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THE HOLY SPIRIT AND THE UNDERSTANDING OF GOD'S MYSTERIES

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1. Introduction

Understanding is the opposite of ignorance or lack of knowledge. In the biblical tradition, human stubbornness, lack of understanding of God and of his ways is adduced to lack of knowledge on the part of Israel, as we read from Hos 4:6, "My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge...". This same ignorance of God's ways is certainly the reason for the unchristian or ungodly attitude of a good number of African Christians. In this paper, it is argued that this ignorance stems from the inability of African Christians to translate into the Christian culture what is already part and parcel of the African belief system and worldview. The epistemic and pastoral objectives of this paper is hereby stated.

Faith is measured by the level of a person's dependence, loyalty and abandonment to God's will, especially in times of difficulties. Most often, negative or challenging experiences, like sickness or misfortune, lead many Christians to predicaments which motivate responses that hardly show in what they believe. The experiences that motivate the present paper are similar to what led the prophet Elijah to ask his contemporaries a question that took them to task over their attitude to God, "How long will

you go limping with two opinions? If the Lord is God, follow him; but if Baal, then follow him" (1 Kings 18:21).

The expression of faith of a people is often shaped by the people's primary religious worldview. Similarly, many Africans are not unaffected by an underlying African Traditional religious worldview which has been judged as very resilient. The crux of the matter seems to be the experience of divinity as *Deus absconditus* (hidden God), which cuts across a good number of religions. Human beings of different religious affiliations find it difficult relating with a divinity who hides his face when they desire to see him, or put more correctly, when they need God to do or say something, especially in times of great distress. Africans solve the problem of apparent divine absence and silence through belief in spirit forces and various human mediums, all of which are means through which contact with the Supreme Being is reached.¹

The peoples of West Africa, especially, associate the spirit forces with unruly, irrational and perilous behavior, although not every spirit force is malevolent. Therefore, diseases and misfortune of

¹ In African Traditional Religion, there are four categories of invisible and visible forces who mediate God, the Supreme Being, in different capacities. These are: the deities, the ancestors, the spirit forces and various human specialists. Leading African scholars agree on these classification. Cf. Laurenti Magesa, *African Religion, The Moral Traditions of Abundant Life*, Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1997; J.S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, Oxford: Heinemann, 1969, 1989; E. Bòlaji Idowu, *African Traditional Religion. A Definition*, Maryknoll: Orbis, 1975; V. Mulago, *La Religion Traditionnelle des Bantu et leur vision du Monde*, 2nd ed., Kinshasa: Faculté de Theologie Catholique, 1980.

inexplicable origins are ascribed to them or to magicians and witches who harness the evil powers of these spirits through magic and who put them to evil use. This explains why in spite of the influence of Christianity, there are still some African peoples who hold these spirits in great fear and why people resort frequently to rituals and sacrifices for protection. Today, African Christians who feel they are under the influence of any of these malevolent spirits run to the aid of diviners, medicine specialists and native priests whom they believe know how to ward off the spirits or how to neutralize the effects of their actions through the use of charms.² The duties of this group of mediums include curing sicknesses, finding the cause of misfortune, combating witchcraft, magic, sorcery and their effects and generally, giving people charms for protection from evil forces, ritual cleansing from impurities, and in fact, engaging in the combat against violence and forces that threaten human life and wellbeing.³ Among all these mediums, diviners are held in greatest esteem because of their ability to have access to divine mysteries and secrets, as well as the moral cause and remedy of some afflictions.⁴ This belief in the malicious effect of spirit forces is so pervasive and so endemic that it is almost a crutch to the African Christian. What faith needs in the African part of the globe is friendship with another Spirit, the Holy Spirit, who is

² Cf. Elochukwu E. Uzukwu, *God, Spirit and Human Wholeness. Appropriating Faith and Culture in West African Style*, Oregon: Pickwick Publications, 2012, p62; Emefie Ikenga Metuh, *Comparative Studies of African Traditional Religions*, Onitsha - Nigeria: IMICO, 1987, pp40,55.

