religious arguments to explain why we cannot dare into new missions. These reasons may end up being different ways of resisting the Lord's command, different ways of resisting

grace. There is no fatality for those who believe in God. As long as mission is the mission of the Lord, it is structured in the form of the Pascal mystery. The moment of passion is also the moment of resurrection. We may judge that the Lord is asking too much from us. The Church may be making impossible demands on us, but miracles cannot happen unless we accept to die. Transformation cannot occur unless we strip ourselves of our resistances.

When Simon let go his resistance and obeyed the Lord's command, he saw the Lord's goodness. He saw grace that God constantly pours out freely for the salvation of his people. The huge number of fish netted out (v.6) is an expression of the abundance of God's love for his people. Only those who obey the Lord's command share in this grace.

Simon's response is extraordinary. "He fell at the knees of Jesus saying, "Leave me, Lord; I am a sinful man". The future cannot be opened unless we fall at the feet of Jesus and recognize our sinfulness. Understand sin here as illusion of being, that which ought not to be. Sin is when we count on our own

capacities, intelligence, strategies, etc. This is what brings frustration, the sentiment of inadequacy, quarrels, careerism etc. We have to allow ourselves to be redirected by the Lord. Diving into the deep is resolutely opting for a radical conversion.

Conversion, obedience to the Lord opens new possibilities. The recognition of their limitations before the abundant grace of God led Simon and his brothers to beckon on other companions in the other boat to come and help them (v.7). This is an example of collaborative ministry. When they were parking their boat and washing their nets, they did not notice that other companions were still working. They did not consider it necessary to seek their advice. They did not even care to share their experiences or frustrations with others.

No one does the Lord's work alone. Sin, pride, self-centeredness, make us think that we do not need others. That is why many of our projects are unproductive. It takes a dose of humility to be able to beckon on other confreres, other sisters, other congregations, priests, and lay faithful to come and help. The natural tendency is to protect our

territories, our projects, our missions. Some people even go to the extent of closing down missions, projects and resources instead of bringing other people to come and help. It is a sign of lack of confidence in God, a sign of ignorance of the abundance of the grace of God.

3

The Powerfully Weak God

The summit of the connection between grace and contradiction is the paradox of the cross of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. It took a lot of pains for the apostle Paul to explain to the Corinthians what he considers as a revelation: that God wants to be encountered and known in the condition of weakness and suffering. Paul is aware of the foolishness of this proposition before the Jews and Greeks (2 Corinthians 12:11). He maintains that this manner of God's self-revelation takes precedence over signs, marvels and miracles that abound around him and that people cherish. Surely, these impressive events are confirmations of the divine missionary

mandate given to the apostle but they are not primary ways of accessing the being of God. Anybody who wants to know God must search for him in the weakness and vulnerability displayed on the Cross of Jesus Christ:

While the Jews demand miracles and the Greeks look for wisdom [...] we preach a Crucified Christ; to the Jews an obstacle that they cannot get over, to the pagans madness, but to those who have been called, whether they are Jews or Greeks, a Christ who is the power and the wisdom of God. For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength (I Corinthians 1:23-25).

We have not really measured the depth of this affirmation, that God has chosen weakness as a manifestation of his power. A French exegete, Etienne Babut wrote a book titled, *Le Dieu puissamment*

*faible de la Bible*⁴ (The powerfully weak God of the Bible). When you compare this to our imagination of God shaped by the classical attributes of God – omnipotence, omniscience, omnipresence, eternal, immortal, etc, you get lost. This Pauline confession of faith has enraged more than one in the history of humanity.

The great German philosopher Frederick Nietzsche took it up as a project to destroy the God of Paul. He once exclaimed, *Deus qualem Paulus creavit, dei negatio*. “The God created by Paul is a negation of God”. He saw the weak God as something that depreciated life and hence something unreal. For him, God is a lie, a poetic invention, a counter-concept of life, an expression of resentment against life. He thinks that in the Christian concept of God, God degenerated into the contradiction of life instead of being its transfiguration and eternal yes⁵. He writes:

⁴ Etienne Babut, *Le Dieu puissamment faible de la Bible*, Paris, Cerf, 1999.

⁵ Cf. Frederick Nietzsche, *Antichrist*, p. 18

We reject God as God. Even if one proves this God of Christians we cannot believe in him. Deus qualem Paulus creavit, dei negatio. The God created by Paul is a negation of God. A religion like Christianity, which has no contact with reality, which dissolves as soon as reality reclaims its right, cannot but be hostile to the wisdom of the world. Faith as an imperative is a veto against science – in practice, it is a lie. Paul understood that lie (faith) was a necessity [...] later, the Church understood Paul⁶.

