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Advocacy of Faith with Good Works: The Nigerian Situation

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Abstract:

In a social context where religiosity is ostensibly displayed, one invariably expects corresponding good human acts worthy of the outwardly professed faith. The reverse appears to be the case in Nigeria that is not only thickly populated in her inhabitants, but also in her varied categories of Christian churches. It is this anomaly that the present paper addresses, using the text of James 2:14-26, from the Christian Sacred Book, the Bible, which is common to all Christians and forms their frequent reading and basis of preaching. The author of this Biblical text strongly advocates faith with good works, of which our contemporary society is in dire need. Our society can become better if we adhere to the message of the Biblical text.

Key words: Faith in God, good work, Epistle of James, Nigeria

1. Introduction

Parádoxos, “contrary to expectation”, bears its etymology from the two components of this compound word: *para* “beside”, “contrary to”, and *doxa* “opinion”, “expectation” (Klein 2002: 533). It is one of the key words that best describe the prevalent phenomenon which this paper intends to address. Another term “ambiguity” seems like a synonym, but also a fundamental word that conveys this common concern which reflective minds perceive with utter amazement. Jesus, in his teaching, referred to perpetrators of *parádoxos* as “hypocrites” (Mark 7:6; Matthew 6:2,5,16; 7:5;15:7; 22:18; 23:13,15,22,15,27,19;24:51; Luke 6:42; 12:56; 13:15; cf. Psalm 26:2; Sirach 1:29; 32:15) that is, persons who pretend to have admirable principles, beliefs, or feelings but behave otherwise.

In the history of human response to Divine Revelation, God’s prophets did not spare words on hypocrisy: “The Lord said: Because these people draw near with their mouths and honor me with their lips, while their hearts are far from me, and their worship of me is a human commandment learned by rote ...” (Isaiah 29:13; 1:10-20; Amos 5:21). Matthew (cf. 15:8-9) cites this as an explicit quotation against hypocrisy practised among leaders of the people (Obiorah 2008: 18-21). Such *parádoxos* when found among leaders is more devastating because of the crucial position and duty they hold. The situation is more disturbing in the sphere of human response to God’s invitation, faith, because “faith is not an illusion, a flight of fancy, a refuge or sentimentalism; rather it is total involvement in the whole life and is proclamation of the Gospel, the Good News that can set the whole of the person free” (Benedict XVI 2012: 24).

In the *Year of Faith* declared by Benedict XVI on 11 October 2012, 50th anniversary of the opening of Vatican Council II, and which concluded on 24 November 2013, Solemnity of Our Lord Jesus Christ Universal King, the Church reflects conscientiously and intensively on the reality of faith and human relationship with this reality in our lives. The “Communiqué on the Note of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith with pastoral recommendations for the Year of Faith” explains it in these words: “The *Year of Faith* will be a propitious occasion to make Vatican Council II and the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* more widely and deeply known” (Benedict XVI 2012). It is of interest to note the emphasis on the compendium of the *depositum fidei* “deposit of faith”, which the documents present as the focal point of the Year of Faith. That the CCC will be “more widely and deeply known”, according to the Communiqué, is far from mere “learning by rote” which the prophet vehemently denounced (cf. Isaiah 29:13). On the contrary, the knowledge proposed ought to be accompanied by the message at the heart of the Letter of James: “Faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead” (James 2:17; similarly in vv.20 and 26). In point of fact, this verse has informed the title of this paper: “Advocacy of Faith with Good Works: the Nigeria Context”.

The Church in Nigeria joined the universal Church in the essential exercise during this Year of Faith by reflecting on how we have so far responded to the dictates of the Divine Revelation. Is our study (for those who do) of the deposit of faith “mere learning by rote”? Or is our faith imbued with good works? Our paper addresses a common loophole in the practice of faith, especially by those in authority. All the Old Testament prophets and Jesus himself condemned dead faith, which the Letter of James termed “faith without

works". A reflection on this Letter, particularly the central section of it (James 2:14-26), forms the matrix of this tripartite presentation. In view of this, we first turn our attention to a key word in this Letter, *faith*.

2. The Reality of Faith

From the event of creation, especially the creation of human beings, God steadily reveals himself in words and deeds. This long process of Divine Revelation reached its climax when "the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth" (John 1:14; cf. Hebrews 1:1-4). Intrinsic to God's self revelation is an invitation addressed to human beings, the only creature made in God's image (Genesis 1:26-27), to enter into personal relationship with the Creator. In the Old Testament this divine-human relationship is explained in the concept and reality of *b'rit*, covenant, which has so much affinity with the Ancient Near East treaties (Mendenhall and Herion 1992). The Lord promised to be their God and they, on their part, were to be his people with all that this entails (Exodus 19:5). It was to make the people of Israel God's personal and sacred possession (Jeremiah 2:3), and a people consecrated to God (Deuteronomy 7:6). By this covenant the people were required to cleave steadfastly to the truths God has revealed about himself. While God remained faithful to his promise, the people failed in many ways to keep the stipulations of the covenant.