³ Cf. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, pp164-167; Uzukwu, *God, Spirit and Human Wholeness*, p89.

⁴ Cf. Magesa, *African Religion*, pp212-213.

benevolent and an easy and most direct access to the mind of God.

Of the functions attributed to the Holy Spirit, the gift of understanding is considered of very vital importance for Christian life. This gift enables the comprehension of God's purpose, and therefore the knowledge required for the ability to think and act in accordance with God's will and to live according to his plan of salvation. In the entire economy of salvation, from Israel's first encounter with God until the time of the Church, God has continued to school his people in the understanding of Himself and of his plan for salvation. In this relationship, God's people have always been judged to be dull in their thinking and lacking in understanding. Moses, the prophets, the Evangelists and Paul recognize that lack of understanding of God's ways is the primary cause of the infidelity and stubbornness of God's people. They also affirm that human beings are not, by nature, able to understand God's ways, but always need a powerful divine assistance to do so. This influence is the Holy Spirit. Paul tells the Corinthian Christians,

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 (1 Cor 2:12-13).

In the Bible, the cause of human stubbornness and infidelity is often said to be lack of understanding and lack of knowledge.⁵

⁵ For instance, Is 5:13; 45:20; 56:10; Jer 14:18; 51:17; Hos 4:1,6.

This paper studies biblical statements about human inability to comprehend divine ways, how it is worked into the economy of salvation, and the role of the Holy Spirit in bridging this gap between God and human beings. This study begins by establishing the biblical background of the inability of human beings to understand God's ways. The gift of understanding by the Holy Spirit is explained against this background.

2. **Biblical Assessment of Human Ways vis-à-vis God's Ways**

One of the difficulties that has characterized life in the world is human inability to understand the ways of God. The mind and the ways of God is a mystery to decipher. The prophet Isaiah reckons that the difference between divine and human ways of doing things is like the physical gap separating the heavens from the earth,

For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the LORD. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts (Is 55:8-9).

This human distance from God has made human life in the world a thorny path to thread. Access to God's will is possible only through revelation and through the mediation of the Holy Spirit. Some biblical texts are very explicit on this subject. An assessment of human ways made in Gen 6:5 is primary:

The LORD saw that the wickedness of humankind was great in the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of their hearts was only evil continually.

In the context of the creation stories, what is evil is what is opposed to good, that is, what does not correspond to the will of God in creation. This assessment, found in the primeval literature of Gen 1-11, is made in the context of on-going degeneration of creation caused by human sinfulness. The event of human sinfulness recounted in Gen 3-6 are all blamed on the evil inclination of the human heart. What is said about human beings in this part of the Bible should be understood as what is universally reckoned to them in time and space. Human beings are naturally inclined to thoughts and ways that are at variance with God's thoughts and ways. The Psalmist says, "The LORD knows our thoughts, that they are but an empty breath" (Ps 94:11). "Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my thoughts"⁶ is the Psalmist's plea for innocence since the human heart is considered as the seat of good and bad actions.

Besides Gen 6:5, the nature and effect of the inclination of the human heart is discussed by many biblical texts.⁷ It is a choice topic in the Wisdom tradition and in St Paul. Human inclination to evil is awarded a personified status in the book of Sirach because of the magnitude of evil it has wrecked in the world, "O inclination to evil, why were you formed to cover the land with deceit?" (Sir 37:3). It is the wellspring of all human offences against others; hurts caused by jealousy, envy, deceit, betrayal, selfishness. Those who act at the bidding of the inclination of their heart are opposed to godly persons, who are capable of unselfish solidarity with their fellows (Sir 37:12). In Sir 5:2,

⁶ Ps 139:23.