However, some other great philosophers in history perceived the contrary. Before Nietzsche, Hegel had perceived the truth of the Christian faith in the incarnation and called on philosophers to bring it to the level of reason. Hegel understood that theology is

⁶ Frederick Nietzsche, "Antichrist", in *The Complete Works of Frederick Nietzsche*, translated by A. M. Ludovici, edited by O. Levy, New York, Macmillian, Vol 16, 1911, n 47, p. 196.

theologia crucis, *theology of the cross*. What distinguishes Christianity from other religions is the confession that Christ, Son of God belongs to the nature of God. Hence from the event of the death of Christ on the cross, it is clear that God is the “union of the life and death for the sake of life⁷. The Good Friday belongs to God’s *curriculum vitae*. God entered into history and exposed himself to death, hence alterity, suffering, contingency, history and death are not contradictions in God. The resurrection signifies “the death of death” and the proof par excellence that God is the God of life. God is life, gift, self-donation. Christian liturgy celebrates this mystery at Easter. This is orchestrated during the *paschal triduum*, the three days of the commemoration of the passion, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

The Slave Master

At Holy Thursday, Christians are invited to commemorate the love of God for humanity in Jesus Christ, symbolised in the institution of the Eucharist (Luke 22:19-20) and the washing of feet (John 13:1-15) when Jesus the Master made himself slave of his

⁷ Eberhard Jüngel, *God as Mystery of the World*, p. 299.

disciples. Through the sign of bread and wine, Jesus Christ gave his body and blood to his disciples: “this is my body”; “this is my blood which will be poured out for you”. Pope John Paul II, in an Encyclical which looks like his last testimony *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, explored the depth of the Eucharist as the sacrifice in which one single sacrifice of Christ is made present ever anew. The Church constantly draws her life from this redeeming sacrifice (no 12). Paul’s testimony on the Eucharist (1 Corinthians 11: 23-26) shows that right from the beginning of the Church, the memory of the Eucharist has been structuring the identity of the Church.

John introduces the washing of the disciples’ feet by Jesus with this wonderful phrase: “He had always loved those who were his in the world, but now he showed how perfect his love was” (John 13:1). A literal translation would say “he loved them to the extreme, to the end, to the fullest; he poured himself out for them. He removed his outer garments and began to wash the disciples’ feet. This corresponds to what Paul also calls the kenosis, self-emptying of the Son of God:

Christ Jesus [...] though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death - even death on a cross. Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father (Philippians 2:6-11).

When he asked his disciples to do this in memory of him, Jesus indicated that henceforth, it is self-donation, extreme love for the other that structures the life of those who believe in him. The Fathers of the Church rightly understood that the Eucharist makes the Church. Eucharistic celebration is the

proclamation of the meaning of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ as well as an act of hope for the coming of the Lord. In one anamnesis we sing: *“We remember how you loved us through your death. And still we celebrate for you are with us now and we believe that we will see you when you come in your Glory Lord, we remember, we celebrate we believe”*.

This proclamation may have shaken the first Christian communities marked by ethnic divides, discriminations and selfishness as we experience today in our societies. Paul had to tell the Christians that a Eucharist celebrated in the context of divisions cannot be the Lord’s Supper:

I do not commend you, because when you come together it is not for the better but for the worse. For, in the first place, when you assemble as a church, I hear that there are divisions among you; and I partly believe it, for there must be factions among you in order that those who are genuine among you may be recognized. When you meet together,

it is not the Lord's Supper that you eat.... (I Corinthians 11:17).

He even maintained that receiving the body and blood of Christ without being in communion with the community of the brothers and sisters brings condemnation to the person who receives.

The first communities made it a mission to structure their togetherness according to the style of our Lord Jesus Christ such that nobody will fight only for his/her self-preservation but that everybody will make efforts to share his life, his possessions with others.

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time

together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved (Acts 2:42-47).

The Crucified God

The Good Friday celebration deepens the drama of the extreme love of God for humanity. Since the 4th Century, this day is reserved for the celebration of the passion of the Lord. The centre of this celebration is the veneration of the cross, sign of the love of God demonstrated through weakness, vulnerability and death. Those who resist the idea of the crucified God are afraid that a weak God can no longer solve our problems. This is inherent in some attempts of theodicy to exonerate God from suffering or from the problem of evil in the world. Again some people think that the veneration of the cross may encourage fatalism and the justification of suffering. This fear may be justified by the way some people give up struggling or escape the gravity of suffering. A charismatic group instructed a widow, at the funeral

of her husband not to cry because God has given and God has taken. The woman spent her time saying “thank you Jesus”. Everyone could see that it was not real.

