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ONE

THE CULTURE OF CHRISTIAN FAITH: AN INVERSE PYRAMID

MarySylvia NWACHUKWU, DDL

1. Introduction

This paper is a discussion of the cultural behaviors that function as distinguishing marks of the Christian faith. The discussion anchors itself on the fact that every institution, whether social, political or religious, has cultural factors that give it a self definition. The paper, therefore, is not a discussion on inculturation; rather, it uses the primary meaning of culture to discuss the biblical presentation of the practices and behaviors that distinguish the Christian religion. The paper laments negative effects of non-Christian attitudes of the majority of contemporary Christians and fears that as these attitudes become conventional, they continue to constitute a great threat to Christian spirituality.

The present essay, therefore, is one out of many responses to the world's concern about and need for authentic witness to Christian faith, which is becoming increasingly more urgent. This need is occasioned by factors internal and external to the Church. Internally, the Christian Church is experiencing threats of no small dimension from a new form of religiosity that is largely syncretistic¹ both in orientation and in content. A good number of the contemporary African Christian experiences the world as filled with malignant forces that threaten life and human wellbeing. The prevailing religious

¹ Syncretism is the mixing of elements of the Gospel with incompatible elements from traditions foreign to it.

atmosphere is marked by insecurity, and religion has become a kind of protection against presumed forces that jeopardize many aspects of life and create fear. After more than a century of Christianity in Africa, superstitious belief in the elemental spirits of the world still thrives. Attempts to cope with these threats have led some Christians to practices and beliefs that are syncretistic, superstitious and bizarre. Threatened by fear, Christians of different denominations and of different ranks, are easily ready to submit to any person or presumed power which claims to have a solution to these problems.

One of the immediate consequences of the problem of fear is the use of religion as a form of protection against other human beings presumed to be evil, and against other presumed forces that threaten human life and its wellbeing. The attempts to respond to this atmosphere of insecurity give rise to theologies and attitudes which portray a negative image of God, an image that obscures the face of God, of a God who revealed himself as 'God with and for his people'. This is a threat on the deposit of faith, and it is found today in teachings which depict God as unforgiving and fault finding, who punishes sinners without mercy. It finds expression in the 'Holy Ghost fire' and 'back to sender' sagas, in the over-emphasis and focus on the power of evil, and especially in attitudes that derive from unforgiving spirit, religious discrimination, and in other expressions that emphasize God's anger over his mercy. These teachings are spreading fast among Christians of different denominations, constituting a great threat to Christian spirituality.

Christendom is also being threatened by another brand of the gospel, preached by a growing number of Christian leaders,

which denies the realism of suffering and poverty, assuring people that suffering is a curse, which those in communion with God cannot experience. The direct consequences of this kind of interpretation of the gospel are materialism and hedonistic attitudes. This brand of the gospel despises and rejects the foolishness of the cross and with it the kind of Lord that Jesus is, one who accepted God's will to suffer and die for others. This particular threat is an assault against the heart of Christian faith.

Certain external factors also contribute to ideas that inspired the present paper. Many non-Christian religions and sects are winning more and more members to their fold by means of political and vicious strategies. The human community is threatened both by religious groups that operate according to absolutist principles and by those groups which menace and kill Christians out of religious non-tolerance. Christians who suffer these threats have been displaced and traumatized by this religious tyranny and bigotry, and they need to be empowered to bear witness to their faith in the midst of persecution.

The present paper is one of the required responses to these challenges. Its aim is to renew in the mind of Christians all over the world knowledge of the nature and character of Christian faith. Many Christians around the world are in their attitudes like seeds that fell on paths, rocky grounds and among thorns; some with shallow faith, some with switching loyalties, some become very easily victims of predators, while some others lose their faith to the troubles and the cares of this world (Matt 13:18-22). Some others so deeply misunderstand the identity of the Master that their efforts to serve Christ are directed mainly to mistaken goals. The

discussion of the attitudes that define Christian faith in the following paragraphs is meant as a response to the experiences of the different brands of Christians in our society. It is preceded, in the next section of the paper, with a brief presentation of the events that constitute the Bible's story of faith. After it, the essay will give a short description of the meaning of culture in order to use it to discuss the Bible's presentation of cultural practices that define the Christian faith. In conclusion, the essay invites Christians to pay attention to the unique character of their faith.