⁷ For instance, Gen 8:21; Ecc 11:9; Sir 5:2; 37:3; 4 Macc 2:21; 1 Cor 3:3 and many Psalms.

those who desire to walk the path of wisdom are warned, "Do not follow your inclination and strength in pursuing the desires of your heart". And in the senselessness that overshadow earthly life, Ecclesiastes warns young people that God would judge every action or decision taken at the command of human sensory biddings. "Rejoice, young man, while you are young, and let your heart cheer you in the days of your youth. Follow the inclination of your heart and the desire of your eyes, but know that for all these things God will bring you into judgment (Eccl 11:9)." In all these texts, human inclination is considered as sensory emotion that leads to ungodly action. One could ask why God formed human beings, as Sir 37:3 reflects, with inclinations that lead them to evil actions. In responding to this question, 4 Macc 2:21 exonerates God of the evil effects of human inclination when it says that God did not abandon human beings to the whims of the senses. Rather, he placed human inclinations and emotions under the command of the mind which guides the senses to do good. This implies that on their own, the senses cannot lead to evil conduct except they are not brought, as they should be, under the control of the mind.

Jeremiah accused the people of God of constantly following their own hearts and walking in their own ways,⁸ and both he and Ezekiel describe the renewal of the covenant as what God would do to the human heart.⁹

A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. I will put my

⁸ Jer 4:22; 9:13-14.

⁹ Cf. Jer 4:4,14; 32:39-40; Ezek 36:26.

spirit within you, and make you follow my statutes and be careful to observe my ordinances.¹⁰

In the New Testament, the human inability to follow God's ways is well depicted in the event of Jesus, where in many occasions, Jesus blamed his disciples for lack of understanding.

3. Human Inability to Understand Divine Mysteries Revealed in Jesus

The assessment of human nature, given above, serves the purpose of highlighting the inability of Jesus' contemporaries to comprehend his person, his mission and the divine mysteries revealed in his teaching. The bone of contention on the need for understanding is the divinity of Jesus. The Gospel of John says it explicitly,

Jesus answered, "Is it not written in your law, 'I said, you are gods'? If those to whom the word of God came were called 'gods'-- and the scripture cannot be annulled-- can you say that the one whom the Father has sanctified and sent into the world is blaspheming because I said, 'I am God's Son'? If I am not doing the works of my Father, then do not believe me. But if I do them, even though you do not believe me, believe the works, so that you may know and understand that the Father is in me and I am in the Father" (John 10:34-38).

¹⁰ Ezek 36:26-27; Cf. Jer 31:33: "But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.."

This was the greatest challenge which Jesus faced in his mission, that is, getting his contemporaries to believe that God is revealed in him and in his works. The importance of understanding and insight into the mysteries of God is highly dramatized in people's responses to Jesus' description of his mission and his preaching about the kingdom of heaven. Neither the religious leaders, who claimed to know the scriptures, nor his disciples, who were his close associates, understood him and his mission. These two groups are used here to represent the collective responses of those who saw and heard Jesus during his ministry.

The Scribes and Pharisees were experts in the interpretation of the word of God; they were teachers and trusted transmitters of the religious traditions of the people. Their training gave them the confidence that they could not misjudge the mind of God in their interpretation of the events of their time. "Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?"¹¹ was Jesus' question to the Pharisee, Nicodemus, who could not interpret Jesus' remark about being born from above. When Jesus called these teachers blind guides and hypocrites,¹² he did not mean to throw empty insults at them as his opponents; rather, he was underscoring for them the great danger involved in leading or teaching others without knowledge of the purposes of God as they are revealed in Jesus. They expose themselves to the risk of leading entire people to the pit, which is leading them to destruction, outside of the purpose of God. Finally, in their lack of understanding, they did not recognize that Jesus was the

¹¹ John 3:10.

¹² Cf. Luke 6:39; John 9:49.

Messiah and according to the author of Acts of the apostles, this lack of understanding led them to killing Jesus,

Because the residents of Jerusalem and their leaders did not recognize him or understand the words of the prophets that are read every Sabbath, they fulfilled those words by condemning him (Acts 13:27).