In Jesus, who is the Word of God made man, God fulfilled the promise of the new covenant made in the Old Testament (Jeremiah 31:31-34). He is "the mediator and the sum total of Revelation" (Vatican II: Dei Verbum 1965: 2). His words and deeds, prepared in the Old Testament and made explicit in the New Testament, form the basis of the Christian faith, which has as its deposit the Sacred Tradition and Sacred Scripture. This single *depositum fidei* contains in itself God's invitation to man to respond to the divine revelation. "The adequate response to this invitation is faith. By faith, man completely submits his intellect and will to God. With his whole being man gives his assent to God the revealer" (*The Catechism of the Catholic Church* [CCC] 2011: 142-143).

According to the compendium of the Catholic faith (*The Catechism of the Catholic Church* [CCC] 2011:153-165), God himself initiates faith in man. He bestows upon man the grace to respond to the divine invitation. "God who makes himself known is also the source of the credibility of what he reveals" (John Paul II 1998: 13). This grace is necessary because the revealed truths, when perceived only from the human perspective, do not always appear intelligible to our natural reason. The Divine authority behind the revealed realities sustains man and spurs him to adhere to them without wavering. Thus, the simplified Catholic Catechism defines faith as a supernatural gift of God, which enables us to believe without doubting whatever God has revealed. There is no delusion in the realities of faith as revealed by God; faith is certain because God who revealed himself to human beings is always faithful and he does not err nor deceive us (Neuner and Dupuis 1982: 118). Although man's response to divine invitation is necessary for salvation and there is need to persevere in it for it is foretaste of eternal life, man is free to respond or not to respond. "God's initiative always precedes every human initiative and on our journey towards him it is he who first illuminates us, who directs and guides us, ever respecting our inner freedom" (Benedict XVI 2012: 23).

Faith, according to Saint Paul, is unreserved or unflinching adhesion to the content of the Gospel, the Good News; it is unconditional acceptance of the content and demands of the Gospel. It has four interrelated stages: a) *Initial adhesion* which begins with the acceptance of Baptism: "Whether then it was I or they, so we proclaim and so you have come to believe" (1 Corinthians 15,11). b) *Progressive Assimilation* in all one's life. The Christian who accepts the Good News of the Risen Christ who died for us allows this Gospel to permeate his or her life as a human person. It should be holistic, all-embracing; every aspect of the human person should be involved in this. Paul has this to say about his own faith: "It is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me" (Galatians 2,20). There is continual openness to the message of the Gospel. Christ who died and rose from the dead should be seen in every detail of a Christian. For Paul sin is a lacuna, absence of evidence of the Risen Christ in the life of a person. A Christian involved in politics, for example, should exemplify in his life the message of the Gospel. There is a Christological aspect to be developed gradually in the life of a Christian. c) *Communitarian Expression of faith*: Faith is not lived in isolation. The group becomes "subject/agent" of faith. The community will be able to do this if all the members believe or have faith in the message of the Gospel. Hence individual's initiation is very important. When each person believes, then together with others something new emanates. There is exchange between the individual and the group. Reciprocity exists between the individual and the group. There is mutual faith nurtured in the group (Benedict XVI 2012: 4). The group expresses this faith in confessing the faith in hymns and in liturgical celebrations. By confessing we mean the expression of faith. This is the product of the community faith. So there is a "pendular movement".

It is interesting to note that many phrases employed by Paul in his letters are from the liturgical expressions of his communities. These were incorporated into his letters and transmitted to his addressees. Some greetings in his letters are from liturgy. Hence faith is handed on from liturgy to liturgy; that is, from simple practical liturgy which also tends to liturgy. The letters of Paul are destined to liturgical action. In 1 Thessalonians he said that his letter should be read in the assembly of the brethren. In this way we see the "pendular movement" of faith expressed in the community. d) *Missionary Stimulus* towards proclamation of faith and sharing with all: When the community matures in faith, the need to communicate the same faith to others is immediately felt. Paul started his first formation in Antioch and from there he went on mission; he later returned to Antioch. Hence a community moves with its living faith to mission. It sends missionaries from its group. It is urged not for propaganda but with a spirit of love to share; it brings faith to others.