2. The Bible's Story of Faith

The meaning of faith, in this study, is not derived solely from an analysis of terminology because in the Bible, faith is presented, not as an abstract idea, but as the story of events concerning God, human beings and creation. Apart from an explicit definition of faith that is found in the Letter to the Hebrews, the entire Bible generally has no definition of faith. According to Heb 11:1, *faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen*. This definition already gives some idea about the semantic universe within which faith operates, one that is basically uncertain and ambiguous. The eleventh chapter of the Letter to the Hebrews discusses faith as that attitude by which normative biblical characters are defined in their relationship with God. Abel, Abraham, Moses and Israel are all described as people of faith. One needs to investigate the life stories of these biblical characters to understand how and why they qualify as models of faith. In the books of Genesis and Exodus where the stories of Abraham, Moses, and other biblical characters are presented, faith is the response they give to God who called them with invitation to rely completely on him and to collaborate in a divine plan that is as difficult as it is humanly

incomprehensible. In their responses to God, events in the life of these people become the very means by which God brings about far-reaching salvation for all.

The Bible's story of faith begins from the first chapters of the Bible, where faith is described within the context of the Bible's presentation of God's self revelation, and how by revealing himself, God invites the human person to a dialogue. Human response to this revelation determines the kind of relationship that is thereby established. One reads of two kinds of human response to God. There are stories of human disobedience and inclination away from God's purposes, as well as stories of human obedience and trust in God. The Bible reader is confronted above all with the tragic consequences of human disobedience, where they mark out critical turning points in the history of God's relationship with the human person (for instance, Gen 6:5-8 and 11:8-9). The turning points describe the ways in which human negative response affects God's decision. The first turning point in the God-human relationship is described in Gen 6:5-8. Against a description of a corrupt earth and of a violent and wicked humanity, God initiated a relationship with Noah which is characterized by obedience to God's word (Gen 6:11-13). The same description is made of Abram at the next turning point in history when human beings unite in a project that contradicts divine plan. God destroyed that evil project by eliminating the source of human solidarity in evil (Gen 11:8-9). Against this act of human rebellion, Abraham is called by God to be a means of blessing to all the peoples of the earth (Gen 12:1-3). It is important to underscore the attitudes that define Abraham's faith in God.

In Gen 15:6, the Hebrew verb *ʾāman* is used to describe Abram's response to God's promise: "And he believed (*weheʾemin*) the LORD...". The nominal form of this verb, *ʾēm nāh*, expresses firmness, solidity, truthfulness, steadfastness and faithfulness, and it is used both for God and human beings within the covenant context. The few instances in which God is the subject of *ʾēm nāh* might appear insignificant (cf. Deut 7:9; Is 49:7; 55:3); nevertheless, God's faithfulness to his covenant is both the basis of the entire history of salvation and the grounds on which the attitude of the biblical characters are evaluated. Therefore, the terminology of faith appears more frequently in its verbal forms to describe the actions of those who relate with God.

The nature of Abram's faith is more understandable when presented within the context of the entire Abraham cycle in Gen 12-25. God gave a promise of offspring to a very old and childless man whose wife was barren and passed the age of childbearing. There was nothing in the history of this man's family which seemed to give this divine promise a realizable possibility. So, it was a promise based on a logical impossibility. It was so ludicrous that the idea made Sarah laugh (Gen 18:9-12). Abram could not understand how God could make this happen, yet, as Scripture says, "he believed God" and the Lord reckoned it to him as righteousness (Gen 15:6). In this story, the *Hiphil* perfect verb *heʾemin* has the sense of 'confident trust'. The basis of this trust is God's personal commitment to keep the promise. This commitment is symbolized in the covenant (Gen 15:9-21). This is basically a belief in what is not seen; it is steadfast attitude even in affliction (Ps 116:10) and a courageous waiting in hope, as Paul says of him in Rom 4:18-21:

Hoping against hope, he believed the he would become "the father of many nations," according to what was said...he did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body which was already as good as dead...or when he considered the barrenness of Sarah's womb. No distrust made him waver concerning the promise of God...being fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised.