On the contrary, Christian liturgy did not hesitate to venerate the crucified Jesus as God. When we contemplate the cross of Jesus Christ, we see a man free from violence. By carrying the cross to the end, he broke the chains of violence and hatred. He did not go for the cross, he simply carried it. He did not do it by simple stoicism or heroism, rather he did it through total confidence in God and for the love he had for humanity. His humiliation was terrible; his death was tragic and dramatic. His big cry on the cross “My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?”(Matthew 27:46; Mark 15:34) led people to think that he was abandoned by God. However, theologians have shown that Jesus’ experience of passion was like a trial or what mystics would call “the dark night of the soul”. Right from the Garden of Gethsemane Jesus hoped in his father. He submitted himself to the will of the Father. His cry on the cross was a prayer from Psalm 22:2 which expresses a deep faith and confidence in God. Luke

understood it this way and that is why he preferred the expression of Psalm 31:5: "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit" (Luke 23: 46). In the Gospel of John 19:30, Jesus shouted, "It is accomplished", before he bowed his head and gave up the spirit. These versions of the same story should not be opposed. The cry of dereliction expresses a relationship of love between Jesus and his father. Furthermore, it says that this love remained intact and is even deepened in the midst of suffering. The experience of suffering, abandonment and that of faith do not exclude one another but imply one another mutually. It is when faith manifests itself as a cry that it manifests its depth. Jesus refused to capitulate before hatred, violence, suffering and humiliation by putting himself totally into the hands of his Father. By so doing he transformed the humiliation of the cross into salvation.

It is from the cross that it became clear that God is love. Jesus' triumph on the cross shows to what extent God can go for the sake of love. God does not lock himself up in impassibility and omnipotence. Rather, he bears our sufferings on himself and leads the fight against death and the forces of death that

threaten to annihilate creation. By so doing, God deprived death of the pretention to be all in all, the pretention to have the last word over life. That is why Paul says: "Death is swallowed up in victory. O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?"(1 Corinthians 15:54-55).

From there the cross of Christ opens for us the possibility to participate in the life of God through the Holy Spirit. Jesus asks his companions to take up their cross and follow him. Paul himself reassures Christians that those who suffer with Christ will reign victorious with him; those who die with Christ will resurrect with him. This makes me think of courageous men and women who chose the way of the cross and refused to capitulate in the context of suffering, violence and humiliation. The history of the Church in Africa is structured by the memory of the Martyrs of Uganda, Charles Lwanga, Kizito, Mulumba and their companions. Some of them were Protestants. Today a multitude of missionaries, priests, religious and lay people die for the sake of their faith. They demonstrate that love is a value worth dying for. By accepting to be incarnations of the foolishness of the cross, they secretly maintain the

history of the world. When we venerate the cross of Jesus Christ, and throw our sufferings at his feet, we allow him to contaminate us with the foolishness of the cross and by so doing guarantee our future. The resurrection of Jesus is a proof par excellence of the fidelity of God to his son and to humanity. This is what is celebrated at Holy-Saturday and Easter Sunday which marks the summit of the *paschal triduum*.

The Risen Dead

It was not easy for the disciples of Jesus to understand his resurrection. They witnessed the death of Jesus and it seemed to them as a failure, that of Jesus and theirs as well. They may have asked themselves serious existential questions. Did they make the right choice by following Jesus? Was he really the person he pretended to be, the Son of God? If he was the Son of God, why did God allow his son to die such a shameful death?

The stories of the apparitions of Jesus in the gospels show that it required a long and progressive catechism and mystagogy, assured by the risen Christ himself for the disciples to believe that he was alive.

This mystagogy mobilized the memory of God's work and promise in the scriptures. What God is doing today is what he did yesterday and will do tomorrow. That is why the paschal vigil, after celebrating Christ the light that shines in the darkness, unveils God's work in the history of salvation, through the reading from the Old Testament: Genesis (creation), Exodus (liberation from Egypt), Prophets (hope in exile). It is demonstrated that if God is the God of creation, who brought out life from nothing, then he cannot abandon his Son to the power of nothingness, namely, death. If God is the one who saved his people from slavery in Egypt and took them through the desert to the Promised Land, he cannot allow his son to be annihilated by humiliation. The God of exile that promised to give life to dry bones when the people of Israel thought that all hope was lost, cannot allow his son to be lost without accomplishing his promise to him and to those who believe in him.

On this motive shine out the readings of the New Testament on the resurrection. The women who went to the tomb early morning, the first day of the week, hear the angel say to them: "Do not be afraid; I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He

is not here; for he has been raised” (Matthew 28:5-6). The God of life cannot allow death to have the last word over life. Again the disenchanted disciples of Emmaus had to learn anew to recognize the risen Lord in the Eucharist which comprises of the sharing of the scriptures and the breaking of bread (Luke 24:13-35).

