

TANGAZA COLLEGE

THE CATHOLIC UNIVERSITY OF EASTERN AFRICA

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**WHO IS MY FATHER?
A STUDY OF THE ICON OF THE FATHER
ACCORDING TO LUKE 15,11-32**

Moderator

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A Long Essay Submitted in Partial Fulfilment
of the Requirements for the Diploma in Biblical Studies

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To all sisters of my Congregation and my family.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

There are a number of people whom I would like to thank for their timely support and help during the process of writing this essay. First and foremost, I would like to thank Rev. Dr. Christopher Owczarek for accepting to be my moderator. His professional help and advice cannot be forgotten.

Typing this work was not an easy task for me. My special thanks go to Sr. Noemi Sichinga for accepting to type the work and all the patience with which he assisted.

Not to be forgotten are all my superiors of my congregation for giving me this chance to follow the biblical course at Tangaza College. My thanks also go my readers who read and corrected my work. In a special way, I wish to thank Fr. Aerled Lacomara and all my lecturers.

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STUDENT'S DECLARATION

I, the undersigned, declare that this long essay is my original work achieved through my personal reading, scientific research method and critical reflection. It is submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the Diploma in Biblical Studies. It has never been submitted to any other college or university for academic credit. All sources have been cited in full and acknowledged.

Signed *Sr. Martha Kaipa*

Name of student: Sr. Martha Kaipa, SSBG

Date 24th May, 2003

This long essay has been submitted for examination with my approval as the college supervisor.

Signed *Christopher Owczarek*

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Date 24th May, 2003

GENERAL INTRODUCTION

"I shall get up and go to my father...". At the surface level, this statement may not be so problematic to most people. However, if one goes deeper in uncovering the meaning of the words, one may make a surprising discovery. The challenge that lies before every reader in all ages is to give a satisfactory answer to this question: *Who is my father?*

Society of today shows that human nature has not changed. All cultures, ancient and modern, tend to keep searching the true face of the father. The main aim of this long essay is to give a true icon of the Father, whom every human being longs for.

The parable of the prodigal son is among the most famous of Jesus' parables. The image of the downtrodden and repentant prodigal son, the rejection by the self righteous elder son and the loving embrace of the forgiving father have inspired many artists and writers.

Despite the power of the parable images, its exegesis is beset with problems.¹ The pious Jews of Jesus' time were complacent as to who was to be regarded as "the lost". In the Jewish culture, the term "lost" indicated something to *search for*. Jesus indeed came to look for the 'lost'.² He was criticised for mixing

¹ B. B. SCOTT, *Hear Then the Parable: A Commentary on the Parables of Jesus*, 100.

² J. GUERIN, *The Gospel of Luke*, 34.

with the ‘lost’, outcasts of his society. However, Jesus revealed the loving face of the father. This became a challenge to all fathers of all times.

Some readers have challenged the authenticity of the scene with the elder son or the realistic depiction of the legal situation. Perhaps even more ironic, readers of Luke’s Gospel have identified with younger son while insisting with Luke that an audience of Scribes and Pharisees would have identified with the elder son.³

It is in this parable of the prodigal son that values of Jewish culture are challenged to the core. Can this parable today challenge our established values? The answer to this question can be understood if these two questions are considered: the first — when Luke the evangelist wrote the parable what was his point? The second — What was Jesus’ view in teaching this parable?

Researches show that this section is one of the most studied parts of the Gospels. Many people have studied it from different angles and thus called it according to their intended purposes. The story has received exceptional praise and attention. F. Sommer, for example, called it “*the greatest short story ever told*”, and J.E. Compton calls it “*the greatest of all Jesus’ parables*”. The traditional title “*The prodigal son*”, dates back to the patristic period, but more recent discussions question its aptness. German Bibles and scholars name it “*the lost son*”.⁴ Jeremias calls it “*the parable of the father’s love*”.⁵ Schweizer named it the parable of the “*powerless almighty Father*”. Some writers have even called it the parable of “*the prodigal father*”. The African Bible entitles it as “*The merciful father*”.⁶ The titles

³ J. GUERIN, *The Gospel of Luke*, 25.

⁴ J.R. DONAHUE, *The Gospel in Parables*, 45.

⁵ J. JEREMIAS, *The Parables of Jesus*, 12.

⁶ The African Bible, 1760.

might differ but the decisive point of the parable is that Jesus vindicates the proclamation of the Good News to the despised and outcast. Throughout our study, we maintain the traditional title — “*The prodigal son*” —, although the research focuses on the icon of the father.

In our investigation we follow the exegetical and descriptive method. Our study is divided in three chapters. In the first chapter we will discuss the historical and literally context of the parable of the prodigal son. This will allow us to examine the use and the characteristics of Jesus’ parables. We will also look at the religious context of our parable in order to understand better its message.

The second chapter will analyse the message of the parable, with a special attention to the image of the father. A special attention will be given to the main characters of the story, the father, the younger son and the elder son.

In the third chapter of this study, we will investigate the ways in which the message of the parable can be implemented in our society and the Church.

Chapter I

The Lucan Parable of the Prodigal Son in Its Historical Context

1. Introduction

Jesus used different ways of preaching the Word of God, and the most famous one was *parables*. The aim of this chapter is to explain what a parable is. The context in which the parable of the “prodigal son” as appears in Luke will also be discussed. A particular attention will be given to the study of its structure and pattern. The religious background of the parable will be examined in order to help the reader understand better the meaning of the parable. However, the guiding question to bear in mind while studying the parable is: “who is my father?”

2. What is a Parable?

Greek word for “parable” was used by the LXX to render the Hebrew noun *mashal*, a derivative of the verb meaning “to be like”. In Hebrew literature a *mashal* could mean almost any kind of verbal image: proverbs, taunt, riddle, simile, metaphor, oracle, illustrative narrative, example story, allegory. However, none of the two words, *parabole* in Greek and *mashal* in Hebrew, gives a specific literary genre.⁷

⁷ B.B. SCOTT, *Hear Then the Parables: a Commentary on the Parables of Jesus*, 89.

In the New Testament the word parable is often used in a vague and general sense as mentioned above. Scholars distinguish many different categories like parable in the strict sense, similitude, exemplary story and allegory. From this entire work one asks this question: what is a parable then? C.H. Dodd gives, it seems, the most accurate definition:

A parable is a metaphor or simile drawn from nature or common life, arresting the hearer by its vividness or strangeness, and leaving the mind in sufficient doubt about its precise application to tease it into active thought.⁸

Parables usually have one special message that is hidden in their figurative part. An interpreter needs to discover it because not every point or detail is translatable into the religious and saving reality like it is in allegory. In allegory each point has an inner meaning and refers to something outside it.⁹ Though the parables in the first decade of the life of Jesus were often treated as allegories, what is important is to bear in mind that parables have that characteristic of having one main core point and the other details are there in order to clarify the intended point.