The verbal form used in Gen 15:6 includes the foregoing descriptions of Abram's response to the promise of God: hope in spite of all discouraging evidences, unwavering conviction about the truth of God's word and about God's ability to accomplish what he promised.

The character of Abraham's response to God's word of promise is basically lacking in the description of universal human response to God's self-revelation in creation. Basically, the stories in Gen 1-11 show that human beings respond to God in disobedience. However, the obedience of Abraham enabled the implementation of the restoration which God began to plan for creation. Located in Gen 1-11, these stories describe what is most basic and most universal of all human attitudes to God: disobedience to God's word and rebellion against God's plan. Against this realism of the human attitude, God is shown to remain faithful to the original plan to salvage creation and to the human means of achieving this plan (Gen 12:1-3).

The story of human rebellion against God is replicated in the historical situation of Israel and of other nations. From the beginning, God's relationship with Israel came to be described as a form of treaty or covenant in a verbal exchange of reciprocal commitment and obligation (Exod

19:3-8; 24:3-8). Israel accepted to collaborate in the project of becoming a people of God through following a particular way of life in distinction from neighboring peoples. Nevertheless, the Historical books and the Prophets describe Israel as a stubborn and faithless people. In Deut 9:23 and Ps 78:8,37, for instance, the entire people of Israel are accused of rebellion against the command of the Lord in showing lack of trust and steadfastness in spite of the miracles they had experienced. The *Niphal* and *Hiphil* perfect and imperfect forms of the verb *āman* are used to express Israel's lack of trust in the Lord himself, or the word of the Lord or the name of the Lord or to the covenant². The New Testament (NT) completes the story of the covenant by showing how God made faith possible for all through the event of Jesus Christ. Jesus, therefore, is God's means of healing human disobedience and of enabling human positive response.

The terminology of faith appears in the New Testament in its nominal (*pistis*) and verbal (*pisteuō*) forms, which are translated as 'faith' and 'to believe' respectively. A study of where the vocabulary of faith appears in the NT shows that faith is even here not presented as a distinct notion. Similar to the evidence of the OT, it is not adherence to a set of religious tradition or teachings. It is rather human response to God or to God's word revealed in Jesus Christ. The NT completes the Bible's story of faith by showing how all previous programs for human restoration find their fulfillment in Jesus. In the NT, the point of departure for the description of faith is God himself, his definitive self revelation in the person of Jesus Christ. The heart of the Christian message is the Good News that God acted in Jesus

² Cf. 1 Chron 17:23,24; 2 Chron 1:9; 6:17; 9:6; 20:20; Ps 78:37; Is 7:9; Deut 9:23; Ps 78:37; Is 7:9.

Christ to fulfill the covenant with Israel, and so bring about human restoration and redemption.

In the Gospels, those who encountered Jesus are said to have great faith (*megale pistis*), faith (*pistis*), little faith (*oligopistis*) and no faith at all (*apistia*). Of these, the Canaanite woman was praised for her great faith (Matt 15:28).³ Next to her was the Centurion of whose faith Jesus said he had not found the kind in Israel (Matt 8:10)⁴. Significantly, these two, who were not Israelites, expressed belief in the efficacious power of the word spoken by Jesus. Symbolic demonstration of power was not necessary. So they, resolutely, demanded that he uttered the word. Jesus was amazed. Jesus also praised the faith of the sick or those who carried them, who came to him with strong inner conviction that contact with him would make them well. These were those who carried the crippled man (Matt 9:2; Mark 2:5), the woman with the flow of blood (Matt 9:22; Mark 5:34), and the two blind men (Matt 9:28-29; Mark 10:52). How best can we explain the nature of their faith? These people entertained an inner conviction which led to different measures of openness to the word or person of Jesus. They recognized in Jesus the presence of a higher or transcendent being, and they abandoned themselves to him as the only condition for survival. This explains their resoluteness and refusal of the possibility of an alternative.