As a divine gift, the three persons of the Trinity are involved in sustaining this faith in man. In the Gospel according to John, this Trinitarian aspect of faith is made clearer. Faith, according to the Evangelist, is the Father's gift to the believers (John 6:44). It is also the gift of the Son (6:37). In this gift, there is a mutual rapport. The Father loves the Son and the Son loves the Father (3:35). If the

Son intervenes in the gift of faith, it is because he loves the Father (17:6). Jesus reveals the Father, thereby giving rise to faith. The Spirit also intervenes in the gift of faith. His roles or activities in this regard include: teaching (14:26), reminding (14:26), leading (16:13), revealing (16:13), and testifying (15:26). The meaning of faith is derived from this Trinitarian dimension.

Faith is dynamic: one receives faith, remains in the faith, knows the faith, and grows in this knowledge. It comes from the hearing of the word of God (Romans 10:17; cf. Luke 8:21; 11:28; 1 Thessalonians 2:13). The grace to believe accompanies the believer as he seeks to understand and know better the God in whom he believes. Therefore, when one receives the light of faith, a crucial part of his duty is to faithfully desire to know God who has revealed himself and to seek to understand the contents of Revelation. A believer grows in faith according to the proportion in which he works to know God. "The life of faith is a path which leads to the knowledge of and encounter with God" (Benedict XVI 2012: 24). The Church, under the influence of the Holy Spirit, guides the faithful, in words and actions, in this important aspect of our life of faith. On his part, the believer avails himself of the opportunities offered by the Church, particularly by her Teaching Authority.

Faith is an unwavering reliance on God's promise (Romans 4:18; Galatians 5:5), unconditional trust in God, the only guarantee of salvation (Isaiah 7:9; 28:16; 30:15). In both Old Testament and New Testament, Abraham is presented as the type and father of believers (Genesis 12:1-4; 15:1-6; 22:1-19; John 8:56; Romans 4:18-25; Galatians 3:6; Hebrews 11:8-10, 17-19; James 2:21). He is a type of all who believe because his faith was manifested in his action. He trusted so much in God's promise to the point of sacrificing his only son.

Apart from Abraham, the OT is replete with instances of practical faith in God. Noah, trusting in God, built the ark in order to evade the deluge (Genesis 6:14-22; cf. Hebrews 11:7). Moses' mother cared for him in spite of Pharaoh's command (Exodus 2:2; cf. Heb 11:23). Faith moved Rahab to show hospitality to the Israelite spies sent to reconnoitre Jericho (Josh 2:24). The Israelites' faith in God helped them in the conquest of Jericho (Josh 6). Manoah's wife believed God's words brought by the angel of the Lord (Judges 13:23). Hannah, the mother of Samuel, trusted in God and he answered her prayer (1 Samuel 1). Jonathan believed in God in striking down the Philistines (1 Samuel 14:6). David had strong faith in God's help when he fought against Goliath (1 Samuel 17:37, 46, 47). He chose to fall into the hands of the Almighty for his punishment for counting the people of Israel (2 Samuel 24:14). He believed God's promise that his kingdom would be a perpetual kingdom (2 Samuel 7:12; cf. Acts 2:30). Elijah manifested his faith in God in his controversy with the priests of Baal (1 Kings 18:32-38). The widow of Zarephath fed Elijah, the man of God, because of her faith in God (1 Kings 17:13-15). Further examples are Amaziah in 2 Chronicles 25:7-10; Hezekiah (2 Kings 18:5; 19; 20:1-11), Ninevites (Jonah 3:5); Ezra (Ezra 8:22).

Similarly in the New Testament, Mary, the Mother of Jesus, stands out as the model of all who believe in Jesus. She believed the words of the angel who announced that she would be the mother of the long awaited Messiah. Joseph, the husband of Mary, through faith, obeyed the vision about Mary and to flee into Egypt (Matthew 1:18-24; 2:13-14). Simeon expressed his faith when Jesus was brought into the Temple (Luke 2:25-35). The first disciples of Jesus left everything and followed him (Mark 1:16-20; Matthew 4:18-22; Luke 5:4-5). The woman with the issue of blood was healed because of her faith in Jesus (Matt 9:21-22). Jairus believed that his daughter would be healed (Matthew 9:18, 23-25). The blind men received their sight (Mark 10:46-52; Matthew 9:29-30; 20:30-34; Luke 18:35-42). The Samaritan leper was cleansed (Luke 17:11-19). The sick people of Gennesaret were all healed because of their faith in Jesus (Matthew 14:36; Mark 3:10; 6:54-56). It was a sign of faith by those who brought the paralysed man to Jesus (Luke 5:18-20). The Syrophenician woman had unwavering faith in Jesus and her daughter was cured (Mark 7:25-30; Matthew 15:22-28). Other examples include: the woman who anointed Jesus' feet (Luke 7:36-50), Philip (John 1:45-46), Nathanael (John 1:49), the Samaritans who believed through the preaching of Jesus (John 4:39-42) and through the preaching of Philip (Acts 8:9-12), the nobleman whose child was sick (John 4:46-53), the blind man who was healed on the Sabbath (John 9:13-38). The list can be longer than this for many more examples can be cited from the Gospels and other parts of the New Testament.