I know you are still not satisfied with this explanation. I hear you ask: since God is in charge of life, why did he not prevent the death of his Son? I have already anticipated the response in our reflection on the cross. Paul answers that the Son of God went to the end of human condition in order to demonstrate to what extent God can go for the sake of love. An ancient Christian tradition of the first centuries translates this by saying that Jesus descended into hell. The Christian Creed retained this conviction. “He descended into hell, the third day he rose from the dead”.

We need to take time to consider the depth of this confession of faith. Before confessing the resurrection, the Church confesses that Jesus Christ, the Son of God descended into hell. What does this

mean? An ancient homily read during the office of the readings of Holy Saturday says that the son of God descended into hell to demonstrate God's solidarity with those held in prison by death. Hell, Sheol is the land of the dead, the land of darkness; it represents the absence of love, the darkness of suffering, doubts, failures and the imprisonment of sin. The homily puts the descent into hell of the Son of God in present to indicate that it is not just something that happened in the past rather it is a present reality. It says that armed with his victorious weapon, the cross, the Son of God descends into hell *"to seek out our first parent like a lost sheep [...] to visit those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death [...] to free the prisoner Adam and his fellow-prisoner Eve from their pains"*. When he encounters Adam, the latter is terrified and expresses his despair. Then the son of God says to him: *"Awake, O sleeper, and arise from the dead, and Christ shall give you light"*. Then he says to each inhabitant of the land of the dead: *"I command you, Awake sleeper, I have not made you to be held a prisoner in the underworld. Arise from the dead; I am the life of the dead"*. The Son of God goes ahead to tell them: *"O man, work of my hands, arise, you who were fashioned in my image, Rise let us go hence; for*

you in me and I in you, together we are one undivided person". Note this Good News: the son of God tells the sinner, the prisoner, the dead, you and I are one undivided person; hence I cannot be without you; I cannot abandon you to grips of death, that is why I have accepted death so that together we shall rise to life. Come let us go, Sheol is not our home. "The enemy brought you out of the land of paradise; I will reinstate you, no longer in paradise but on the throne of heaven". The hymn of the Morning hour of praise (Lauds) composed by the great Cardinal John Henry Newman captures this marvel so well.

O loving wisdom of our God
When all was sin and shame,
A second Adam to the fight
And to the rescue came.

O generous love; that he who smote
In man for man the foe,
The double agony in man
For man should undergo;

And in the garden secretly
And on the cross on high
Should teach his brethren, and inspire
To suffer and to die.

Praise to the Holiest in the height
And in the depth be praise,
In all his words most wonderful,
Most sure in all his ways.

When all was sin and shame, the Son of God went into the fight against nothingness. He risked his life to save those created in his own image. This is Good News for all those who consider themselves as lost. If Christ descended into hell and came out victorious, we should not be afraid of the hells of our life. What is it that can separate us from the love of God? Nothing, as far as God is concerned. According to the Apostle Paul, as long as Christ, the risen Lord is sitting at the right hand of God interceding for us, hope is guaranteed for those who are in Christ Jesus:

*Who will separate us from the love of
Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or
persecution, or famine, or nakedness,*

or peril, or sword? As it is written, "For your sake we are being killed all day long; we are accounted as sheep to be slaughtered." No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord"(Rom 8:35-39).

So Dearly Beloved friend, you can see the meaning of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. If you encounter sickness cry out to God and he will hear you as he heard his Son. If you fall into the grips of sin, rise, and if you fall again, do not give up, rise again. The Son of God will hold you by his hands and emerge from the tomb with you. If you are carrying a wound, in your body, in your heart or mind, hand it over to the Father of all mercies because his love is stronger than death. If you have lost someone that you love

and you are worried about his/her fate, know that God takes care of him and God will take him/her with him as he emerges victorious from the tomb. If you are afraid of your own death, understand that death is a passage towards the fullness of life that God alone gives. You can also take a step further by loving as the Son of God loves.

Remember the point I am struggling to make since the beginning of this letter. There is grace in contradiction. This is clearly demonstrated in the paradox of the cross, which is at the same time, the passion, the death and the resurrection of Jesus the Son of God. I hear you mumble a question: What of the ascension?

The Ascended that Descended

Permit me to say this: the ascension of Christ is one and the same mystery with the passion, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Paul encountered this question and gave this simple and limpid answer: "*He ascended,*" *what does it mean but that he had also descended into the lower parts of the earth? He who descended is the same one who ascended far above all the heavens, so that he might fill all things*" (Eph 4:9-10). He

takes this up again in his letter to Philippians where he explained that the Son of God was glorified through his kenosis. The one who emptied himself is the one taken up to heaven and now sits at the right hand of the Father; hence forth at the name of Jesus every knee should bow in heaven, on earth and under the earth (Philippians 2:6-11).