Besides these different measures of faith attitudes are those whom Jesus judged as people of little faith, the *oligopistoi* and those whom he judged as faithless, those characterized

³ Mark 7:24-30 does not use the language of faith in the story of this woman.

⁴ This story is absent in Mark. Mark has another story about the leader of the Synagogue (Mark 5:36).

by *apistia*. Surprisingly, these are those who have very close relation and connection to Jesus. In the five instances of the appearance of *oligopistos* in the Gospel, they refer to the disciples (Matt 8:26; 16:8; 17:20) and to Peter (Matt 14:31), but also generally, in only one instance, to the crowds during the Sermon on the Mount (Matt 6:30). In these different contexts, the disciples were accused of fear, doubt (wavering faith), lack of understanding, inability to perceive and to remember, and over-concern for food. Fear and doubt are certainly contrasts to faith and obstacles to the nurturing of the kind of faith that relationship with Jesus required. It is faith that lacks the total assimilation of the reality of Jesus.

Similar to these people of little faith are the group judged as faithless. They are again the disciples (Matt 17:17) and people from Jesus' own town, Nazareth (Matt 13:58). Matt 13:58 represents an extreme case of where materialistic interpretation about things that concern Jesus are obstacles to proper understanding and conviction about the power of Jesus. These examples of people with little and lack of faith show that physical closeness to Jesus does not work magically as guarantee for safety. The fact of being a disciple also does not confer the power to work miracles. Rather, one needs faith, an inner motivation which leads to abandonment to a power which the person neither could understand nor control. These negative instances are important and powerful descriptions of what faith is not. Nevertheless, they function to explain how these faithless followers of Jesus grew to become powerful examples of faith after the Pentecost. The Gospel witness is complemented by Paul's description of faith within the context of salvation history. It allows us to appreciate how Paul's treatment of the theme follows the story line of the Old Testament.

In Paul, the point of departure for a description of faith is the death of Jesus Christ. Paul describes the death of Jesus Christ as the event of the righteousness of God (*dikaiosune tou Theou* - Rom 1:16-17; 3:21-16). In Paul, faith is fundamentally related to this event of righteousness. Righteousness is a comprehensive term that describes relationships and by which God revealed himself as faithful and merciful.⁵ The history of God's faithfulness, which is attested by the Law and the Prophets, reached its climax in the cross of Christ (Rom 3:21). Since human beings are incapable of right relationship with God, God has provided through the death of Christ a remedy for human salvation.

According to Rom 3:21-26, the death of Jesus Christ fulfills the goal of the covenant between God and Israel. "Since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement by his blood, effective through faith" (vv23-25). The event of the death of Jesus revealed an awareness of the power of sin in human flesh which rendered impossible the belief that human beings could obtain salvation through human efforts. This deepened awareness of the power of sin allows the idea of salvation that is a gift from God, a righteousness not based on works but received by faith in Christ (cf. Rom 5:17; 10:5-20). Of all the means by which the covenant institution provided for reconciliation between God and his people, the sacrifice of atonement is the one by which God graciously ensured reconciliation, liberation and total restoration of the people in order to fulfill the goal of the

⁵ Cf. K. Snodgrass, "The Gospel in Romans: A Theology of Revelation" in L.A. Jervis - P. Richardson (eds.), *Gospel in Paul*, JSNTSS 108, Sheffield: Academic Press, 1994, p307.

covenant (Lev 16:34; 23:27-28; 25:9). Throughout the covenant history, disobedience and distrust defined the people of God, while compassion and faithfulness (*hesed*) characterize God's dealing with his people. In being compassionate, God identifies with and shares in his people's historical situation of weakness and suffering. God's compassion describes the reality of gracious love for a people who are in need of restoration, even though they do not deserve it. Alongside other texts like Is 54:7 and Jer 31:20, Hosea 11:7-9 explains that compassion makes God's heart warm and tender, compelling God to renounce the execution of his just anger in the face of Israel's sin. Israel's ongoing existence in spite of sin is thanks to God's nature as merciful and compassionate. Therefore, God takes responsibility for the consequences of Israel's sins by providing programs of restoration for them. The highest provision of restoration is the sacrifice of atonement which is celebrated annually.