The lack of understanding which Jesus' hearers exhibited was the reason for Jesus teaching in parables.¹³ He, however, said to his disciples, "But blessed are your eyes, for they see, and your ears, for they hear. Truly I tell you, many prophets and righteous people longed to see what you see, but did not see it, and to hear what you hear, but did not hear it" (Matt 13:16-17). The disciples of Jesus represent very close followers of Jesus who had been prepared to understand the mysteries of the kingdom.¹⁴ Yet, they were exhibiting a deep-seated misunderstanding which led Jesus to ask them, "Are you also without understanding?"¹⁵ Lack of understanding was pervading their relationship with Jesus until after his passion and death.¹⁶ What advantage, then, has the disciple? To this question, Paul would say that the Jew has no advantage over the Gentile; "there is no one who has understanding, there is no one who seeks God".¹⁷ The disciples of Jesus lacked as much understanding as the rest of the people. They were simply enchanted by the miraculous and the demonstration of power with which he taught the mysteries of

¹³ Cf. Matt 13:13-15; Mark 4:11-12; John 12:40-41; Acts 28:26-27.

¹⁴ Luke 8:10.

¹⁵ Mark 7:18; 8:17-21; Matt 15:16.

¹⁶ Cf. John 20:9.

¹⁷ Cf. Rom 3:11.

the kingdom, but who, nevertheless, did not understand Jesus and his words. Some followed him as long as he satisfied their material needs for food, healing of their diseases or the need to identify with him as a prospective political leader in Israel. At various occasions, in fact, in the most sensitive part of Jesus' mission, the Gospels reveal that even the apostles failed to understand their Master. Their responses and Jesus' reaction to those responses unveil the deep anguish Jesus felt at their lack of understanding. In each Gospel, it is shown that Jesus' description of himself and of his mission provides the criterion for the expected response of his followers.

The description of the who and the why of Jesus' mission is found most concretely in the passion prediction texts.¹⁸ In these texts, Jesus defined his messianic mission in a manner that runs contrary to traditional Jewish expectation. "... the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again". Peter, who had made an inspired declaration about Jesus' divine sonship and messianic mission,¹⁹ turned again to reprimand Jesus, and in this way showed a deep misunderstanding of Jesus' person and mission. Although Jesus' response to Peter could be interpreted as drastic, he nevertheless revealed the basis for Peter's lack of understanding, "for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human on human things."²⁰

¹⁸ Mark 8:31; Matt 16:21; Luke 9:21.

¹⁹ Matt 16:16; Mark 8:29; Luke 9:20.

²⁰ Mark 8:33.

The effects of misunderstanding are further depicted in the Parable of the Sower. This parable answers the question of the most basic requirement for becoming a disciple of Jesus. It occurs in all the synoptic Gospels,²¹ and in telling this parable, Matthew underlines more than other Synoptic Gospels the importance of understanding. Only in Matt 13, the verb 'to understand' appears six times out of the nine times it is found in the entire Gospel.²² In this way, Matthew shows that the primary mission of the disciple is not simply to listen to Jesus, the teacher, but mainly to hear and understand. Listening without understanding has grave consequences both for the hearer and the word of God. In interpreting the parable, Jesus explains that the one who hears the word of God without understanding it is like a seed which falls prey to predators and heretics,

When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what is sown in the heart; this is what was sown on the path (Matt 13:19).

The verb 'to understand' (*sunīēmi*), which appears in Matt 13:19 in its present participial form, *sunientos*, means primarily, 'to set together' or 'to unite', but here used metaphorically to speak of the unity of perception with what is perceived, therefore meaning, to be one [in mind and purpose], to understand.²³ It is necessary to relate the meaning of this terminology to the imagery of the seed in the parable of the sower. The contact

²¹ Cf. Mark 4:1-9,13-20; Matt 13:1-23; Luke 8:4-8,11-15.

²² Cf. Matt 13:13,14,15,19,23,51; 15:10; 16:12; 17:13

²³ Cf. W.E. Vine, *An Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words*, Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1952, p1180.

between soil and seed, which is necessary for growth and fruition, explains the nature of the unity of perception that is meant here. Just as the setting together or unity of seed with the soil, which leads to the death of seed, empowers growth, so also the disciple and the word of God. Understanding grows as the disciple gets to know Jesus better through fellowship with him and through listening to his words. Lack of understanding, on the other hand, implies the absence of unity of life and purpose with Jesus. Similar teachings are found in John and Paul,

Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit (John 12:24).