Let us go to the liturgy for more light. The ascension of the Lord is celebrated forty days after Easter. This tradition was drawn from the story of Acts 1:1-11 which situates the ascension of Christ forty days after his resurrection. These forty days symbolize a sufficient time during which the risen Lord, through a powerful mystagogy prepared his disciples to understand the mystery of his resurrection and their mission in the word. The Gospel of Luke situates ascension at the evening of Easter, while for John the hour of the cross is the hour of the glorification of Jesus.

To deepen the understanding of the ascension of the Lord, I would like to draw your attention to what Jesus said to his disciples before going up to heaven: *"I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away,*

for if I do not go away, the Advocate will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you” (John 16:7). The Master leaves so that his disciples might become masters themselves.

Each and every one of us has had examples of teachers, parents, educators who in one way or the other knew how to take a distance discretely so as to allow the pupils, students or children to grow and take responsibility for their lives. We know also what happens when parents or teachers are omnipresent in the lives and decisions of those under them. The latter being too protected will find it difficult to be responsible teachers and parents. This happens also with animals. Think of how parent birds teach their little ones to fly. Initially, the parents go out of the nest to get food for their little ones. The little ones just need to open their mouths and receive food directly. I don't know whether they even say “thank you”. After some time, when the parents consider that their offspring can now take care of themselves, they decide to leave. The offspring continue to open their mouths expecting to receive food. When it dawns on them that no food will come to them again, they attempt flying out to go and search for food. The

courageous fly out, get food and survive. The fearful remain in the nest and die of hunger. I also noticed the same reality in the tradition of Martial arts in Asian countries. The master teaches his disciple how to fight by fighting with him. The disciple imitates the master's steps, gestures, cries, etc. When the master notices that the disciple is becoming as strong as he is, he leaves the disciple and goes to look for another one. The absence of the master provokes anxiety in the disciple. But this pushes him to become a master himself. He goes to look for a disciple and begins to put into practice what he learnt from his master, gradually he forges his own style.

This human paradox throws a new light on the mystery of the ascension of the Lord. After forty days of lecture, catechism with his disciples, the risen Lord disappeared. Luke captures the anxiety provoked by this absence. They stood there gazing up to heaven (Acts 1:10) like the little birds still opening their mouths to receive food, not knowing that their parents have disappeared. This is understandable. Jesus left without accomplishing all he promised. The Kingdom of Israel was not yet restored; the community was still suffering persecution; mission to

the gentiles remained a difficult one. There is a contrast between the reality and Jesus' manifesto: *"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour"* (Luke 4: 18-19).

The community was obliged to choose between locking themselves up and dying or taking the risk of mission. That is the instruction given to the disciples by the angels, the two men in white robes: They said, *"Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven."*(Acts 1:11-12). It was then that they went back to Galilee, gathered together in Jerusalem to share the scriptures, break the bread, take care of the poor among them and plan for mission. The ascension of the Lord is the birth of the freedom of the church that will become manifest at Pentecost.

So my Beloved friend, you can see how divine pedagogy helps us to deepen our reflection on grace and contradiction. We can learn three things from the

mystery of ascension. First, just as Saint Leo the Great says, the ascension of the Lord purifies and fortifies our faith and makes active our hope. We stop dreaming of the day when God will come down and solve all our problems with a magic staff. Christ gives us the mandate to support those who are suffering. He needs our voices to defend the voiceless and the privileged. Second, ascension reminds us of the necessity of the transmission of faith. Before he left, Jesus said to his disciples: "*You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.*" (Acts 1:8). The danger facing Christians today is the loss of enthusiasm for mission. Many are worried about their self-conservation. They have become like frozen fish. Thirdly, the courage of mission is based on Jesus' promise: "Remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age" (Matthew 28:20). This new form of presence is assured by the gift of the Holy Spirit. Christians work in the world with the conviction that Jesus has already won the battle against the forces of evil and darkness. The opening prayer of the mass of the ascension announces that the victory of the Lord is already our victory. The Fathers of the Church preached that because one of us, the Son of God entered into glory,

our human nature is transfigured and by consequence has received the promise of victory over sin. Christians should not be worried about the resistances of the world. Led by the Spirit we shall accomplish even greater works than Jesus himself did.

4

All is Grace

Don't Resist Grace

Is life still possible when one has lost everything he/she has? I think of a friend whose leg was recently amputated because of diabetes. What of the man who lost his eyes in car accident or the other woman whose spinal cord was damaged and can no longer walk? All these came to my mind as I meditated. I also remembered our brothers and sisters in Rwanda who painfully struggle to regain normal existence after years of genocide. What of the couple that has no child or even the other couple that has a delinquent and dangerous child such that parents wished they never had one. We must not forget families where quarrels and hurts have made it impossible for husbands and wives to sit together, not to talk of sharing gestures of love. Is it possible to

continue loving when one has been hurt, betrayed, denied?