According to Paul, the death of Christ fulfilled the goal of the sacrifice of atonement. Besides atoning for human sins, through it God has also graciously provided for a lasting remedy for the healing of human disloyalty from its root, and this remedy is both Jesus' act of self-giving for us in obedience to God and the personal bonding to Jesus Christ. For Paul, Christian existence is a life under grace. The expression 'under grace' (*hypo charin* - Rom 5:2) is used to describe both human liberation from bondage to sin and the situation into which the event of Christ has introduced redeemed mankind. This expression describes the new relationship that is thereby created. Paul describes this relation in texts like Rom 6-8; Gal 5 and Eph 2. Christians live out this new relationship under the liberating rule of a new Lord, Jesus Christ. The immediate effect of God's grace

is the outpouring of the Holy Spirit into the human heart (Rom 5:5), which assures the renewal of the human mind towards total obedience to God (cf. Rom 6:17; 8:5-14) and a strong bonding to Christ. In order to describe this relationship to Christ, the verb 'to believe' (*pisteuō*) is expressed with the preposition 'in' (*eis or en*) and 'on' (*epi*), which implies that the believer is one who is enabled to share in the life of God through close relationship with the person of Jesus Christ. This bond is possible through identification with Christ in his death and resurrection. "It was to prove at the present time that he himself is righteous and that he justifies the one who has faith in Jesus" (Rom 3:26).

Though fulfilling the covenant story between God and Israel, the death and resurrection of Jesus accomplished the redemption of the entire human race. Every human person, Jews and Gentile, now is enabled to share in the life of God through faith in Jesus. A proper description of faith takes its point of departure from the death of Christ. Christian life is defined around this event as identification with Christ in his death and resurrection (2 Cor 5:14f), and with this Paul used the language of faith to conclude the story of election and of covenant which began concretely with Abraham.

This Pauline exposition of the theological meaning and benefits of Christ's death is verified by the Gospels and other NT texts. The entire NT affirms that the project of God concentrates around the person of Jesus Christ, and different NT books use different terminologies to articulate in what consists the relationship with Jesus. For instance, in describing the Last Supper, the four Gospels prove that Jesus' act of self-giving on the cross fulfills the covenant history. It is the new covenant in his blood.

While they were eating, he took a loaf of bread, and after blessing it he broke it, gave it to them, and said, "Take; this is my body." Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he gave it to them, and all of them drank from it. He said to them, "This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many (Mark 14:22-24 // Matt 26:26-28; Luke 22:19-20// John 13)

In these various ways, the Gospels underscore the fact that Jesus' obedience to the Father unto death became the model of human relationship with God and of openness to the mystery of God. In the NT, belief in Jesus is a sharing in the life of Jesus which has practical implications. These implications are, in the next paragraphs, presented as cultural practices that define the Christian faith. A brief discussion of the meaning of culture will precede it.

3. The Culture of Faith

Culture is the fact about a people which gives access to a better comprehension of who they are. An attentive observation of how a people act and how they respond to things and situations gives insight into the people's philosophy of life and mission. Culture is the concrete expression of a people's unique way of life. It is, therefore, understood as those practical ways through which a people live out their vision of life and by which they define their uniqueness. Culture marks out a people socially from others. People talk about their cultural identity and they defend it at a great cost because a people could become extinct with the loss of that which makes them unique in the midst of other people.

The idea of culture in relation to faith is important because as a concrete expression of a people's vision of life, the culture

of faith is the way in which faith is lived out in concrete life situations. In other words, faith needs to become culture. The process of making faith a way of life is defined here along the lines determined by the biblical presentation itself, which is most evident in the Passion prediction, as it is presented in the Gospels. In narrating this event which both fulfills and inaugurates the story of faith, the Gospels show that in order for faith to become culture, it must clothe itself in the parameters already set by Christ's act of self-giving on our behalf and in total obedience to the Father. According to the descriptions of the Gospels, this culture takes the shape of 'an inverse pyramid'.