From all these examples in both the Old Testament and the New Testament we have more insight into the reality of faith. "Faith gives us precisely this: it is a confident entrustment to a 'You', who is God, who gives me a different certitude, but no less solid than that which comes from precise calculation or from science" (Benedict XVI 2012: 23). The grace to believe in God generates in those who freely receive it childlike trust in God who loves and cares for all. It is an ardent hope that God will fulfil his promise as contained in the Divine Revelation and that there is a lasting future after the present life here on earth (Benedict XVI 2007: 2-3; Okeke 2013).

Faith "happens in the deepest part of us and signals a change in direction through personal conversion" (Benedict XVI 2012: 4). Such personal conversion should be manifested in our daily life, in our interactions with others. In other words, faith is both vertical and horizontal and these two should always go together; they are the two dimensions of our relationship with God (Obiorah 2009: 7-25). Our faith becomes ambiguous when we think we can relate to God excluding those around us. The author of the Letter of James describes faith that is not imbued with actions, concrete love of neighbour, as a dead faith. This Letter is highly relevant to the Nigerian Society where there seems to be a dichotomy between our outward manifestations, religiosity, of faith and the real life we live with others.

3. Faith with Good Works

The New Testament Epistle attributed to James is one of those seven letters (James, 1-2 Peter, 1-3 John and Jude) in the New Testament called *Catholic* or *Universal Letters*. They are so called because, unlike other letters in the New Testament that are addressed to particular Christian communities or individuals, *The Catholic Letters* are not destined for any particular community or individual. At the introductory section of the Letter of James, however, the writer identifies his addressees as "the twelve tribes in Dispersion", which could refer to the Jewish Christians in Diaspora. Actually, the Letter has so much to prove that it was originally

addressed to the Jewish Community, because the author presupposed that his readers were conversant with the Jewish tradition, particularly their Scripture. This is evident in the allusions to the Old Testament (cf. 2:21-25; 5:17), especially the copious allusions to the Old Testament Wisdom Literature (1:5, 13, 19; 3:2-3 etc.) (The New Jerusalem Bible 1985: 1991-1993). There are also remarkable similarities between the content of the Letter of James and Jesus' teachings, particularly in Matthew (Brown 2004: 734-735). The acceptance of the Letter of James as a canonical scripture underwent a gradual process, because initially it was not universally recognised as inspired. Martin Luther repudiated it because of its insistence on the close link between faith and work, a view that refutes Luther's doctrine that faith alone is necessary for salvation. Luther based his teaching on Paul's Letters to the Galatians and Romans, without taking the second part of Gal 5:6 into cognizance: "For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything; *the only thing that counts is faith working through love*". In this there is no basic disagreement of James with Paul. It has been noted that in Galatians 5:6, "Paul realizes the needs to emphasize the ethical dynamic inherent in the relationship of being 'in Christ Jesus'" (Longenecker 1990: 229).

The Epistle of James is generally attributed to James, the 'brother of the Lord' (Matt 13:55), who was very prominent in the early Christian community in Jerusalem (Acts 12-17; 15:13-21; 21:18-26; 1 Corinthians 15:7; Gal 1:19; 2:9,12), and killed by the Jews about 62 AD (Josephus 1981: 423-425). Attributing the letter to James, one of the apostles of Jesus, is not without some difficulties because of the characteristic features of the letter, particularly its literary style. Its elegant Greek, rich vocabulary and rhetorical technique, diatribe, all together pose a serious concern in attributing its authorship to a Galilean. Could it be that a well-lettered Jew, a Christian, composed the letter and attributed it to James the apostle in order to obtain an apostolic origin that was one of the criteria for the canonicity of the New Testament scriptures?