3. Characteristics of Jesus' Parables

Jesus addressed his parables to men and women of his time. Jesus' aim was to reach the hearts of the people. His parables were so straight to the point that he drew the attention of the hearers. They were provocative and his listener felt challenged on many occasions. Jesus' parables aroused reflection and enquiry of his listeners.¹⁰

The parables of Jesus had images drawn from ordinary life of his people of Palestine. To discover their original meaning it is important to know why Jesus

⁸ C.H. DODD, *The parable of the Kingdom*, 16.

⁹ J. JEREMIAS, *Rediscovering the Parables*, 10.

¹⁰ J. LAMBRECHT, *Once More Astonished. The Parables of Jesus*, 2.

taught this or that parable to a particular people of that time and what was the reaction of his listeners. Jesus' parables are something totally new. In all rabbinical literature not one single parable has come down to us from the period before Jesus; only two similes from Rabbi Hillel (c.20 B.C).¹¹ Jesus' parables contain a very profound truth. Their fundamental message is that things are not as they seem at the surface level. Their language interrupts our normal way of viewing things and presents the extraordinary within the ordinary.¹²

Parables are open-ended invitations waiting for response. The parable is not effective until it is freely personalised.¹³ Jesus uses a compelling image that draws his critics to his own reality, in a way that his listeners have possibility to accept Jesus' vision. The parables break off abruptly, and the issue is still open.¹⁴ They announce the coming of the Kingdom of God.

Each parable has its historical setting that has to be discovered. They explain with simplicity and clarity the message of the Good News. The parable of the prodigal son is not primarily proclamation of the Good News, but a vindication of the good news in reply to its critics.

4. Parables in Luke

Luke is a genius in story telling. This is very evident in his parables and the way he moulds the material as to suite his purpose. Sometimes it is possible to discern the origin of the stories in other Gospels or elsewhere, but he forms the material so thoroughly that it is even no longer possible to decide on their origin and

¹¹ J. JEREMIAS, *Rediscovering the Parables*, 10.

¹² R.E. BROWN, *The Parables of Jesus*, 6.

¹³ R.E. BROWN, *The Parables of Jesus*, 137.

¹⁴ P. VONK, "Understanding 42 Gospel Parables", 111.

how many of them he received from oral tradition, from Jesus or via Jesus.¹⁵ Their atmosphere and tone differ from those of Mark and Matthew. Luke invites us to become participants in his parables. Very often his parables serve as shocking examples of the behaviour that is to characterise the followers of Jesus.

Luke employs a range of usage that begins to correspond to that of *mashal*. He diverges from the other Synoptics in having no long parable chapter. Luke moves beyond Matthew and Mark by developing his own format for presenting parables.¹⁶

5. Context of the Parable of the Prodigal Son

5.1 Literaly Context

The story of the prodigal son is probably one of the most loved and most often told stories of Jesus. It is found in chapter 15 of Luke, the third parable on the theme of the lost/found/joy, after the parables of the lost sheep and the lost drachma. All the three stories are told in the context of Jesus sitting around with tax collectors and sinners, all of them eager to hear what he has to say. The scribes and Pharisees, however, are frowning and muttering: “this man welcomes sinners and eats with them” (Luke 15:12). Jesus reacts to their behaviour by telling them these stories. They are directed at the “accepted” ones of the religion and society:¹⁷ Scribes, Pharisees, ministers, good religious people.

5.2 Jewish Religious Background

The parable is set in a religious context whereby “the Law” is very important, even more important than a person. There are two religious groups of

¹⁵ H. WANSBROUGH, *The Lion and The Bull: The Gospel of Mark and Luke*, 166.

¹⁶ B.B. SCOTT, *Hear Then the Parables: Commentary on the Parables of Jesus*, 114.

¹⁷ J. GUERIN, *The Gospel of Luke*, 45.

people: good, religious, Jewish people who know the Law, follow the Law. These were scribes and Pharisees. Their basic principle was that “*a man must have nothing to do with sinners*”.¹⁸ The second group is that of sinners, those who are “unclean” in the eyes of the Law.¹⁹ These were prostitutes, tax-collectors, people who publicly sinned, those who sold their inheritance, pigs keepers, shepherds, those who raised pigeons, those who left the covenant²⁰ and more. In this case the younger son automatically falls into the group of public sinners.

The people to whom the story is told are the scribes and Pharisees. No wonder the elder son refuses to take part in the feast — he represents those good religious people who were scandalised by Jesus behaviour. The image of the father is again a challenge: he seems to go against the law, he seems to be so passive and a man of no reason.²¹

6. Structure and Pattern of the Parable

One surely is struck by this peculiar dilemma which one reads between the lines in the monologue of the prodigal son, “I shall get up and go to my father and I shall say to him...” (Luke 15: 18).

It appears that the concept of the “father” has both the vertical and horizontal meaning. In verse 20, the “father” is someone who loves unconditionally, in whatever situation the son or daughter is. Views of many commentators are different, but the image of the father subverts the reality and feelings of hearers.²²

¹⁸ J. GUERIN, *The Gospel of Luke*, 23.

¹⁹ C.M. MARTIN, *Ritorno al Padre*, 7.

²⁰ M.I. AGUILAR, *Social and Religious Outcasts in Africa*, 69.

²¹ J. LAMBRECHT, *The Parables: the Arrow of God*, 35.

²² J. GUERIN, *The Book of Isaiah*, 20.

The first part of the parable is narrated in the third person. This blocks the audience's immediate identification with the man. The pattern of lost/ found/rejoice appears in the narrative. The banquet is no longer implied but real: the father kills the fat calf and throws the party (Luke 15:22-23).

The second part of the parable introduces an opponent to the father's plan. The elder brother murmurs against the father's feast exactly as the scribes and Pharisees do against Jesus' feasts with sinners.

Hearers of the parable are invited to notice the similarities and contrasts between the two sons and their relationship with their father.²³

7. Conclusion

Parables communicate the truth vividly and memorably. Jesus must have been a true master in telling parables. The historical documents from the time of Jesus that are at our disposal do not offer us anything that would match the beauty of the parables we find in the gospels. One of the most beautiful and most loved is the parable of the prodigal son. In Luke's mind, this parable is not primarily a proclamation of good news, but a vindication of the good news in reply to its critics. The parable is addressed to the religious people for whom the Law is very important; sometimes even more important than a person. The parable falls into the category of those on the theme of lost/found/joy.