4. Christian Culture: An Inverse Pyramid

This part of the paper presents the various ways in which the Gospels and Paul draw out the implication of belief in Jesus Christ. Christ is the content of Christian faith and in describing the event of Christ, the NT at the same time specifies how belief in Christ determines the life of a Christian. The Gospels give this description with the language of discipleship and within the context of the Passion prediction. This connection to the Passion story implies that Jesus' invitation to "Follow" him finds its climax in a journey that leads to the cross. In about ninety-eight percent of its occurrence in the Gospels, the language of followership is linked to the image of Jesus who is in motion towards Jerusalem.⁶ The entire NT witness agree that discipleship creates a new situation and a commitment to Christ: "Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life

⁶ Cf. Ernest Best, *Disciples and Discipleship. Studies in the Gospel According to Mark*, Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1986, pp4-5.

itself, cannot be my disciple" (Luke 14:26).⁷ In this regard, Jesus delineated clearly the conditions for walking this way of suffering.

4.1 Christian Life and the Culture of 'Dying to Self'

The culture of dying to self is a way of life which accepts providential suffering as collaboration in the plan of God. All four Gospels derive this culture from within the Passion Prediction context. The passion prediction explains that as the Messiah, it was necessary that Jesus undergoes suffering, persecution and death in order to save us. Therefore, the true mark of a Christian is to identify with Jesus in the very event that is most essential to his identity as Son of God. "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me" (Mark 8:34). The same condition is expressed in various ways in other NT texts. Besides Mark, other Gospel texts express this condition alongside the demand to break all ties, and to deprive oneself of possessions.⁸ John expresses this same condition as the love commandment. God's love for the world, which led Jesus to die, should guide the actions of all disciples of Jesus: "By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (John 13:35). The core of the message of Jesus Christ is love. John tells us in what this love consists: "We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us - and we ought to lay down our lives for one another" (John 15:12-14; 1 John 3:16; 4:10). This is redemptive incarnation.

⁷ Cf. Mark 10:28-29; Matt 10:37; Luke 18:29-30.

⁸ Cf. Matt 10:37-39; 16:24; Luke 9:23-25; 14:25-33; John 13:36-37. These may represent concrete expressions of the essential demand to carry the cross.

A closer look at the three predictions of the passion in the Gospel of Mark highlights very subtle obstacles to the acceptance of suffering in its various presentations in the life of a Christian. The first prediction (Mark 8:31-38) addresses the problem of misunderstanding of Jesus' identity as the Messiah. The question "Who do people say that I am?" introduces this first prediction,⁹ and through it the point is made clearer that knowledge and understanding regarding the person and mission of Jesus is necessary for discipleship. Knowledge of the identity of Jesus is a precondition for good and effective followership. Since it is shown that discipleship finds its definition only in relation to the cross, the problem of misunderstanding, which the text presents, refers to a fundamental challenge. The response of the disciples to the question about the identity of Jesus becomes the yardstick for measuring both the level of their understanding of Jesus' mission and their ability for discipleship.

In the face of this description of Jesus, the Gospels leave us in no doubt that the disciples would find it difficult, accepting and fulfilling this necessary condition. While they identified Jesus with known models, and even though Peter recognized in Jesus the Son of God, he misconstrued the character of Jesus' messiahship. Therefore, Jesus' rebuke to Peter is turned into a teaching to all the disciples.¹⁰ On the basis of their rejection of the cross and of the idea of a suffering Messiah (Mark 8:32), the Gospels highlight the ways in which the ability of the disciples to follow Jesus diminished significantly. They were overcome by fear as they travelled the road to Jerusalem (Mark 10:32), and as Jesus suffered persecution and trial in the hands of Jews and Romans, they

⁹ Cf. Mark 8:27,29; Matt 16:13-28; Luke 9:18,20.