James's Epistle is characterised by series of disjointed moral exhortations, about 119 imperatives (Felder 1998: 1786), which include comportment in times of trial (1:1-12; 5:7-11), source of temptations (1:13-18), how to tame the tongue (1:26; 3:1-18), good human relationship with neighbours (2:8,13; 3:13-4:2; 4:11-12), importance of prayer (1:5-8; 4:2; 5:13-18), anointing of the sick (5:14-15). From these and from a close reading of the letter, one could deduce the life situation (*Sitz im Leben*) that engendered its composition. Externally, there were hostility and persecution by those who were not yet believers (2:6, 15-17; 5:4). This external cause gave rise to serious trials in the faith of the believers (2:14, 20, 26). The trials were manifested in acts contrary to the faith: the poor were despised in the sacred assemblies (2:1-9), breaches of brotherly love (2:7), some falsely called themselves teachers (3:1,13), detractions and other sins of the tongue (3:1-12; 4:11-13), contentions and lawsuits (4:1-2), swearing (4:12), neglect of assiduous prayer (5:13,17-18), pride and vainglory (4:6-10), sacred rites were overlooked (5:14-16) (Achille 2013). Therefore, the letter was written with these two purposes in mind: (1) to exhort them to constancy in the faith in spite of the persecutions and trials they were undergoing, and to give them comfort in their tribulations; (2) to correct the abuses and extirpate the evils amongst them, by urging them to make their conduct conformable to their faith, and by earnestly reminding them that faith alone would not save them unless they added good works (Achille 2013).

Judging from the internal causes and the two aims that led to the composition of the Letter, one can perceive the heart of James' Epistle in his exhortation articulated in 2:14-26: "Faith without works is dead". When positively stated, the writer's intention is to underline the close link between faith and good works. It has been noted that "James is not opposing faith and works, but living faith and dead faith" (Leahy 1992: 912). Taking this as our guide, we can now undertake a reading of the core of this message as found in 2:14-26, which, according to some opinions (Leahy 1992: 912), give the theoretical basis for the practical exhortations in the Letter. It is the basis for these exhortations because everything depends on knowing that faith, true religion, is not passive. It is proved in good works.

3.1 Reading James 2:14-26

We have chosen this passage from James' Epistle because of its importance in the Letter and its relevance firstly in this Year of Faith, and secondly, in the General theme of our Conference. The situation that the author of the Letter addressed is comparable to ours. It was a situation where external religiosity, greatly fraught with ambiguities, outweighed what the Letter itself describes as "Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father"; it is, according to the writer, "to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world" (1:27). In the midst of the paradoxes prevalent among his contemporaries, the writer proposed "an alternative to the comfortable kind of civil religion that tolerates injustices of the status quo" (Felder 1998: 1786). Comparing this passage with Paul's teaching, Brown observes that "the writer of James is thinking of people who are already Christians and intellectually believe in Jesus (even as the devil can believe: 2:19) but have not translated that belief into life practice; and he is insisting that their works (not ritual works prescribed by the Law but behaviour that reflects love) must correspond to their faith" (Brown 2004: 733). He did this in the most organised passage of his Letter.

James 2:14-26 is marked as a separate unit by the literary technique of inclusion, or envelope figure, at the beginning and end of the text. This typical Semitic literary style, found often in Hebrew poetry, is the repetition of an idea at the beginning and end of a text with the intention of delimiting the passage (Watson 1995: 282-286). The style is also an indication of the central message of the text. In James 2:14-26, the point which is inherent in the inclusion is a sharp opposition between living faith and dead faith, and not between faith and works. The writer proceeds in this in two stages, which form the two major parts in the structure of the passage: vv.14-17 and 18-26. In both, there is a sentence that is almost like a refrain, found once in the first part: "So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead" (v.17); and twice in the second part: "Do you want to be shown, you senseless person, that faith apart from works is barren" (v.20); "For just as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is also dead" (v.26). Each of these, in a kind of crescendo in their intensity, plays an important role in their contexts.

In the first part of the text (vv.14-17), the writer states his thesis, which is developed in the rest of the pericope. Two rhetorical questions in succession open this section. "What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you?" (v.14). The second depends on the first; or it is a continuation of the first question. Faith alone without works cannot procure salvation. "Faith without charity bears no fruit, while charity without faith would be a sentiment constantly at the mercy of doubt. Faith and charity each require the other; in such a way that each allows the other to set out along its respective path" (Benedict XVI 2011: 14). In verses 15-16, the writer illustrates his point with examples from practical life based on essential human needs: clothing and food. It is not enough to recognise that others need these; one has to endeavour to provide them. This calls to mind similar teaching of Jesus in Matt 7:21: "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord', will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven" (cf. Matthew 25:41-45); and of Paul in Gal 5:6 and 1 Corinthians 13:3. The picture presented by James is also vivid in 1 John 3:17: "How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help?" There is an appropriate summary at the end of this first section of the text from James: "So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead" (v.17). Works in this context are practical ways of manifesting one's faith, especially in caring for others. It is faith in action and the only antidote to the paradoxical situation of James' addressees, whose faith was superficial.