²³ J. JEREMIAS, *Rediscovering the Parables*, 131.

Chapter II

Analysis and Message of the Parable

1. Introduction

In the second chapter we will analyse the message of the parable with special attention to the image of the father. The Jewish family setting will be given a particular attention in order to understand better the message of the parable. The three important characters of the parable will be analysed in some detail.

The second part of this chapter will concentrate on the theological message of the parable. It will be done with the help of the famous Rembrandt's picture representing the encounter between the father and the prodigal son.

2. Jewish Family Context and Its Influence on the Parable

In a peasant society the family rotates around the father. A peasant's economic goal is to maintain the family, not to build a surplus for investment. The father represents the family, and the family's maintenance is his chief concern. Peasant families favour socialisation techniques that make the child depend on the family in order to maintain it.²⁴

²⁴ J. GUERIN, *The Gospel of Luke*, 34.

According to the rules of inheritance in the Jewish culture, a double portion of the father's estate would normally go to the elder son, therefore the younger would receive one third, that would be the share of the property that would be his eventual inheritance. The father in the parable, however, was not obliged to divide his property among the two sons, but he did so.²⁵

Many observe the multiple meaning of the Greek word for what the father gives "*bios*", that is, "means of subsistence", "property," "manner of life conduct" or literary, "life". Some commentators have discerned in the younger son's demand a wish for his father's death.²⁶ What exactly the father gives to the younger son is not so clear because there were many regulations as regards inheritance. What is sure is that the son leaves with his portion. It seems that the son takes "everything" coming to him and turns it into cash, which then he squanders.

3. Analysis of the Main Characters in Luke 15:11-32

3.1 The Younger Son

Luke 15:12 "... *father, give me the share of your estate... that respects me...* "

According to the Jewish Custom it was a normal thing for the son to ask for his share, especially when seeking a job somewhere else.²⁷ On the other hand the young's son request for his share of the property, especially the right of disposition effectively announces his father's death. The father, by giving in exposes his own and his family's honour and shows himself to be 'foolish'.

²⁵ B. B. SCOTT, *Hear Then the Parables*, 110.

²⁶ J. JEREMIAS, *The Parables of Jesus*, 35.

²⁷ B.B. SCOTT, *Hear Then the Parable*, 112.

Luke 15: 13 “...*the younger son collected all his belongings and set off to a distant country...*”

“Gathering together” and “departing” complete the son’s relation to his father. The hearers expect him to make good. By taking the property with him he has refused to maintain his father out of his property.²⁸ The younger son demands not only the right of possession, but also the right of disposal; he wants a settlement since he proposes to lead an independent life. He is evidently unmarried, which allows us to conclude about his age. The normal marriageable age for men was eighteen to twenty.²⁹

Luke 14:16 “...*when he had freely spent everything ... He hired himself out to one of the local citizens...*”

Moving away from the father leads the son into a precarious situation. Not only is he joined to a foreigner but he is also reduced to feeding pigs. The abhorrence of such an activity for Jews is well known, for it was a forbidden occupation: “No one may rear swine anywhere and cursed be the man who would breed swine. ... Be cursed the man who would teach his son Grecian wisdom.” Wanting to eat the pig’s food makes him to behave like an animal, so that he abandons even his human dignity. He is without money and food, in a foreign land, without family, tribe, or even dignity.

Luke 15: 17 “...*coming to his senses...*”

This means that he finally realises his terrible situation and plans to go home to regain his father’s favour. He can no longer be a son, because he forfeited the

²⁸ M.I. AGUILAR, *Social and Religious Outcasts in Africa*, 37.

²⁹ J. UPTON. *Time for Embracing*, 67.

rights. His sin is twofold: by attaching himself to a foreigner and feeding pigs he has abrogated Judaism.³⁰ The loss of his inheritance is a sin against his father, for he will be unable to carry out his familial responsibility to take care of the old man. Therefore he will earn his bread as a hired hand.³¹ This coming to his senses and rising up suggest a fundamental change in his life's direction — *metanoia*.

Luke 15:18 “...*I shall get up and go to my father...father, I have sinned against heaven and you... ”*

The son's change of heart begins in a somewhat self-serving manner with fear of death and hope for a better situation, but finds its expression in the confession “*father, I have sinned against heaven and before you*” (Luke 15.18). This shows that the son is aware of the depth of his sin. Awareness of sin and accepting personal responsibility for it is the beginning of his return. The son knows that he has lost everything and is no longer worthy to be called son, but should be treated as a servant (Luke 15:19). He makes a decision and leaves for home, “*I shall get up and go to my father*”.³²

3.2 *The Father*

It is important to examine the discourse of the father in the parable in order to answer the question: who is my father? It is evident that Luke organises his material in a way that the message is clear. Close examination of the discourse of the father will help to understand the meaning of the parable and the younger son's motivation to return back home.

³⁰ J. GUERIN, *The Gospel of Luke*, 46.

³¹ Luke 15:19

³² J. UPTON, *A time for Embracing*, 44.

Luke 15.12 “... *father give me the share of your estate that should come to me... so the father divided the property between them...*”

Since the father has property, he is obviously a man of some wealth, although of how much does not become evident until later. The younger son's request is clear, but whether this conforms to normal Jewish family practice is debated. The legal distinction between the right of possession and the right of disposition are important.³³ The younger son apparently requests and receives both. J. Jeremias assumes that the two go together and that the situation depicted is common.³⁴ It is very evident that the son cashed all what he got from the father. In Palestine, a place of little opportunity, younger sons would cash in their inheritance and go out to make their fortunes.³⁵

Luke 15.20 “... *He ran to him, embraced him and kissed him and was filled with compassion...*”

The fact that hired servants had abundance is not merely a sign of prosperous household, but also of the kind of treatment of the hired servants, going beyond what was customary. The fact that the life of hired servants in his father's house appears above all else good and to be desired, speaks convincingly for the all embracing kindness of his father. There springs from the heart of the father as it were a sea of tenderness. He sees him from afar – what a ray of light this shades in the heart of the silent father. He has been gazing into the distance and has nourished the hope of the return of the lost one.

³³ B.B. SCOTT, *Hear Then the Parables: a Commentary on the Parables of Jesus*, 109.

³⁴ J. JEREMIAS, *Parables of Jesus*, 129.