¹⁰ Cf. Mark 8:33,34-38; 10:38-40,41-50.

betrayed, denied, fled at his arrest, and followed him only from a distance (Luke 22:54).

For Paul also, Christian life is basically a sharing in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. "I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me" (Gal 2:19-20. Cf. also 2 Cor 4:10-12; 5:14-16). While the Gospels use the language of discipleship, Paul adopts the language of baptism to express the same idea:

Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his (Rom 6:3-5).

The Christian, therefore, is a disciple who responds to the call to learn the manner of life of Jesus through following him on a journey that leads to Jerusalem. Therefore, like Jesus, the Christian must live the paschal mystery, purifying himself/herself of all self interest and laying down his or her life for others.

4.2 Christian Life and the Culture of Service

The second (Mark 9:30-37) and third (Mark 10:32-45) predictions of the passion are addressed only to the Twelve. According to these texts, misunderstanding of the mission of Jesus leads to equal misconstruction of the aims and goals of Christian life. Even here, the motif of misunderstanding

(Mark 9:32) is used as a foil to directing attention to other related problems of the Christian community, that is, the disciples' quest for power and positions of honour and the resultant quarrel among them. These texts are important because they explain that the practical expression of the command to carry the cross is service of others:

He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all (Mark 9:35).

Whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant (*diakonos*), and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave (*doulos*) of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many (Mark 10:43-45).

The attitude of service stands against that of power as the Gentiles do (Mark 10:42) and of love for places of honour and self-seeking, as the Pharisees do (Matt 23:11). Instead, the disciple should be like the Master who gave his life by serving others. Many words express the idea of service in the NT, but not all are used in relation to discipleship. Of the terms which denote the idea of service, only the term *diakoneō* and its cognates refer to the idea of a service of love, which Jesus demanded from his disciples.¹¹ The image of Jesus as servant (*diakonos*) justifies the cross motif and provides a concrete expression of discipleship in particular contexts. All the Gospels also agree that *diakonia* as an act

¹¹ They are distinguished from other terms: *therapeuō* (to serve with respect and concern), *latreuō* (to serve for wages), *leitourgeō* (official public service to the state) and *hupēreteō* (to help another). Cf. H.W. Beyer, "diakoneō" in Gerhard Kittel (ed.), *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, p81.

of self-giving for others should be the characteristic mark of every disciple of Jesus, and therefore of every Christian. Paul calls his ministry a *diakonia*, a ministry of reconciliation (2 Cor 5:18; 3:4-6) and not a matter of standing above others as leader (2 Cor 1:24).

In many texts, the service required of *diakonia* is complemented by another word *douleuō*, which denotes servanthood. The relationship between the two words merits attention at this point. In the Greek world, *douleuō* was considered as the most repudiated kind of service because such service was a perversion of human nature; expressing lack of autonomy and personal choice.¹² In agreement with Greek thought, the LXX uses words of the *douleuō* group to translate the Hebrew *ʿebed*, when the reference is to any restrictive service which a subordinate renders at the whim of a master. This meaning came to be adopted into the language of worship, *douleuein*, understood as total commitment to God as Lord.¹³ In the NT also, the term describes the exclusiveness of a relationship to a master or lord and a master's claim to the obedience of his subordinate. Paul used this language to describe Jesus' obedience to the Father, which was redemptive for us. Jesus emptied himself, and taking the form of a slave, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death (Phil 2:7-8). This vocabulary also characterizes Mary in her openness to the mystery of God. Luke designated her as the slave girl (*doulē*) of the Lord (Luke 1:38,48). Paul also claims that for the sake of the Gospel, he became a slave of all so that he might win some

¹² Cf. Beyer, "Diakoneō", pp82-83; K.H. Rengstorf, "Doulos" in G. Kittel (ed.), *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, pp261-263.

¹³ Cf. Rengstorf, "Doulos", pp265-269.

of them for Christ (1 Cor 9:19-23), and believers fulfil the love command through becoming slaves of one another (Gal 5:13-15).