The second part of the text (vv.18-26) expatiates and elucidates the thesis of the writer by giving examples of persons who translated their faith into action. He resumes his discussion with the literary style of diatribe (a bitter verbal or written attack on somebody or something) as he now addresses an imaginary interlocutor. Verse 18 appears a strong objection to those who claim they can separate faith from work: "Show me your faith apart from your works, and I by my works will show you my faith". The first part of this sentence, a pun on his opponents who profess, "faith without works", is corrected in the second part. Living faith is manifested in works. This argument is continued in v.19 where the writer alludes to the basic Jewish truth of faith: "The Lord is our God, the Lord alone" (Deuteronomy 6:4), the oneness of God (similarly in the New Testament: cf. Mark 12:29; 1 Corinthians 8:4,6; Ephesians 4:6). All believe in this, even the demons. It is not enough to profess this oneness of God, which is the basic truth of faith; this should be translated into action. Without works, such faith is barren.

In verses 21-24 the writer cites Abraham as an example of persons whose faith is not barren. The patriarch believed in God and trusted him to the point of sacrificing his only son. (Genesis 22:9; Hebrews 11:17). He is called 'friend of God' (Isaiah 41:8); one who loves God, according to the literal translation of the Hebrew active participle (*'ōhābī* 'he who loves me') of this in Isaiah. "Faith grows when it is lived as an experience of love received and when it is communicated as an experience of grace and joy" (Benedict XVI 2011: 7). Faith moved Abraham to leave his land and he followed God's directives (Genesis 12:1-3). When there was strife between his herders and those of his nephew Lot, the Patriarch showed his living faith in these words: "Let there be no strife between you and me and between your herders and my herders; for we are kindred" (Genesis 13:8). He acted accordingly with Lot thereby saving a situation simmering with conflict. The same faith inspired his selfless hospitality to the strangers whom he received in his house (Genesis 18:1-15).

Another example of one who had living faith mentioned by James is Rahab, the woman who received Israelite spies (Joshua 2). She first made this profession of faith when she met the spies: "The Lord your God is indeed God in heaven above and on earth below" (Joshua 2:11). She went further to take care of them and saved them from imminent danger. After these two examples, James 2:26 compares faith without works to body without breath. It is the climax of the three versions of the writer's thesis (cf. vv. 17 and 20). This last one sheds more light on the absurdity of dead faith, which is actually the writer's point of emphasis; dead faith is like a lifeless body. "As breath enables a body to live, likewise works produce a living faith" (Martin 1988: 98). His point resounds: It is paradoxical to separate faith from good works.

4. Identifying the Riddle and Its Possible Roots in the Nigerian Context

One expends little energy in perceiving the many and varied manifestations of our religiosity. "Religiosity in its narrowest sense deals with how religious a person is, in terms of practising certain ritual, retelling certain myths, revering certain symbols or accepting certain doctrines about deities and after life" (Amogu 2008: 8). In Nigeria, it is almost close to ostentation of the fundamental quality of human beings who by nature are religious beings. We tend to the other even when we purport to be indifferent and profess nothing. Our nation excels in the outward manifestations of this innate human feature. Streets are dotted with different shapes and shades of religious edifices that serve as centres for prayer and other related religious practices (Alonge 2012). The number of Christian sects increases daily and this is attributable to the fact that there is a corresponding increase in the number of those who claim to have understood the message of the Christian Sacred Book, the Bible, more than others. As many as there are subjective interpretations, so there are sects who competitively project their own theories and theologies. Ill-fated warehouses or stockrooms are converted into lucrative business centres in the guise of religion. Many flock to these in large numbers. It has been observed that:

Since religious centres are meant to shape the moral, physical and spiritual conducts of the worshippers with attendant salubrious effects on the society, seeing such a crowd of folks attending spiritual programmes instils glimmers of hope that Nigerian society would be devoid of evils and social vices that characterise nations whose vast population suffers from apostasy (Ajayi 2012).

Unfortunately, all these make very little impact on the moral life of the people who appear deeply religious.

This externalism moves external of the religious precincts for the worshippers extend their belief outwardly. Few are commercial cars in our cities without bold catchy phrases depicting religiosity; some private cars are not free from this externalism. Motorcycles and fast emerging tricycles that naturally do not have sufficient surface where these scripts can be engraved bear the boldest forms of letters. These phrases are mainly extracted explicitly from the Bible; others, on the other hand, are paraphrases or personal

interpretations of the same Sacred Scripture. Every part of our Nation, even the insignificant parts are decorated with some literary religious insignia that make us appear very religious.