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 6:4-5).

A Christian lacking in this deep union with Jesus cannot withstand moment of persecution, difficulties of life, attractions of this world, the lures of wealth, and exposure to an environment or ideas that contradict gospel values. This is what happened to the seeds that fell on rocky ground and among thorns (Matt 13:20-22). In order to produce the expected fruit of discipleship, the words of Jesus must be sown on the good soil of basic understanding of the person and mission of Jesus. In other words, the person should be of one life, one mind and purpose with Jesus.

Lack of understanding was responsible for the inability of the disciples to perceive the meaning of the events of the Feeding of the Five Thousand (Mark 6:30-44) and Jesus' Walking on the Water (Mark 45:51). These two events recall two demonstrations of God's sovereign and divine power which underlie the faith of God's people, Israel. These are God's salvific actions which he wrought through waters²⁴ and his provision of bread and water in the wilderness for his people.²⁵ In the Old Testament, God's divine power is revealed in his effortless control of hostile and turbulent waters and the waves of the sea. In fact, divine actions of immense salvific import are depicted through symbolic representation of what God does to and through waters.²⁶ The first account of creation in Gen 1 and the crossing of the sea in Exod 14 are two outstanding instances. In the event of threats to national and individual life, God is called upon to unleash his holy wrath and divine power on the waters. God's guidance, protection from enemies and feeding of his people in the wilderness were further demonstration, besides the exodus, to his people of his divine power to save. This is why those who mistrusted God in spite of the miracles they saw were denied of a

²⁴ Creation (Gen 1) and The Crossing of the Sea (Exod 14).

²⁵ Exod 16-17; Num 20.

²⁶ It could be symbolic representation of a more powerful enemy (Ps 18:16-17; 69:14; 74:13; 124:2-5), a time of great distress (Ps 32:6; 46:3), immense problem defying human solution (Ps 69:1-2). God roars through the waters to confront the enemy (Ps 29:3-4). Calming of water is a sign of salvation (Ps 23:2). Therefore, when the people praise God for spreading out the earth on the waters (Ps 136:6), they acknowledge his mighty salvific actions for his people.

share in the promise.²⁷ These Old Testament stories help to show that the miracle of the Feeding of the Five Thousand and the Walking on the Waters are strong statements about the divinity of Jesus. In fact, the parallel account in Matthew aimed towards this confession: "When they got into the boat, the wind ceased. And those in the boat worshiped him, saying, 'Truly you are the Son of God.'" (Matt 14:32-33). Mark, instead, reached a different conclusion. The disciples could not arrive to recognize the divinity of Jesus behind the events because their hearts were hardened (Mark 6:52). The event left them astounded, fearful and speechless. Not even the presence of Jesus in the boat could relieve their fear and anxiety.

*"Why are you talking about having no bread? Do you still not perceive or understand? Are your hearts hardened? Do you have eyes, and fail to see? Do you have ears, and fail to hear? And do you not remember?... Do you not yet understand?"*²⁸ These heartbreaking questions are Jesus' reaction to the inability of the disciples to understand the purpose of God in his words and actions. The worst happened when Jesus foretold his passion the second time.²⁹ According to Luke 9:45, "...they did not understand this saying; its meaning was concealed from them, so

²⁷ Cf. Num 14:22-23. Also, Ps 95:8-11. Ps 78:21-22 interprets Israel's rebellion in the wilderness as fundamentally, lack of faith in God and lack of trust in his promises. Israel's lack of faith is shown in their lack of trust in God's promises and in a deep misunderstanding that led to their thinking about God in worldly and materialistic terms. "They exchanged the glory of God for the image of an ox that eats grass. They forgot God, their Savior, who had done great things in Egypt,..." (Ps 106:20-21).

²⁸ Mark 8:17-21. Cf. Matt 15:16.