4.3 Christian Life and the Culture of Compassion

The covenant history between God and Israel, which the event of Jesus Christ fulfills, is a history of God's faithfulness and compassion for his people. Jesus revealed the face of the Father by living out in his ministry, the compassion of the God. In Jesus, God revealed his compassionate face as "God with us" (Matt 1:23; 28:20). In his ministry, Jesus revealed God as the compassionate and merciful Father, who goes in search of the lost (Luke 15), who worked for the physical and spiritual liberation of people (Luke 4:18-19), and who offered his Son to die for the salvation of the world (John 3:16). This is the core of the Christian doctrine of God, which is brought out very clearly in the Gospels¹⁴ and in the letters of Paul. Compassion defines the ministry of Jesus and in doing so, the Gospels invite Jesus' followers to practice the compassion of God as it is exemplified in the ministry of Jesus (Matt 5:48). This invitation is brought out very clearly in some of the Parables of Jesus, for instance, the Parable of the Unforgiving Servant (Matt 18, especially vv32-35) and the Parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15, especially vv31-32). Compassion is the practical implication of the Sermon on the Mount as the Gospel of Matthew says in words like the following:

"You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for

¹⁴ The praise of God's compassion in the Song of Hannah (Luke 1:46-55) is a key to Luke's version of the Gospel.

he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect (Matt 5:43-48).

Christians should live out in daily life the compassion of the Father. Every interpretation and proclamation of God's power and holiness is faulty if it does not emphasize the freedom, mercy and compassion of God, as it is fully revealed in the event of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

5. Evaluation and Conclusion

The definition of faith, as it is given in the foregoing paragraphs, presents a vision of life that transcends logical reasoning and human natural inclination. It is difficult to comprehend that if anyone wants to save his life, he should lose it (cf. Mark 8:35). It is also not easy for anyone to love his or her enemies and persecutors (Matt 5:43). And these are given to the Christian as practical ways of carrying the cross and therefore of collaborating in God's project. Christian faith is not defined with terms that fit the standards of this world, but according to a different kind of paradoxical reasoning, comprehensible only from within its own system. It is a vision of life which Paul says does not belong to this age but whose meaning is revealed by the Spirit (1 Cor 2:1-10). Christians must pay attention to the nature of the faith they profess because it is different from other kinds of human teaching. It contains a wisdom that is not of this world. Therefore, we can understand the mysteries it contains only through the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 2:10). Since Paul says like

Isaiah (55:8-9) that the Gospel of Christ conforms to the ways of God and not according to human ways, he warns that it is primarily spiritually discerned.

So also no one comprehends what is truly God's except the Spirit of God. Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit that is from God, so that we may understand the gifts bestowed on us by God. And we speak of these things in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual things to those who are spiritual. Those who are unspiritual do not receive the gifts of God's Spirit, for they are foolishness to them, and they are unable to understand them because they are spiritually discerned (1 Cor 2:7-14).

Since faith communicates a divine wisdom which is not easily discernible to the human mind, the ability to comprehend and live it comes only through the renewal of the mind by the Spirit of God (Rom 12:2).

The primary assignment of a Christian is to have a direct and personal bond with Jesus, completely obedient to the call and teachings of Christ, and to follow him through a journey of forgiveness, of compassion for the poor, and of self-giving. John 15 describes this bond with the image of the Vine and the Branches. "Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me" (15:4). It is clearly stated that without a dedicated focus on Jesus as the one who goes before us on the road that demands self-sacrifice, the aim of Christian discipleship is impossible to realize.

Therefore, today, evangelisation faces challenges that supersede simply converting more people to the Christian religion or ensuring large membership to a particular Christian denomination. In the face of the many threats internal and external to Christianity, the people of God should be encouraged to bear authentic witness to the faith they profess. Moreover, in the face of internal disunity that characterize many Christian communities, caused by domineering and self-seeking attitudes, the Church should be steadfast in teaching and bearing witness to the inescapable truth about the image of Christ, who came to serve and not to be served. The image of a disciple as servant slave stands in opposition to power and attitudes of domination. A ministry undertaken for the sake of the Kingdom of God is redemptive to the extent to which it is done with total dedication, in lowly service and self-sacrifice.