³⁵ B.B. SCOTT, *Hear Then the Parables: a Commentary on the Parables of Jesus*, 109.

At the return of the son, the father doesn't ask him why; he doesn't need explanation. In fact he kisses him, which is a sign of forgiveness. He makes the first step. The father embraces him to a point of covering his "nakedness" with his rich and perfumed garments. He is the father of charity. He is covering the weakness of his son. He did not wait passively for his return. This reveals that important dimension of the father: parent, who gives directions, transmits values and gives orders.

Luke 15:22 *"... bring the finest robe and put it on him, ... put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet..."*

The response of the father shows that he will not follow legal or paternal roles: he will play the nourishing role. The father gives specific and significant orders to be followed: *"bring the finest robe (Luke 15:22)."* When the king wished to honour a deserving official, he presented him with a costly robe. Investiture with new garments was therefore a symbol of a particular honour and relationship. The father of the parable treats his son as a guest of honour.

"put a ring on his finger (Luke 15:22)." This must have been as a signet ring³⁶ that signified the bestowal of authority. So the son can now act with the father's authority.

"put sandals on his feet (Luke 15:22)." Sandals (shoes) are luxury, worn by free men; here they mean that the son must no longer go about barefoot like a slave. The father doesn't allow his son to reduce himself to the level of hired servant.

³⁶ 1 Macc 6:15.

“*take the fattened calf and slaughter it... then let us celebrate with a feast...* ”
(Luke 15: 23).

The killing of the fattened calf and the celebration indicate a feast. As a rule meat was only rarely eaten. A fattened calf was prepared for special occasions. Its killing meant a feast for the family and the servants.

The two sets of symbols, the new garment and the banquet, are not contrasting but woven together into the full theme of restoration. Orders given by the father are the clear tokens of forgiveness and reinstatement evident to all.

Luke 15:31 “*my son, you are here with me always; everything I have is yours...* ”

The father’s response to the elder son expresses profound pain because he understands the distance between his two sons is enormous. The father, certain of the adequacy of his providing, sees no reason for getting angry.

The father responds with the simple word, “*son*” and states that “... *all that is mine is yours...*” He treats the elder son as equal in authority and dignity and counters angry and divisive language with images of reconciliation and unity. The father is treating the elder son as a “friend” with whom everything is held in common.³⁷ This verse unfolds the father’s view of his elder son. Where the son sees himself as a faithful slave, the father views him as a *companion*³⁸ and *co-owner* of the farm.³⁹ The father’s response goes beyond a simple legal affirmation that the elder son is the one true heir and he addresses him affectionately, “... *my son...*”. The elder son fails to recognise that the father is always on his side and he needs not

³⁷ L. T. JOHNSON, *The Gospel of Luke*, The Liturgical Press 1991.

³⁸ “You are always with me...” .v.31.

³⁹ The fact that the father asserts that the elder son has everything affirms his right of possession but not yet his right of disposition.

to earn his father's approval. He has made himself a slave for something that was already his. The relationship with the father worked out in terms of servility leads to destruction. The relationship as redefined by the father leads to life and joy.

Luke 15:32 *"we must celebrate and rejoice... your brother was dead and has come to life again; he was lost and has been found..."*

Making merry, celebrating, and rejoicing may be Luke's way of directing interest to that part of the parable where he sees the emphasis but the ending is not opposed to the originating parabolic structure, since it affirms this maternal, nourishing aspect of the father.

The dialogue with the elder son ends in an opened-ended manner, leaving his son to decide. The invitation to intimacy is still there. To refuse to associate with brothers and sisters who have sinned is to put oneself outside. The Pharisees and scribes know that and hear it clearly. The father has a long-range vision of what can be and waits attentively and moves quickly so that others cannot do harm to those who return for whatever reasons. In fact, the father acts at the opportune time and passionately. He makes sure that everyone gets involved in the celebration even those who had been in the family with him all the time. It is hard to deal with the people who are with us all the time, who think that they are not at all bad, that the problem is with others, never themselves, and never us. In the end one son comes in, but we don't know about the other. Will he come in?

3.3 *The Elder Son*

Luke 15: 29 “...*Look, all these years I served you and not once did I disobey your orders...*”

The response of the elder son verifies that the younger son received the right of both possession and disposition while the elder son has only the right of possession.⁴⁰ He sees himself completely dependent on the father. An important aspect of the son’s complaint is that the father has failed to live up to the demands of being a just father in his cultural context.

The elder son does not address his father with respect but immediately blurts out his complaints: he has served for years and never disobeyed his command, never gave him a kid that he might make merry with his friends (Luke 15: 30).

His self-understanding is also that of a slave, literally, “he has slaved” for many years and apparently never even asked for a kid to celebrate. Just as the younger son felt that to restore the severed relationship was to become a servant, the older brother maintained it by acting as a servant. Between the dutiful son and the prodigal one is a bond much deeper than is visible on the surface. The younger has brought shame on the family by destroying the family life. This is the great insult. There is a deep contrast between the elder son’s view and the father’s. For the elder son, his brother is a *profiteer* who is depraved, while he is a *slave* to the father and *faithful*. From the father’s viewpoint the younger son was lost and now is found.⁴¹ They both interpret the facts in a different way.

⁴⁰ B.B. SCOTT, *Hear Then the Parables*, 120.

⁴¹ B. B. SCOTT, *Hear Then the Parables*, 121.

Luke 15: 30 "... *When your son returns who swallowed up your property... for him you slaughter the fattened calf...* "

Throughout the interchange between the father and the elder son there is an element of defiance and scorn on the part of the latter, "...*your so...*". He never refers to "my brother" but to "your son". The self-righteous destroys the family bonds as effectively as the squandering of the inheritance by his brother. From the father's view point where the son sees himself as a faithful slave, the father views him as a *companion* and *co-owner* of the farm.⁴²

4. Theological Message of the Parable

After examining the parable from different angles, one is taken up by a curious question: why did the son, knowing his situation, decide to go back to his father? He was in a desperate situation — miserable, hungry and without dignity. Is it because of this situation that he decides, "*I will rise and go to my father...?*" After reflection and discernment he finds a solution, *metanoia*: going back to the origin. The origin is in his father's house. The decision of the son goes beyond all religious, social and financial motivations. He is motivated by more profound reasons. He is re-discovering his father. His meeting with the father only deepens his experience of his fatherhood. He discovers in his father four very important dimensions: his father, his brother, his friend and his mother.

