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**Divine Forgiveness and Freedom from the  
Shame of Past Mistakes**

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**Introduction**

Christians have come a long way from the idea that there is no salvation outside the Church to the belief in the universal salvific will of God. This journey was not without anticlines and synclines that are still continuing till date. My approach to writing this treatise presupposes that there is the spirituality that experiences divine

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forgiveness from the acknowledgment that “all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God” (Romans 3: 23) and another school of spirituality that draws its religiosity from the perspective that “God loves us so much that he sent his only begotten son to die for us and forgives us our trespasses” (John 3:16). In other words, God forgives us because he loves us, even when we do not ask Him for forgiveness. These two spiritualities are represented in the main denominations of Christendom but adherents of these two schools are agreed on the reality of divine forgiveness but are pitched against each other on the question of how divine forgiveness impacts our salvation. Catholics against main line Protestants and the evangelicals against everyone else that is not born-again. The Catholics believe that the Lord’s Prayer teaches that we are to ask for God’s forgiveness regularly and so encourages their members to attend the sacrament of Confession and there is great emphasis on the penitential rites. The Protestants on the other hand posit that we must know that of our own strength, we are powerless to do the right thing and thus rests on the mercy of God because God can judge a person’s intentions as He knows what’s in a person’s heart (1 Samuel 16:7; Hebrews 4:12-13) and God forgives because mostly, sin is out of ignorance, like Jesus prayed; “Father forgive them for they do not know what they are doing” (Luke 23:34). Catholics think this is passivism, post-modernism, ultra liberalism, Pelagian (forgiveness of sins was an unmerited act of divine grace) and Baianism (justification is based on perfect love and because the sinner possesses love already before the forgiveness of his sins, he already possesses justification). Catholics consider these positions as heretical and quote St. Augustine who said; “The God who created you without consulting you will not save you without your cooperation.”

The parable of the labourers in the vine yard (Matthew 20: 1-16) often emerges in theological debates over justification by grace and the efficacy of good works. St. Augustine, for example, refers to the parable repeatedly in his writings against the Pelagians as a means of showing the gratuitousness of grace. He refers to the parable at length, to show that God may bestow grace on one person without doing any injustice to another: “one is honoured freely in such wise as that another is not defrauded of what is due to him.” The landlord paid the hired labourers the same wage not minding that some arrived at the

11th hour. Similarly, Aquinas refers to the parable at the conclusion of his article on whether foreknowledge of merit causes predestination. Referring to the workers' complaint and the vineyard owner's response thereto, he states that both grace and punishment are demonstrations of God's goodness, such that: "He who grants by grace can give freely as he wills, be it more be it less, without prejudice to justice, provided he deprives no one of what is owing." However, controversy arose among theologians in fourteenth-century England over the role of human free will in salvation. Both Ockham and Holcot, for example, claimed that human actions could positively dispose one to receive God's grace. Ockham and Holcot maintained that human preparation does not fully merit salvation but only constitutes a half-merit (Levy, 2005). Despite the different opinions among fourteenth-century theologians pertaining to salvation theology, scholastic soteriologies which Catholics uphold, maintained the necessity of grace.

On the other hand, the Protestants accuse the Catholics of being ultra conservative in their interpretation of scripture on the how of divine forgiveness and say Catholics have continued to linger in medieval theology.

In writing this article, I took into cognizance, the truth that forgiveness is good for one's health thus I chose to approach the topic by contextualizing our theological disagreements by juxtaposing Catholic and Protestant ecclesiology and highlighting the variance in our soteriology. I attempted some clarification of major tenets of Catholic theology and some Protestant leanings on the mystery of sin and divine forgiveness and I concluded with the psycho-pastoral therapeutic praxis for healing us from the sins of our past and the wounds and shame that these disagreements have dealt us. I have taken time to explore the spiritualities surrounding whether God's forgiveness is conditional upon repentance, or whether our forgiveness is conditional on asking for it, or whether it is based on God seeing fruits of repentance in us. In doing all this, I keep the focus on the areas where we need freedom to move on, the disagreements that has led to the burning some at the stake, some to the inquisition and others to being excommunicated from the love of God...We all need freedom from the shame of the past. Healing is central to the theology of divine forgiveness. Not even the healing

that comes to us through counselling and psychological therapies can be ranked as effective as an experience of divine forgiveness. The knowledge that God has forgiven one's sin is held as one best reason why people go to church. People worship and thank God for the blessing of healing experienced through the forgiveness of sin.