Christian faith answers yes to all these questions. This yes is based on the memory of the life, passion, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ in which God's promise in the history of salvation is accomplished. Vatican II Council captures this conviction in the following word: "The truth is that only in the mystery of the incarnate Word does the mystery of man take on light" (*Gaudium et Spes* 22). Christ is the perfect man who embodies the contradictions and paradoxes of our human existence. He is fragile and yet crowned with glory and splendour (Cf. Psalm 8: 5). It was only in front of Pilate when he was humiliated, unrecognizable, when he was nobody that it was proclaimed, "Ecce homo", Behold the man" (John 19:6).

I am not preaching dolorism, I am preaching hope. Nothing brings hope more than yielding to grace. The sorrows of men and women in our contemporary societies increase because they wish they had immediate solution to all problems. It is true in Europe, America, Asia, Oceania and Africa. The

western world has become so sophisticated that man now feels that he can become man without God. Man makes the world his own product. The search of autonomy led man to take charge of the world as his work. Man made himself the measure of all things. There is a divorce between God and the world, God and man, the created natural world and the fabricated artificial world⁸. The more man gives importance to the world as his own production, the more he loses sight of the creator of the world. The more man celebrates his autonomy the more he poses himself as the measure of all truth. The consequence is that man finds it difficult to handle contradictions in the world. I am very much in touch with the French society; the rate of suicides per day is alarming. In August last year, Euthanasia was rejected with a little margin. Those in favor argued vehemently that when human suffering has become overwhelming and unbearable for the sick, the handicapped, it is better to terminate their life and set the person free. More and more people who undergo this type of suffering now ask to be set free from this suffering body. Can this be

⁸ Cf. Eberhard Jüngel, *God as Mystery of the World*, p. 52.

acceptable as solution to the enigma of human suffering?

In Africa, Pentecostal Churches have made miracle, healing and material prosperity proofs of the existence of God. They distinguish between a priest and a man of God. If one "mixes prayers", manifests special gifts of healing and pretends to transform peoples' situations here and now, he is called a man of God. People rush to parishes where the priests do "ministration", casting and binding. This has led many Catholic priests to specialize in exorcism, household liberation (oru ezi na ulo), healing of family roots etc. Some even go to the extent of combining Christian sacramentals with some practices of African Tradition Religion, just to remain relevant; they bury goats around the house, sprinkle salt, mix olive oil with garry, mustard seed and palm oil; they cut trees. Healers promise breakthrough for whoever wants. They promise the barren woman that her child is on the way. They tell the pregnant woman that she will deliver without labor, like Hebrew women. They assure the unqualified, unemployed graduate that his car is on the way. Most of the time they corroborate the

hypothesis of witchcraft and demonic attacks and by so doing lead people to explain away the reality of suffering and human responsibility. This hypothesis also leads people to think that the causes of all manifestations of evil in the world can be named and explained. The type of Christianity projected by these practices could well be Christianity without suffering, a cosmetic supermarket Christianity with the gospel of material prosperity as the best seller article. Can this gospel of material prosperity offer a meaningful response to the enigma of evil and suffering in the world? I don't think so. It could still be another way of resisting grace.

On the other hand, Christian faith in Jesus dead and risen proposes an answer that is more global and meaningful:

Through Christ and in Christ, the riddles of sorrow and death grow meaningful. Apart from His Gospel, they overwhelm us. Christ has risen, destroying death by His death; He has lavished life on us so that, as sons in the Son, we can cry out in

*the Spirit: Abba, Father!'”(Gaudium
et Spes 22).*

We live through the grace of God. Life is grace. All is grace. Grace is that gift of God which sustains us even when we feel that all hope is lost. What we need is to develop a genuine faith in God. Faith recognizes the absolute freedom of God. Nothing can be snatched from the hand of God. Abraham, Jacob, Moses and Elijah experienced it. The Israelites experienced it. You remember when they forced the Ark of the Covenant into the camp in order to oblige God to fight on their behalf against the Philistines (1 Samuel 4:1-11). The whole scenario ended in disaster. The Philistines mustered courage and humiliated Israel. The Ark was captured and the two sons of Eli, Hophni and Phinehas died. This is a situation where people tried to use God as a means to an end instead of seeking God as an end in itself. True faith trusts in God even when what is asked for is not given because God never deceives those who believe in him. He knows best what is good for us and when to give us that which is good for us. I admire the faith of the three young men, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego who resisted King

Nebuchdnezzar (Daniel 3: 14-28). The King had made a golden statue of himself and asked them to worship it instead of obeying the commandments of the Lord God of Israel. He threatened to throw them into the burning fiery furnace if they refused to do so. He ridiculed their God and claimed that this God had no power to save them. The response of the three young boys is very instructive. *“If our God, the one we serve, is able to save us [...] he will save us; and even if he does not, then you must know [...] that we will not serve your god or worship the statue you have erected”*. This is a magnificent example of faith that respects the freedom of God. Their faith in God does not depend on what God does for them. They believe and trust in God simply because he is God.