One would think that the number of street preachers will diminish as prayer houses spring like grass after dewdrops. The reverse is what a good number of Nigerians experience in most cities that have not yet prohibited loud noisy megaphones of those who want to convert others by all means, and at odd hours of the day. Everybody does the preaching! Who hears whom? The enthusiasm of these preachers is surpassed by none. Ours is a nation where everyone claims to possess the true divine teaching and preaches accordingly. The paradox is almost palpable for, most often; the real life we live does not correspond with these outward manifestations. Still relevant to our situation are the words of the prophet: “these people draw near with their mouths and honor me with their lips, while their hearts are far from me” (Isa 29:13).

Religiosity, as we perceive it in Nigeria, is fraught with obvious commercialisation of religious activities by religious leaders and feigned religious leaders alike. Set prayers have prices according to the length and intensity of the prayers, and according to the power of the leader and the number of fellow prayer warriors. In most cases, the price of the organised prayer has to be paid in advance before the group arrives. This is not all, because the would-be beneficiary of the prayer has to provide all the necessary equipment to be utilised during the prayer sessions. Each of these has its own value stipulated by the leader of the prayer group. This, indeed, is sheer extortion of the uninformed persons.

Commercialization of religious activities appears in another garb among those who convert ordinary things of daily use into religious objects, believing that they are imbued with some spiritual powers imparted by religious leaders. Salt, oil of various kinds, water, sand, pebbles, pieces of cloth of assorted colours and others are packed and sold in the religious precincts and beyond. Similar to this is the profuse diffusion of substandard booklets on prayers or their cognates, which worshippers are coerced to purchase at very high prices. Jesus’ rebuke, using the words of prophet Jeremiah 7:11, of similar situations among his contemporaries, is appropriate in our time: “Is it not written, ‘My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations’? But you have made it a den of robbers” (Mark 11:17; Matthew 21:13; Luke 19:46; cf. John 2:13-22). He is more pinpointed in the version of this account according to John 2:16 “Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father’s houses a market place!” It is a *market place*, indeed, in many of our prayer houses. The contexts of Jeremiah 7:11 and the Gospel passages thus cited are quite radical accounts of the relationship between ethics and worship. In fact, every sacred space acquires its status from the quality of the worshippers who gather there (Carroll 1996: 209). Following this, lack of the respectability we display in our prayer houses defaces them of what they should actually be.

Closely related to this is the widespread belief that divine blessings are acquired by human wealth. This erroneous theory states: “the more you give, the more you receive from God or are blessed with more riches”. It is proclaimed from the pulpit, over the radio, on television and through handbills. Inattentive reading of the Sacred Scripture and subjective interpretations of the same exacerbate the situation, for these preachers employ related passages of the Bible on this to project their point. They, however, overlook the fundamental texts of the same Bible that teach the sovereignty of God who is both the Lord and the Creator of all (cf. Genesis 1-2; Psalms 8; 24), and the theological correction of this ambiguous conviction in Proverbs 10:22: “The blessings of the Lord makes rich, and he adds no sorrow with it”. God’s blessings are freely given to human beings; it is not conditioned by what human beings give to God. Everything we have comes from him who is the sole Creator of all that exist. This, however, does not imply that human beings should not work hard to earn their living. They work and allow God’s will to be done in their lives.

These are some aspects of the image of the society in which Nigerians from all walks of life live, especially those who offer public services. All inhale this Nigerian religious air, which is saturated with paradoxes. “If there is anything so strangely peculiar about the country called Nigeria, it is her avalanche of contradictions which in many cases defy logical explanation even by the international community which is daily bemused by the developments in the nation” (Ajayi 2012). All are “deeply religious”, enthusiastic and assiduous in displaying their faith. We are in a nation where people publicly profess their faith, sometimes, to attract attention and win the confidence of others. Those in public services avail themselves of this as they use religion to manipulate those they ought to serve (Eso 2003). The more religious they appear, the more they display actions incongruous with religious tenets. How many persons in public service are actually where they should be? How many elections are truly genuine? Sometimes one can speak of selection instead of election! Since many deceitfully assume office, the same deceit characterises their actions.

Public service is meant to serve the society; those who are in public service ought to render service to others. When this service is devoid of its altruistic characteristic feature, the servant obviously deviates from the focus and from the purpose of the service. Egocentricity, manifested in diverse forms, often generates such situation of disservice. It is paradoxical for persons of active affiliate of religious tradition, especially Christians, to be involved in this, for Christianity, in particular, advocates selfless service in imitation of Jesus who became servant of all and teaches all to follow in his footsteps (Mark 9:35).