### **I. Contextual Theological Understanding of Divine Forgiveness**

Soteriology is the starting point of all Christian theology yet very few Christians understand how the death and resurrection of Jesus is a saving event. We cannot separate salvific work of God through divine forgiveness from Christology, ecclesiology and eschatology. The ultimate source of salvation is God. His son Jesus was born into the world to bring peace (salvation to God's chosen people) which today we represent by all humankind; through divine forgiveness.

For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. John 3:16.

The above quote, spoken by Christ in his conversation with Nicodemus, introduces us into the very heart of *God's salvific work*. They also express the very essence of Christian soteriology, that is, of the theology of salvation. By salvation, I mean God's love for us was the reason He sent Christ into the world and to the cross. The plethora of Christian preaching has dwelt more on sin and not on God's love and thus humanity is been reduced to nothing but sinners needing liberation from the bondage of sin. Everything that God created was good (Genesis 1: 1-31), including human beings and all things work together unto good for those who love God (Romans 8:28). The Gospel story of Matthew 18: 21-27 where the master forgave the debt of the servant who fell on his knees and pleaded for forgiveness and was forgiven, tells of the reality that divine forgiveness is not obtained in passivity but comes with asking God for the grace.

All instances in scripture about divine forgiveness indicate that it is either freely given or gotten when we ask God for it. For instance, in the Lord prayer, we pray for it (Matthew 6: 9-13) and in (Luke 23:34) while on the Cross, Christ did not wait until his crucifiers asked for forgiveness; as they drove the nails into his hands and legs, he asked the father to forgive them for they know not what they were doing. A discussion on divine forgiveness must therefore attempt a

fine balance lest there would be an over emphasis on sinful humanity needing divine forgiveness and minimizing the grace of God's grace, because divine forgiveness also means God's love that truly frees us from our sins and the shame and guilt of the past. It is God's love for us that sent Jesus to the cross and it is the conviction of this love that gathers us together in the name of Jesus Christ as Church every time we worship. "Greater love has no man than he who lay down his life for his friends" (John 15: 13). His death on the cross is a sacrifice of expiation that accomplished this purpose. However, disputes have arisen in Christendom because we all find it hard adopt the perfect example of Jesus – the love of God and love of neighbour.

The topic of Divine forgiveness as a condition for salvation has become an on-going discussion giving rise to various theologies about what makes for justification. For Catholics, divine forgiveness is predicated on asking God for forgiveness through confession like the thief on the cross who addresses Jesus by name and makes a request. The criminal's prayer is directed to God but to Jesus, the mediator of God's salvation (Luke 23: 39-43). This is in contrast to the Protestants' position that insists that only grace, good work or faith. The Protestants' understanding is that, as Christians who possess the Holy Spirit, we rely on His power, and we can do all things through Christ who strengthens us (Philippians 4:13).

A theocentric understanding of human **forgiveness** flows from the supreme grace of **divine** love because love and **forgiveness** have **divine** origins. A Christian perspective of love must emerge from an understanding of God's character. The keys to understanding forgiveness within the context of love involve the issues of sin and the costly nature of divine love. But Christendom has continued to misunderstand this intricate connection of love and forgiveness. First, Catholicism became divided against itself, first, in 1054, when the great schism between the East and West Catholic churches occurred and for 950 years, the Eastern Orthodox Patriarchs and the Western Roman Catholic popes excommunicated each other. Later, the whole of Christendom became divided on the understanding of divine forgiveness in the 1500s and is still polarised to date. The controversy centers on whether there first needs to be confession before forgiveness is given or whether we are redeemed by just the grace of God alone. The trading of words through theological exposés and

counter rebuttals would lead to some people being tagged heretics, schismatic, infidels and excommunicated and thus considered unable to enjoy divine forgiveness and ipso facto enjoy no salvation.

The quest for understanding how divine forgiveness is granted was a major thesis of the Lutheran Reformation of the sixteenth century and the Augsburg Confession and continues to lead Christendom to a variance in the doctrine of justification. Our continued disagreement on this central issue is making the Gospel and the unity of the Church that Jesus prayed for in (John 17) almost impossible to attain and the situation is even further made worse by the condemnations, vituperations not minding the 1999 joint declaration of reconciliation between the Catholics and the Lutherans.