Some people stop believing in God when they feel that their prayers are not heard, or that they are suffering too much, or that they are not remembered or loved by God. Some relate with God as bank customers relate with ATM machines. They insert their cards, press some buttons and money comes out. In certain cases, when money does not come out, people get angry and break the machine. The machine must release money. God must do miracle.

This is evident in the song: *Me I no go suffer, I no go search for bread. God of Miracle na my Papa*. This explains why people run from one church to another, from one pastor to another, from one native doctor to another. Most often, some collect all the above together; after all, as the Igbo would say, “anaghi akwu ofu ebe ekiri mmanwu”, a masquerade is not watched from one angle. We need some level of freedom of the children of God to be able to continue to trust God in the midst of trials on the basis of God’s fidelity. Job proclaimed the same faith when he said: *“I know that my Redeemer lives, and that at the last he will stand upon the earth; and after my skin has been thus destroyed, then in my flesh I shall see God, whom I shall see on my side, and my eyes shall behold, and not another”* (Job 19:25-27).

Wait for God’s moment

Having recognized the primacy of Grace manifested in our lives especially in the most difficult moments of our lives, I want to conclude by inviting you to learn to wait for God’s moment. Since my childhood I learnt that God’s time is the best. By the way, has it ever occurred to you that our life is God’s time given

to us so that we can love and prepare for our face to face with God?

If this is accepted, then the first thanksgiving we should give to God is to recognize our inadequacies and confess our sins. Sin is that illusion of being which makes us believe that our existence depends on us, that we can save ourselves, that we are powerful, etc. In one of his sermons, St Bernard indicates three signs of wisdom:

You pour fourth wisdom or understanding from your lips in three ways: if on your lips there is the admission of your own sinfulness, thanksgiving and the voice of praise, and words that encourage. For indeed, a man believes with his heart and so is justified, and he confesses with his lips and so is saved. At the beginning of his speech the righteous man is his own accuser; and in the middle of his words he gives praise to God, and in the third place, if so far wisdom has

*poured fourth, he must also
encourage his neighbour⁹.*

Sin can only be discovered when one discovers the immensity of the grace God lavished on us freely. This is what Peter did when he discovered the overwhelming grace of God (Luke 5:8-1). It was when the prodigal son remembered his father's love and the comfort in his father's house that he saw the vanity of his actions (Luke 15:18-32). He then regretted his sin and decided to go back to his father's house. He was overwhelmed when his father opened his arms and embraced him. The father rejoiced that his son was back. This is the type of joy God has when we come back to him. As Jesus himself assured us, "there is rejoicing among the angels of God over one repentant sinner" (Luke 15:10).

This is what the sacrament of reconciliation is all about. The Act of contrition says it all. "I am sorry for having offended you; because you are so good." Some people are terrified by the sacrament of reconciliation because they imagine it as a tribunal.

⁹ St Bernard, Sermon de Div 15. Office of Readings Monday Week 6).

Some priests do not help the matter in the way they handle penitents. When we approach the sacrament of reconciliation, we first of all confess God's love. We cannot have the courage to go to confession if we don't really appreciate God's love. We remember that, "Christ died for us while we were still sinners" (Romans 5:8) It is because we trust God our Father that we come to him saying, "Have mercy on me God in your kindness" (Psalm 51). We tell him that we are sorry for offending him, that we did not honour him in our thoughts, words and deeds. Finally, we resolve never to offend him again. We promise to avoid sin and everything that will separate us from him. Of course, this resolution cannot be carried out faithfully without the help of God's grace.

Count on Divine Providence

Anyone who understands grace as free gift from God learns to follow the divine providence. I believe that one who acts trusting in divine providence has the possibility of transforming suffering into hope. It is only when one counts on his capacities alone that he gets blocked by suffering and failures. Somebody who excelled in this art of confiding in the divine

providence is the Co-founder of the Holy Ghost Congregation, Fr. Francis Mary Paul Libermann. He writes:

*If we should embark only on simple works in the Church, what would become of the Church? St Peter and St John would have continued their fishing at the lake of Tiberiade, and St Paul would not have left Jerusalem. I understand that a man who thinks that he is somebody and who counts on his own forces capitulates before an obstacle; but when one counts only on the admirable Master, what difficulties can one fear?*¹⁰

Counting on the divine providence does not mean that we should not take initiatives. It means simply

¹⁰ Francis Libermann, "Letter to Fr. Dupont" 17/08/1840, *Notes and Documents* 170). See also Aubert Arsène, *Coping with Darkness. Fifteen days of prayer with Francis Libermann*, Translated by Joseph D'Ambrosio, Dublin, Paraclete Press, 2006, p. 51-54.

that as we mobilize all our capacities and our intelligence in executing our projects we recognize that the success of our projects depends on God.