²⁹ Cf. Mark 9:30-31.

that they could not perceive it. And they were afraid to ask him about this saying". Lack of understanding of the mission of Jesus led them to a materialistic mindset, to compete for leadership position.³⁰

4. The Holy Spirit and the Gift of Understanding

Although troubled by the depth of misunderstanding that he saw in his disciples, Jesus seemed to understand the connection of misunderstanding to human nature. This is most evident in Jesus' response to Peter's confession of his divinity,

"Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven..." (Matt 16:17)

"Flesh and blood has not revealed this to you" is Jesus' recognition that human beings need the assistance of God to look beyond what is human and material in order to acknowledge what is divine in Jesus. All his teachings were geared towards lifting their minds out of culturally based truths and guide them to be open to the values of the Kingdom of God. Mark and Matthew underscore this, especially through joining the two words 'listen and understand' or through prefixing Jesus' speech with the command to understand.³¹ In his gospel, John showed that Jesus understood the depth of human helplessness in the face of God's mysteries. Jesus expressed this in his words to the disciples, "I still have

³⁰ Cf. Mark 9:32.

³¹ Cf. Mark 7:14; Matt 15:10; 24:43

many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own, but will speak whatever he hears, and he will declare to you the things that are to come" (John 16:12-13). Therefore, besides his teaching aids, Jesus' final solution to human inability to understand divine mysteries is the gift of the Holy Spirit.

In Luke, John and Paul, there are clearer descriptions of how the Holy Spirit would guide the disciples to truth. These holy authors add firmer emphasis to the effect that human inability to understand divine mysteries is not only a fact of nature; it is also fruit of human lack of openness to and rejection of divine truths. John quotes Jesus as saying to the Jews,

Why do you not understand what I say? It is because you cannot accept my word. You are from your father the devil, and you choose to do your father's desires. He was a murderer from the beginning and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him (John 8:43-44).

Luke narrates that after the events of Jesus' passion and death, the disciples still exhibited the effects of misunderstanding, fear and disappointment. Jesus did not relent in his efforts to lead them to understanding because this was an important basis for the ability to bear witness to him. As they received the gift of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:1-4), the fearful disciples became very courageous as they began openly to bear

witness to the power of God revealed in the life of Jesus.³² The story of the disciples on the way to Emmaus (Luke 24:13-35) aims to show how Jesus' teaching aids stretched to the time of post resurrection appearances. The disciples who had looked up to Jesus as their hope for political liberation were so disappointed after his death that some decided to return to where Jesus had picked them. Jesus met them on the way and led them to understanding through a detailed catechesis of the biblical testimony about his person.

Then he said to them, "These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you-- that everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled." Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, and he said to them, "Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things (Luke 24:44-48).

After this long teaching and the celebration of the Eucharist, these disciples understood the meaning of all that Jesus had been telling them about his mission and passion. Now, their eyes were opened and they recognized him.³³ Before the post-resurrection appearances and before the Pentecost, the disciples had related to Jesus according to ideas derived from their culture and religious tradition. Their minds were not open to the new ideas imbedded in Jesus' preaching of the Kingdom of God, which holds truths

³² Acts 2:14f.

³³ Luke 24:13-35.

that contradict human traditions and interpretations of God that are culturally conditioned. The parables in Luke 15, for instance, the lost sheep, the lost coin and the Prodigal Son, aim to highlight God's gracious deeds which differ significantly from human ways of acting and understanding. The post resurrection appearances and teachings and the gift of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost specify the goal of Jesus' efforts at leading the disciples to understanding, that is, witnessing.³⁴

In the writings of Paul, human understanding of people and historical events, which is derived from teachings received from cultural and religious backgrounds, is described as 'setting the mind on things of the flesh' or 'living according to the law'.

For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit. To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. For this reason the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God; it does not submit to God's law-- indeed it cannot, and those who are in the flesh cannot please God. But you are not in the flesh; you are in the Spirit, since the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him. But if Christ is in you, though the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness (Rom 8:5-10).

For Paul, therefore, true spiritual discernment, which leads to understanding of God's mysteries, comes from the mind that is

³⁴ Cf. Acts 1:8.

being renewed in Christ under the Spirit. He appealed to the converts, "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God-- what is good and acceptable and perfect" (Rom 12:2). Under the influence of the Holy Spirit, the Christian is led more and more to understand who Jesus is and how God works. Living in the Spirit is a strong defense against false doctrine and false conceptions of God's ways.