Since the Reformation (1563-1650), through early modernity (1650-1800), till the nineteenth century, and the period from Vatican I to Vatican II (1870-1960s) there have been counter claims in the understanding of what Christ wants of the church. All through these epochs, discussions centered chiefly on salvation and divine forgiveness. The Protestant churches emphasized the Word and Martin Luther called the Pope the antichrist, believing he puts himself above the Word by claiming the keys to the doors of the kingdom but the Catholics emphasized the Sacraments, insisting that the keys and the sacrament were handed to Peter by Jesus himself (Matthew 16:18) and these keys has continued to be handed down through Apostolicity. Tradition, Catholics argue, subsisted before the Scripture was put together, because, scripture is tradition in written Form. Controversy has continued to rage because Catholic theologians interpret the Lutheran doctrine of the church as “*Creaturis verbi*” – church as creature of the Word as opposed to the Catholic understanding of the Church as sacrament of salvation. For the Catholics, the fundamental ecclesiological principle of *ubi eucharistia, ibi ecclesia* (wherever the sacrament (Eucharist) is celebrated, there is the church) is what church is.

This conflagration in our uncommon understanding of divine forgiveness has led to mutual alienation causing traumatic tensions amongst Christians. Catholics tag Protestantism and their theology of salvation as private and individualistic spirituality while the Protestants criticise Catholicism as deep-seated Thomism and Trentism robed in a new language called Vatican II and join the

Evangelicals to tag the Catholics as lost in Papist Romism and gasping for the Spirit. The unresolved problems and tensions arising from the topic of divine forgiveness have persisted for over a century and continue even in post Vatican II and the post-modern era. If you grew up Protestant, you will remember the first time you went into a Catholic church? The strange smells of incense, the sudden moves from standing and sitting, the unending priest congregation dialogic responses and the awkwardness of having to kneel, feeling the painful exclusion of not being able to participate in communion, all these symbols of feeling like you don't belong has led to increasing boundaries between Catholics and Protestants and the mutual suspicion between the two faiths in 19th Century extends to our common understanding of divine forgiveness.

Attempts at reconciliation started as far back as in 1910 when the World Missionaries Movement held a conference in Edinburgh, Scotland; although the Catholics were not in attendance, it was reported that the other Protestant denominations and the Anglicans at the conference intentionally avoided talking about their doctrinal differences. The Faith and Order Movement was founded in 1927 in Switzerland to handle areas of doctrinal differences and the Roman Catholics and Eastern Orthodox delegates attended these meetings. Strides were further made after the formation of World Council of Churches (WCC) in 1948 in Amsterdam. Since the Vatican II, especially, in 1967, Catholics have initiated several reconciliation initiatives. They started dialogues with the Lutherans, Baptists, Anglicans, Mennonites, 7<sup>th</sup> Day Adventists and the Salvation Army. Fr Raymond E. Brown and Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, now Pope Benedict XVI was very involved in the Faith and Order Council of the WCC and today, Catholics actively participate in the week of prayers for Christian Unity held annually from January 18-25.

Vatican II Council helped make great strides in our quest for unity by clearly identifying the church as ecumenical. It clearly stated that the body of Christ consists not only of Catholics but all Christians. Hitherto, all other churches had been declared “false churches” and outside of the body of Christ and consequently outside of salvation. The Vatican II decree on Ecumenism defined the goal of the ecumenical movement as the “restoration” of Christian unity and this task has been taken very seriously till date. Since Vatican II, there

have been formal dialogues, consultations and bilateral talks between the Catholic Church and other Christian churches at the local, national and international levels and also there continues to be joint theological pursuits and common prayer and other initiatives to foster mutual recognition of each other.

Despite all these initiatives, the theological division continues to greatly hamper us from praying together, we mutually suspect and exclude each other from communion and in most cases can't even pray the Lord's Prayer together. For instance, in 1989, the late Pope John Paul II did pastoral visits to the Nordic countries: Iceland, Norway, Sweden, Belgium, Finland and Denmark. These countries are heavily Lutheran and during the visit to each of these countries, Ecumenical services of the Word were held and the Pope was invited to give a homily except in Denmark. During the service of the Word in Denmark, the Pope was not allowed to preach neither were the Lutherans ready to preach at the service, so they maintained silence at the homily space at the worship. The Catholic-Lutheran dialogue joint declaration of 1999 on the positive things that have come out of the Reformation has helped to douse the inflammatory situation. Though the 1999 Joint Declaration on Justification was the result of over 40 years of dialogue, there still continues to be some doubts and mutual intolerance, for instance, Catholics are urged to understand that the JDDJ:

does not cover all that either church teaches about justification; it does encompass a consensus on basic truths of the doctrine of justification and shows that the remaining differences in its explication are no longer the occasion for doctrinal condemnations (Vatican Editrice, 1999).

The Catholics, affirming the real and serious differences between the decrees of the Council of Trent and the normative Lutheran documents collected in the 1580 Book of Concord reject the 1999 "JDDJ" as fatally flawed (Malloy & Lang: 2005). And on the part of the Lutherans, especially Confessional Lutherans, they maintain that the JDDJ fails to properly define the meaning of faith, sin, and other essential terms and thus does not enjoy the support of the Lutheran World Federation.