4.1 The Father Is My Father

The son, after reflecting, decides to go back to his father (Luke 15:17), because where he is, there is no life. To go back to his father is to go back to the light; this is also to go back to life. The father is associated with the power for

⁴² B. B. SCOTT, *Hear Then the parables*, 23.

procreation — life giving. In this case the son wants to go back to life, he has decided to live and not to die. he has a deep desire for life. Going back to the father means that he sees in his father the source of life, origin of human existence. The father is the one to give discipline in the family, the one who gives and transmits the values; he is the pedagogue to the son.⁴³ In the development of the child, there is need to have a father because he is the role model in the family, he protects and guides the life of the children. Otherwise, if the children are left to themselves, they run a risk of going astray. The presence of the father is life giving in more than one way.

4.2 The Father Is My Brother

The son discovers that his father is also brother, someone with whom he can share some of the intimacies at brotherhood level. The son then, is going back to his father who is also his brother.⁴⁴ This dimension does not cancel the parental/son relationship. The father continues to be the father but with this particular characteristic, which urges the son to go back home and share his problems with him, the problems that can only be shared among brothers, with the guarantee that he will be understood as a brother. Apparently the father ceases to be his father, therefore, the son is now at ease and comfortable because there is a strong bond that draws them together. He and his father are now, just as between two brothers. The level of embarrassment for sharing intimacies is becoming lower and lowers. The

⁴³ H. J. M. NOUWEN, *The Return of the Prodigal Son*, 152.

⁴⁴ H. J. M. NOUWEN, *The Return of the Prodigal Son*, 150.

fear of the father is no longer there,⁴⁵ they both share the brotherhood, with equality of dignity.

4.3 *The Father Is My Friend*

The relationship between the son and father is enriched by another dimension. The father is also his son's friend. The Father keeps his identity as a father, but the way of relating changes.

In Greek, *Philos* — friend,⁴⁶ is not only someone with whom you are familiar, but someone very close to you, one who shares in the intimacy with you, someone you love very much and who loves you too.⁴⁷ A friend is someone you trust, one with whom you are very free and you are able to share all what is in you without fear of being betrayed, judged or punished. Indeed, a friend is someone who understands you, challenges you smoothly, and blasts you with love.

In fact, as the younger son reaches home, the father acts as a true friend and he prepares a beautiful surprise. The son has been expecting to be received as a servant, but the father has raised him up, and treated him not only as a son or brother, but also as a true friend — with compassion, love, forgiveness and understanding (Luke 15:19-20).

4.4 *My Father Is My Mother*

The parable of the prodigal son is very rich and it is inexhaustible in its applications. In the parable itself there is no mention of mother, or any other feminine name. This is very clear in the context of the mentality and culture of the Jews of that time. Women were not considered important components in, for and of

⁴⁵ M. I. ANGULAR in his book *Social and religious outcasts in Africa* says that "the prodigal sons of today can't go back home because they are afraid of the wrath of their parents.

⁴⁶ H.J.M. NOUWEN, *The Return of the Prodigal Son*, 151.

society. But examining closely the parable, there are some attitudes typical of women. In the parable the mother is apparently inexistent, but she is there to “give birth” to the son because he has to come back to life again. The maternity of God is delicately described in the image given in the Scriptures. God gives birth to a new child in the Spirit, labouring ceaselessly in creation until she can look on the face of her child.⁴⁸

5. Illustration

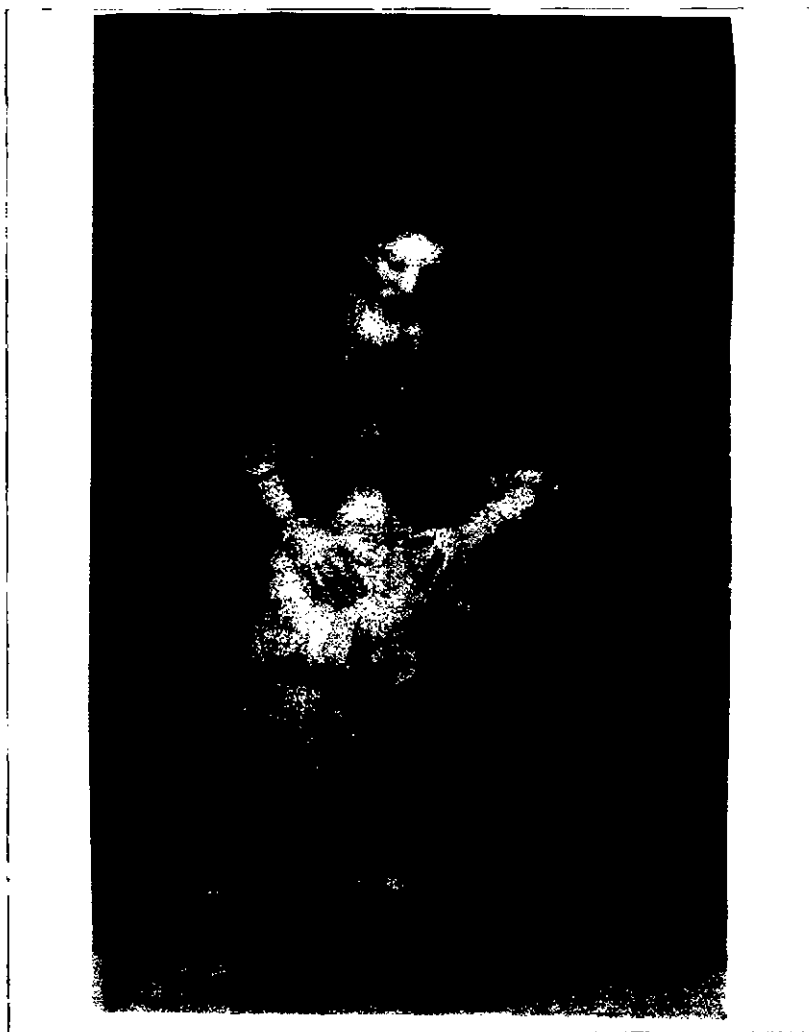


FIG. 1 The return of the prodigal son by Rembrandt

⁴⁷ H.J..M. NOUWEN, *The Return of the Prodigal Son*, 152

Amazing grace how sweet the sound
That saved a wretch like me,
I once was lost but now I am found
... and grace will lead me home. (John Newton 1725 – 1807)

The central figures of the painting and the son, form a glowing focus. The picture resembles a burning candle, held aloft to attract someone's attention to a mysterious drama of encounter. The colours arouse in one the feelings that God paints and creates a person on the great canvas of life. He lovingly mixes our colours and applies brush strokes now with great delicacy and then again with exuberance as we emerge from the darkness of indecision and fear into the light of love and acceptance.