5. Conclusion

Ignorance of God's ways leads to inappropriate behavior. Today, people express deep lack of faith in God, not only when their actions suggest that they think God's power is limited, but also when they behave in manners that are opposed to God's way of doing things. Knowledge of God is one of the most important ingredients for faith, since it helps one to adopt a mindset that yields actions and behaviors acceptable to God. An important fruit to be reaped from the present study is its presentation of the biblical assessment of the inability of the human mind to comprehend divine mysteries and the inability of the human being to do good. It is, therefore, very important that we understand and appreciate what Jesus has done for us by giving us the Holy Spirit. Without the Spirit, the human being is cut off from the life of God and from access to the salvific purposes of God for us.

A good part of the present paper shows how God gradually led Israel away from ignorance to knowledge of his purpose. From after the Eden even till the event of Jesus Christ, one of the restoration programs which God established is the healing of the

human heart, which the biblical tradition says is evil from the beginning. The human heart has been restored to enable it to think thoughts that correspond to God's will. This restoration program for human renewal is channeled through the Law and the Prophets. The law of the covenant which God gave to the Israelites was to be kept in the heart (Deut 6:5-6; 11:18; 26:16), so that it could replace every inclination to evil, which is the law of sin that seats within it. God fulfilled this covenant by pouring the Holy Spirit into our hearts (Rom 5:5) as Paul also says,

For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death. For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do: by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and to deal with sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, so that the just requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit (Rom 8:2-4).

The present discussion on the Holy Spirit addresses an important issue in the African Traditional religious belief system, especially with regard to the belief in the existence of spirit forces who rank third in the mediation of the Supreme Being. It also regards a pervasive and extensive belief and human fear of spirit forces, in elemental spirits and in principalities and powers, which is a great challenge to the practice of Christian faith in Africa. Underlying this belief is the presence in every culture of the existence of good and bad spirits, which are means through which they resolve the problem of the origin of evil. African religion describes God as a moral being who is not associated with evil, but to whom are attributed what is good, pure and

noble. Therefore, nearly all African societies attribute evil to other causes, like deities, evil spirit forces and witches.³⁵

The great influence the spirit forces have on the African is a good pedagogical basis for the essential role the Holy Spirit plays in the Christian tradition. Given humanity's experience of God as mystery, and the fear and anxiety which evil spirit forces wield in the African religious worldview, a good case is made for the Christian for belief in the Holy Spirit. In his letters, St. Paul shows that the Holy Spirit is the answer to all problems associated with the human person, and is also the answer to the fears associated with evil spirit forces, principalities and powers. The Holy Spirit makes us children of God the Father and is the divine presence that dispels every form of fear from the life of a Christian (Rom 8:15). The Holy Spirit helps us in our weakness and is the resolution to the gap created between the transcendent God and human beings (Rom 8:26-27). The understanding of God's mysteries is possible only through the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 2:10-15). Therefore, actions that accord with God's holy will are possible through the Holy Spirit (Rom 8:4-5).

Finally, the present study underscores that understanding is not simply an affair of the mind; it is fruit of deep union of heart, mind and will, in fact, of one's person with the person of Jesus Christ. This bond is possible only through the Holy Spirit, who brings about the setting of the Christian's mind on the things of God. The importance of setting the mind on the things of God is underscored in Jesus' saying to his contemporaries that "no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above"

³⁵ Cf. Mbiti, *Concepts of God*, pp31-42; Magesa, *African Religion*, pp40-41.

(John 3:3). This is, in fact, a reference to our rebirth through the Spirit, by which we become sons and daughters of God (Rom 8:15-16). Growing in understanding and gaining knowledge of God's mysteries was the goal of Paul's ministry as it is shown in the letter to the Colossians

I want their hearts to be encouraged and united in love, so that they may have all the riches of assured understanding and have the knowledge of God's mystery, that is, Christ himself, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. I am saying this so that no one may deceive you with plausible arguments (Col 2:2-4).