The addressees of the Epistle of James were beset by external persecution which degenerated into internal disorder in the faith of the people. This disorder was manifested in obvious ambiguities in how the people lived their faith. They knew the truth of their faith but they were tossed about by the waves of persecution. In our situation today paradox in the way we practice our faith could be attributed to the same concern that inspired Benedict XVI to proclaim the Year of Faith and convoke General Synod of Bishops on *New Evangelization*. Many centuries in the past, the author of 1 Peter 3:15 exhorted Christians aright: “Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you”. Christians will be able to make this defense if they know. “Christians often do not even know the central core of their own Catholic faith, the Creed, so that they leave room for a certain syncretism and religious relativism, blurring the truths to believe in as well as the salvific uniqueness of Christianity” (Benedict XVI 17 October 2012). This is a great concern in the universal Church and the reason for the *New Evangelization*: “The new evangelization calls all Christians to account for the hope that is in them (cf. 1 Peter 3:15), aware that one of the worst obstacles

for our pastoral mission is ignorance of the content of the faith. In fact it is a dual ignorance: a lack of knowledge of the person of Jesus Christ and ignorance of the sublimity of his teachings” (Benedict XVI 5 December 2012).

This general ignorance of the truths of our faith among Catholics explains why the Church strongly recommends that “the Year of Faith will have to see a concerted effort to rediscover and study the fundamental content of the faith that receives its systematic and organic synthesis in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*” (Benedict XVI 2011: 11). Paradox in the practice of our faith can also be traced to the same ignorance of the content of our faith. Knowledge strengthens and sustains faith; it also prepares one for effective transmission of the same faith to others, for one gives from the wealth of what he has.

Perhaps, this dual ignorance of the person of Jesus and of his teaching is behind the superficial spirituality that remains merely on the external manifestation while neglecting the essence of the faith. The Epistle of James terms this ‘lifeless faith’, because it is devoid of the life-giving works, which should not be severed from the truths of faith. One tends to live a double life, ambiguous indeed, when life within the Church precincts is incongruous with the life outside. Faith should be consistently lived, whether in the Church or in places of work.

Therefore, we recommend, with the whole Church, a committed and assiduous study of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, especially in this Year of Faith. In order that our faith may grow, it should be nurtured; one way of doing this is by seeking to understand the contents of our faith. Pastors and leaders of all categories in the Church can make this a point of duty to re-evangelise the faithful, beginning with themselves. Schools are an effective ground for this vital task. Our revered early missionaries knew the importance of this when they introduced daily and compulsory Catholic Religious Studies in all their schools. In our society today the Church is privileged to own and run schools; Catholic Religious Studies should be the first in the list of the core subjects in the curriculum and should be made obligatory for all in our schools.

The Church, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, continues to grow in her understanding of the person of Jesus and his teaching. Her Teaching Authority guides the faithful in this. It is the duty of the faithful to make maximum use of various opportunities that the Church offers. Therefore documents from the Church, beginning from the Roman Pontiff and their subsequent interpretations by Local Ordinaries and their close collaborators should form part of the daily readings of the faithful. It is the work of Pastors to invent ways of communicating this teaching to those who by no fault of theirs cannot read.

5. Conclusion

A good number of persons in our society, who have received the Christian faith, genuinely and consistently live their faith. These are committed Christians who steadily grow in their knowledge of the person of Jesus and of his teaching. Their efforts, however, are sometimes blurred by so many others who have received the same faith but still remain on the infantile level. A common trait of this second group is superficiality deducible from incongruity of their daily life. Faith, God’s grace and human response to Divine Revelation, should permeate every aspect of the life of believers. Life in the Church should not be different from life outside the Church, particularly among those who have the privilege to render service to others. The dynamic nature of faith requires that it be translated into action.

In both the Old Testament and the New Testament, the sacred writers emphasize the importance of ‘living faith’, which is faith accompanied by good works. The two should be inseparable in the life of every believer. According to the author of the Epistle of James, faith that is separated from works is like body without breath; in other words, a dead body. All the examples of persons who are known for their faith in the Bible, especially Abraham in the Old Testament and Mary the Mother of Jesus, are models of faith with good works.

The awareness of the cause of paradox among believers coupled with the growing indifference to the reality of faith is the reason for the *New Evangelization* and the declaration of the Year of Faith by Benedict XVI. General ignorance of the person of Jesus and of his teaching in our society can be eradicated by assiduous study of the contents of our faith compiled in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. The Church highly recommends this study, especially in this Year of Faith. We believe that knowledge, strong conviction of what we know and believe, and readiness to accept the conversion inherent in faith, can help the faithful, who are searching for God, to understand the close link between faith and works which the Epistle of James strongly advocates.

6. Note

In this paper, Biblical citations in English are according to *The New Revised Standard Version Catholic Edition*; Bangalore: Thomas Nelson, 1990.

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