In fact, gestures and physical features given in the picture are just a keynote to understanding the image of God, the father in the parable.

5.1 The Younger Son in the Painting

The younger son is in an attitude of complete peace and rest on the bosom of his father, like a ship in harbour after a severe storm or a sleeping child at its mother's breast. The son's garments are tattered and torn like the sails of a ship that has battled with ocean winds and currents. His sackcloth lies in deep and dark folds around his legs as darkness still clings to his being, which is only just unfolding in light. The young man's head is shaven. His flesh is bruised. His sandals are totally broken.⁴⁹ The son is aware of the presence of his father.

⁴⁸ H.J.M. NOUWEN, *The Return of the Prodigal Son*, 153.

⁴⁹ M.LAWLER, *The Return of the Prodigal Son*, 18.

5.2 *The Father in the Painting*

When we focus our attention on the paternal figure, bearing in mind the words of the father in parable of the prodigal son, we are brought to a deeper understanding of the figure of the father.

- **An Old Man**

The artist's own preoccupation with old age and its wisdom, born of experience and suffering has caused him to portray the father as an elderly man whose eyes are damp with sadness. His face is furrowed by years of searching for the son who is beloved of his heart and the joy of his declining years. We are in front of the parent-God who embodies all the qualities of tenderness and strength that we associate with those who have given us life and cared for us.⁵⁰

According to the painter's interpretation this old man is the figure of the Israelite patriarch. In ancient Israel, patriarchs were the people who followed God, who gradually revealed himself to them, in wisdom and compassion as well as in might and justice.⁵¹

- **Rich Clothes**

The richness of the old man's dress and his velvet yarmulke denote the richness of the grace, which he dispenses together the material richness in the welcome he extended to the younger son. On the contrary, the younger son's dressing — sackcloth of subjugation represents all the misery of our world.⁵²

- **The Old Man's Hands**

They lie on the shoulders of the son like the light yoke. The hands that draw him close are not a pair. According to the artist's explanation they represent all that

⁵⁰ M. LAWLER, *The Return of the Prodigal Son*, 12.

⁵¹ M. LAWLER, *The Return of the Prodigal Son*, 12.

can be uttered about human existence and, at the same time, they communicate profound depths about the truth of our God.⁵³ The hands are both male and female. The right hand is masculine, and the hand of a labourer, perhaps the hand of God who created all and holds all things together. The left hand is feminine, representing the mothering and nurturing of God, who brings us to birth and touches our hearts with tenderness⁵⁴.

- ***The Heart***

The attitude/position of the son gives a very touching description of the heart of the father in the embracing action (Luke 15:20). This is perhaps the most profound meaning of the parable of the prodigal son. At the centre of the father/son group there is a heart shape indeed. It is formed by the head of the son in the hollow of his father's breast; it is almost impossible to tell where one living figure ends and the other begins.⁵⁵ Nicely, the artist explains further that the chiaroscuro of the space blurs the edges between humanity and divinity so that we do not know, except in our own hearts, where either begins or ends, or indeed where, ourselves, begin or end, except in God.⁵⁶

- ***Gentle, Bending Gesture of Love***

In this action the father welcomes his son back home. It is the image of the father who always takes the first initiative, who stoops to us, gently beckoning and holding the son.

⁵² M. LAWLER, *The Return of the Prodigal Son*, 4.

⁵³ See Fig. 1, 25.

⁵⁴ M. LAWLER, *The Return of the Prodigal Son*, 22.

⁵⁵ M. LAWLER, *The Return of the Prodigal Son*, 20.

⁵⁶ See Fig. 1, 25.

5.3 *The Mother in the Painting*

Luke 15:20 gives a very nice description of the encounter between the son and the father: “*the father caught sight of him, and ...he ran to him... embraced him...*” Rembrandt describes this encounter by saying that the son is an attitude of complete peace and rest on the bosom of the father as a baby sleeps at its mother’s breast. Furthermore, the two figures form one shaft of glowing light. The centre of the father/son group ... formed by the head of the son in the hollow of his father breast, where it is almost impossible to tell where one living figure ends and the other begins.⁵⁷ The bond is so strong. No one can break this bond sealed by this “left hand” with its tenderness and care while still in the womb. In fact, the left hand on Rembradt’s painting is the female hand. It represents the mothering and nurturing of God, who brings us to birth and touches our hearts with love and tenderness.⁵⁸ The long period of waiting for the returning of the son in pain and joy, in hope and trepidation, in love and expectations, and with emotions is just like the nine months world of paradox for the waiting mother to give to light the son, the waited for. The moment of encounter is it not the great joy of labour pains for the life giver, the mother? For the mother what matters is to embrace a new — born baby and she forgets all the pains, so is the father is the parable. The son is pushed to go back home because of this natural divine bond. He is going back to the mother. It’s visceral love. The bond is so strong; a bond that goes beyond all human telling. Only then the son can really say, “*yes, I rise and go to my mother, mum*”. Where else can a person experience this high dimension of existence, if not from total trust in God our Mother? It is an over wrapping love that wraps in the garments of love, mercy

⁵⁷ M. LAWLER, *The Return of the Prodigal Son*, 17.

⁵⁸ Cf. M. LAWLER, *The Return of the Prodigal Son*, 18.

and care, just like an African woman over wraps her baby at the back in tenderness and strength. This is my father, therefore, *"I rise and go back to him* (Luke 15:18).

6. Conclusion

"Who is my father?" Luke in writing this parable had a specific purpose, which is to be found in the father's surprising action toward both sons. He wrote to non-Jews, addressing the "good religious people" of his country. He employed images that could help his hearers to discover by themselves who their true father is and what he wants. The parable unveils the true face of God. He is the father of everyone and rejoices when the "lost" is "found" because salvation is for all. The major theme emerging from this parable challenges the hearers not only to overturn their established conclusion but also to make a choice: either you stand on the side of Jesus or you remain in a world of selfishness and self-righteousness.

Chapter III

Parable of the Prodigal Son in The Context of the Catholic Church Today

1. Introduction

The study of the parable of the prodigal son in our context cannot be complete without an application of the fruits of our study to the current situation of the contemporary world. The chapter will show how this parable challenges some trends found in our contemporary society. We will also discuss the ways this parable may find its adaptation in the Catholic Church, especially in its approach to different kinds of “prodigal sons” in our society.