After the death of his first missionaries in Guinea in 1844, Libermann did not give up. He writes to Mother Anne-Marie Javouhey, the foundress of the Sisters of Cluny:

*The greater the difficulties, the more my soul feels strength and hope [...]
Let us unite our prayers so that the will of God may be done; let us do all that depends on us for his glory and for the salvation of souls; let us enlarge our desires, fortify our souls against difficulties; but let us not be troubled if the success of our projects is slow in coming; let us not want the good more than God himself wants it, neither in a different manner than his. After having done all we suppose to do, we must depend on him for*

*our success, and be happy whatever happens*¹¹.

The society of fast food, quick success, quick money, cheap popularity, achievement or what the Igbo Pentecostals call “akanchawa” pushes us to lose patience when our projects are not moving as quickly as we want. Consider what it means that it took the people of Israel forty years to reach the Promise Land, the time for their faith to be tested. Jesus the Son of God was tempted forty days and forty nights in the desert before he was ready for his mission. Even as he accomplished that mission the success was slow in coming. Remember the parable of the sower (Matthew 13:1-9). Some seeds got lost but it took the patience and faith of the sower to wait and discover that at least one seed fell on good soil and produced fruits in abundance.

Permit me to let the great spiritual master Francis Libermann talk to us. I have been meditating on the instructions he gave to his missionaries, Frs Briot and

¹¹ Francis Libermann, “Letter to Anne-Marie Javouhey”, 22/07/1844, in *Notes and Documents* VI 278).

Aragon who were about to depart for Africa, after the catastrophe of the death of his first missionaries. Aragon was courageous, a goal getter, but impatient and temperamental. Libermann once said that to change Aragon would be like stopping the sun on its course. The instruction he gives to Aragon and his colleague are very relevant to our lives today in Nigeria and Africa at large. You can also propose it to your friends from all works of life especially those who because of their positions have to make important decisions.

“You are about to embark on this big and important mission.

- 1) *Do not count on your own strength, your prudence, your own action. God alone and Mary; that is where you have to place your confidence.*

- 2) *Expect great difficulties [...] do not be troubled, do not allow yourselves to be defeated by anything.*

- 3) *Be tranquil and calm, humble and meek in all circumstances you find yourselves. Remain the*

same in prosperity and in adversity [.....] handing everything to God and expecting everything from his divine mercy.

- 4) *Do not represent things to yourselves in your imaginations, but examine things calmly, consider them practically. Do not allow the sight of huge success to turn your heads; neither should you be down spirited by the anxious anticipation of failure.*

- 5) *Weigh whatever you must do in the spirit of faith while at the same time reflecting on things[....] As much as possible, do not act on important affairs until you have a clear vision of the reality; try as much as possible to have an insight into things before embarking on them. Do not take things for granted, be proactive as much as possible, but when you have taken the necessary measures within your reach, put your trust in God alone[....] It is not possible to eliminate all difficulties in order to undertake something. When you have taken the necessary measures for success, always leave something to the divine*

providence (leave some space for the divine providence).

- 6) *Do not be impatient in your enterprises; you will cause the failure of a great number of them. Allow things to mature and do not try to reap the fruit before it is ripe; you will find it bitter and hard (rugged) and you will not succeed[...] Endeavour to follow the way of Providence; follow it instead of preceding it.*

- 7) *Do not give in to a too imprudent and ardent zeal that can destroy your health [...] Sacrificing one's life for the salvation of one soul alone is no doubt an excellent thing to do, but conserving one's life for the salvation of hundred others is even better.*

- 8) *Seek information [...] so that you don't destroy yourself by your impatience without doing anything useful.*

So my beloved friend, I allow you to meditate on these powerful words. I thank you for taking the time

to read this letter. If you have found it interesting, recommend it to another person.

Finally, I invite you to say this prayer of self-dedication with me. It is found in the Breviary, the book the clergy and religious use for their prayers, precisely among the prayers for Thanksgiving after mass.

*Take, Lord, receive all my liberty,
my memory, understanding, my
entire will. Whatever I have or
hold comes from your bounty. I
Give it back to you, surrender it all
to the guidance of your will. Your
grace and love are wealth enough
Give me but that, and I ask for
nothing more. Amen.*

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We are used to seeing things of God in agreeable things that happen in our lives, but we have difficulty in associating him with the painful and disagreeable experiences. This reflection will help you to reshape your understanding of life, your approach to success, achievements as well as pain, suffering, failure and evil. It will help you to deepen your understanding of God. You will find tips in this letter that will help you manage stress and impatience when you undertake difficult tasks and especially when things are not moving the way you want.



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