2. The Catholic Church as the Family of God

The Catholic Church is seen to be a people brought into unity of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. The mystery of this holy Church is already brought to light in the way it was founded. The Lord Jesus inaugurated his Church by preaching the Good News: “*the time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand*”.⁵⁹

⁵⁹ Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*, 1.5.

The fathers of the African Synod presented the Church as God's family and the guiding star for evangelisation in Africa⁶⁰. These images express very well what the Church really is for they emphasise its essential horizontal and vertical dimensions, its divine origin and its incarnation in the heart of humanity.

The teaching of the Second Vatican Council shows how this image of the Church as family⁶¹ needs to be completed with other biblical images: *Our Mother*, *the house in which God dwells* and *the holy city*⁶².

The Church has a divine origin and yet its manifestation branches into various realities: social, cultural, religious, and political. It is a universal family. The African Synod fathers express their experience of the Church as a family in these words: "a profound experience... of being Church, the great and diverse family of God gathered from all over our vast..."⁶³ world. This is our Catholic Church and, though imperfect, lives and manifests the father's love. The Church ceaselessly and efficaciously seeks the return of all humanity and all its good under God. Living Christian communities are the building stones of the Church as a family. In this family every one has his own role, and all enjoy that freedom of being sons and daughters of God. Therefore, the Church can be described as a mini society on its way to the Father's house. It is the duty of the Church, "Our mother" and the "House where God dwells", to make sure that everyone unconditionally join this pilgrimage.

⁶⁰ *African Synod Comes Home*, 20.

⁶¹ JOHN PAUL II says the family, as the domestic church, is a mixture of divine and human architecture, the family needs this mixture to live, to preserve itself and to meet God in the home.

⁶² *African Synod Comes Home*, 24.

⁶³ *African Synod Comes Home*, 20.

The Church as “Our Mother” cares and shows tenderness for the children, she has been entrusted with, in many different ways. Through the sacraments the members of the pilgrim Church, are called singularly and all together to the “great celebrations” in the father’s house. Everybody is invited regardless of social status, religion, colour, race, health, and political ideology.

3. Sacraments: Sign and Instrument of Communion with God and of Unity Among All People

Sacraments are very essential for the life of the Church and at the same time they are a challenge. The Church is holy, thanks to the bond established by the economy of salvation⁶⁴ and expressed in the sacraments. She makes herself responsible for the sins of her children by virtue of solidarity that is among them through time and space because of their incorporation into the trinitarian economy. This concept is well and effectively expressed in the idea of “Mother Church”. As in the African domestic family, in matrilineal marriage, the mother is its uniting bond, so should be the Church in its pilgrimage⁶⁵. The Church as family is sustained by the sacraments and is challenged by sacraments in time and space.

3.1 The Sacrament of Reconciliation: Sign and Instrument of the Father’s Forgiveness

The Church, embracing the sinners in her bosom, is at the same time holy and always in need of purification. That is why, she incessantly pursues the path of penance and renewal. The Church is invited to become more fully conscious of the sinfulness of her children. She should acknowledge the sinful sons and daughters as her own. The Church should encourage them to purify themselves, through repentance, of instances of infidelity, inconsistency, slowness to act, segregation,

⁶⁴ M.I. ANGULAR, *Social and Religious Outcast in Africa*, 56.

negligence, lack of respect and intolerance for cultural differences, superiority complex, and hard judgements of the “recognised sinners”.⁶⁶

The Church is called to have the heart of the father and his daughters and sons are invited to have the feelings of the prodigal son, always seeking the return to the origin (*metanoia*). To ask forgiveness has always been hard. To accept one’s sinfulness is an amazing grace and to realise that God our Father is greater than our conscience is a divine gift. Conversion that should take place in the Sacrament of Confession is not once for all change, but rather it becomes a way of life in which one is continually called to re-examine his or her life and renew one’s commitment to the Gospel.⁶⁷

We know that everyone is a sinner but there are two groups of sinners: public and private sinners. Everyone falls from the grace, but, unfortunately, in our society the sinner is identified only when an act of sinning comes to the light, and a lot of people, even religious, or church people act as though they don’t sin. It seems as if another eleventh commandment were added: “thou shall not be caught”. “Make sure you do what you want or you can, but never come to the open”. Those who are caught are considered sinners. They are heavily punished and at times get no chance to regain their reputation, as if the society registered them in the waiting list for Hell. Nothing can be done for them. There is no time for them. They must go for confession, not to enjoy the mercy of the Father but to prove their sinfulness.

⁶⁵ M.I. ANGULAR, *Social and Religious Outcast in Africa*, 35.

⁶⁶ M. I. AGUILAR, *Social and Religious Outcast in Africa*, 34.

⁶⁷ A. GASPARINO, *Il sacramento del perdon*, 24

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⁶⁵ M.I. ANGULAR, *Social and Religious Outcast in Africa*, 35.

⁶⁶ M. I. AGUILAR, *Social and Religious Outcast in Africa*, 34.

⁶⁷ A. GASPARINO, *Il sacramento del perdono*, 24

Today in our mini society we have many examples of outcasts, the most recent ones are HIV/Aids patients. How does society look at them? They are considered scandalous sinners of today, condemned by the self-righteous. In this way the drama between the prodigal son and his self-righteous brother unfolds again in our society.

The father in the parable embraces his son, and so the Church is called to embrace his sons and daughters regardless of their situation. Only by doing this there will be joy and peace in the House where God dwells and every-body will enjoy the freedom of being son and daughter of God right away here on earth. Then a fallen Christian will say, "*Yes, I will rise and go to my father...*" (Luke 15:20).

3.2 The Sacrament of the Eucharist: Sign and Instrument of Communion

Eucharist is the source and summit of Christian life. By the Eucharistic celebration we already unite ourselves with the heavenly liturgy and anticipate eternal life, when God will be all in all.⁶⁸

The word Eucharist itself expresses the richness of this Sacrament, it is an action of thanksgiving to God and recalls the Jewish blessings that proclaim God's works. The Church, our Mother, in this celebration calls all her sons and daughters to join in her thanksgiving and in the anticipation of the wedding feast of the "lamb" in the heavenly Jerusalem.⁶⁹

The Eucharist is a great celebration, which embodies all human expectations. Everyone is invited to the feast and the invitation is always open. One might as well say it is a celebration of love, a marvellous encounter where the economy of

⁶⁸ *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 336.

⁶⁹ Rev 19:1-7.

salvation and human efforts meet in the feast. This is the climax of human existence — the divinity in humanity and humanity in divinity. This communion of love reveals in the best way the face of the Church, our mini society. Thus, the Eucharist

downtrodden and the person at times is taken for an *object* of market, because money is more important than a person. It is in this world that the image of the Father (Chapter two) has to find its place and challenge its way forward.

It is not difficult to identify categories of “prodigal sons”, or better, outcasts in our contemporary world and in the Church. We need to seriously reflect on the ways we can show them the loving face of God.

4.1 Prostitutes

Prostitutes are never looked upon as decent, although they are expensively dressed. They are the “unclean” of society. They are *objects* of pleasure to men who have resources, time and status. Church, government and society at large look at them as a problem, a problem to be dealt with. They are labelled X as a prostitute. Once this happens, the girl will be rejected by members of her community and judged by the Church community as a fallen Christian. She will be considered an outcast of the society.⁷¹

Prostitutes usually do not dare visit their parents. They are too ashamed to return home and face the wrath of their relatives. Regardless of their religious affiliation, they draw a clear line between their pious moments and their job of prostitution. They keep a certain link with their respective churches and homes although they feel that the Church and home do not take any interest in them. Gradually they lose interest in the Church and home. In the end, they have neither religious affiliation nor a “home”. They are completely lost.⁷²

Where is the tender hand of God our Mother; is it not being stretched even unto them? Where is the action of society, if action in the Church is a sign of the

⁷¹ M.I. ANGULAR, *Social and Religious Outcasts in Africa*, 56.

presence of faith, especially when it is confronted by the reading of the Scriptures and Celebration of Love in a particular historical and social setting? On the other hand where is the mature, courageous and responsible “metanoia” of the prodigal son? What makes this decision so difficult? The son in the Parable inspite of his situation returned home because he experienced the greatness of his father’s heart. Is our Mini society a reflection of the greatness of the father’s love? It is a call to action and attention to the “last of the least” in our Mini society.

4.2 Children Sexually Abused

This is a very sad reality of our society today. Young girls not only struggle more than boys to attain literacy but are also victims of sexual exploitation and of cheap labour on farms and in houses of the wealthy. Some people take advantage of a tremendous disparity in wealth of the society. They hire poor young girls in order to use them for prostitution or as surrogate wives. An NGO, *Exploitation of Children Prostitution and Tourism*, reports that it recently intercepted a South African trafficking human cargo of girls who were destined to be flown to the USA. Another NGO, *The Malawi’s Eye of the Child*,⁷³ reveals that usually these girls are between twelve and nineteen years old.

Wealthy people entice children by promising jobs and better life, only to find themselves in dangerous trade That exposes them to HIV/Aids. In some cases, the smugglers collude with relatives of orphaned children in exchange for money.⁷⁴

According to the reports, most of the Malawian girls destined for prostitution are trafficked to South Africa, USA, Britain and Italy. Malawi, in turn, is a focal point for trafficking girls and boys from Kenya, Zimbabwe, Nigeria, and Cameroon

⁷² M.I. ANGULAR, *Social and Religious Outcasts in Africa*, 4-5.

⁷³ A child’s rights NGO affiliated to ECPAT, which facilitates the exchange of information among children’s rights groups in the Southern Africa Development Community (SADC).

to USA, South Africa, Britain and Netherlands. When caught breaching the law, these children are treated as criminals and illegal immigrants⁷⁵. Once deported to their countries of origin, they either end up in the streets or are detained while their families are sought.

In Malawi, there are no statistics on the magnitude of child trade due to the culture of silence and psychological trauma that the victims go through after a public disclosure of their sexual ordeal. Nevertheless, some efforts to curb local trafficking for housework or farm labour in tea and tobacco plantations bear positive results.

The challenging question comes up: where is the father of the parable in our society? The father covered his son with new garments and restored his dignity; now who will cover the “nakedness” of these children who are rejected and abandoned in the streets or elsewhere, or those who try to go back to their “homes”, but they find the door sealed?

Experience reveals that not all families are ready to welcome “the lost and found” sons and daughters back home. Some NGOs and religious congregations have dedicated themselves to help these victims. It is however not enough. The presence of these rejected children presents a challenge to all fathers and mothers of our society and to the Church. It is the hour of action.

5. Conclusion

This parable has not lost its challenging force as it was originally intended in the Gospel. We still find in our society different boundaries, social and religious indifference, self-righteousness, slowness to act, cultural intolerance, and negligence, etc. The parable offers values and concrete gestures, which give an

⁷⁴ *New People African Women Journal*, No.18.

answer to what every human being longs for: love, dignity, tolerance, promotion of life.

In order for us to be authentic Christians we should follow the Father's love as our model of an authentic love. That is why the Catholic Church is proposed as family or mini society where the Good News can find its adaptation, sense and way forward. The Catholic Church in African can also become "home" for everybody on the way back to their Father. Homes are inclusive in nature. The love of God is the bond that binds a family together.

In my attempt to give the true icon of God, I am discovering that it is very difficult to be the prodigal sons and most of us unconsciously or consciously prefer to be the self-righteous elder sons. A rapid look at our contemporary world reveals some very important challenges, which are to be faced by all people of good will. Some NGO and Governmental Organisation show their efforts, but it is not enough. The African Synod fathers launch a special appeal to Africa — we need to go back to our roots, we need to embrace life and promote life even where it seems to be extinguished.

⁷⁵ *New People African Women Journal*, No.18.

GENERAL CONCLUSION

“Who is my father?” in the parable of the prodigal son. This is the question we have been trying to answer throughout our inquiry. We have seen that to become sons and daughters of the Father is not all that automatic, it is a divine gift but also a personal commitment and daily conversion after the example of the prodigal son. The fact of being a Christian, a religious, and an “accepted of the society” is not a guarantee for salvation, because one may run the risk of being the self-righteous elder son.

In our proceeding we discovered that the “Father”, as described in the parable, is God himself. He is a Father to everyone with immeasurable love; his fatherhood is beyond all human imaginations and expectations. The father is concerned with the salvation of all his sons and daughters, no matter in what condition they are. The return of repentant sons and daughters is a reason of great joy in heaven. Salvation is for all. He invites everybody and the invitation is always open. To become a son or daughter of God does not necessarily depend on the living in the “house where God dwells” or being in the temple, or being one of the “accepted” by the society, but rather on being in communion with the Father. Then a child enjoys the same dignity of father and becomes one with the father, the co-owner of what the father has and the companion of the father. Every human being has a longing for God, our Father. This longing is satisfied only when one makes

a decisive change in life, when one decides to trust the Father despite one's sinfulness and imperfections.

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