## **II. The Tragedy of Sin and Divine forgiveness**

A treatise on divine forgiveness would not be comprehensive without a reflection on the tragedy of sin. Sin is a product of man's

freedom interpreted and lived as licentiousness. A freedom that derives from the error of “*horizontalism*,” the exclusion of God; “*secularism*,” a religionless morality; “*psychologism*,” no shame or guilt feeling from morally bad/evil actions; error of “*sociologism*,” a feeling that only humans and the environment and not God is affected by our sins; over emphasis on cultural anthropology; explaining sin away as culturally acceptable; and historical relativism; excusing sin to suit one’s plight. But we know that despite our various attempts at explaining sin away, very many Christians are weighed down by sins. Confirming the truth of God’s word in the Bible that “if we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves” (1 John1:8-9). This is what makes the theme of sin intimately connected with divine forgiveness.

The protracted argument about divine forgiveness has left many Christians doubting that the Lord Jesus wants us to give him the sins which most of us struggle by entering into the mystery of divine mercy, the paschal mystery. For some, our greatest sin for which we are ashamed might be failure to trust in God (not attending church to worship God on Sunday; for instance), for others it might be a sinful habit or an addiction or a longstanding grudge against a family member or colleague. It could also be some destructive form of self-indulgence that has wrecked its havoc on us and those around us. These guilt feelings can become manifested in negative self-views, such as feelings of unworthiness and low self-esteem.

Commenting on the Book of Genesis which tells how sin came into the world and robbed us of divine forgiveness, the Reformer, Baius (1531-1589) had taught that because of this tragedy of Adam and Eve, unbelievers are men without grace and there would be no justification for them at death; the works of unbelievers are sinful and the virtues of philosophers were vices and that man before the fall was in a perfect nature but this nature was destroyed at the fall renders man incapable of any good. A mere glance at the above sketch cannot fail to reveal a strange mixture of Pelagianism, Calvinism, and even Socinianism. Baius thus was classed a Pelagian because of his concept of the primitive state of man. He also tended towards Calvinism in his presentation of the downfall. He is more than a Lutheran and little short of the Socinian in his theory of Redemption says Joseph Sollier (1907).

It is the Catholic position that when Adam fell, his nature, his ability to do good was not destroyed. He was still capable of doing good but what was impaired at the fall was his relationship with God and this could be restored. St Augustine argues that human nature was not destroyed by the fall and what makes a man good is the end in view. No man is good without the grace of God and no act of virtue is performed without the grace of God not minding the freedom of man. The lost freedom at the fall is not the power to choose between good and evil. Man continues to exercise his freedom but limited by concupiscence-the tendency to always fall into sin. Concupiscence is a somewhat old-fashioned term for what might be termed “lust.” Paul admonished believers not to let sin reign, which happens when we obey the “passions” or “desires” (Rom. 6:12, 13:14). In Christ’s sacrifice on the cross, we see an open demonstration of his love for us human beings. Our sins are like the nails been driven into his body; like snipes, our sins causes us pains, shame and destruction but because he loves us, he takes up into himself all of humanity’s sufferings and hopes, all the yearnings of creation, and bears it to God.

### **III. Assurance of Divine forgiveness and Eternal Life – The Catholic Position**

When we sin, we not only desecrate ourselves, the community or the environment but we also transgress against God. The Catholics profess that, to experience divine forgiveness, there has to be an acknowledgement of the sense of sin, remorse for sin, confession and divine forgiveness through absolution. Luke’s gospel insists for repentance preceding forgiveness; “Unless you repent, you too will all perish” (Luke 13:3, 5). This is what makes divine forgiveness grace centered and not merit centered. Just as we humans are composite so is the dimension of sin in our lives. The human dimension reveals sins as an integral part of us and the divine dimension guarantees us of the love and mercy of a generous God. Divine forgiveness is salvation and redemption through Jesus Christ. Sin is a human act and not an act of man. It affects our horizontal (man-man) and our vertical (Man-God) dimensions. Adam and Eve were never forgiven because there did not ask for forgiveness. They suffered the consequences of sin by been separated. They hid themselves and instead of been sorrowful,

they made excuses, heaping blames and were eventually driven out of the Garden of God's presence.

Jesus' promise that He will never lose anyone the Father gives Him nor cast them away (John 6:37, 39) and when he posits in Matthew 6:12, 14-15, that Divine forgiveness for people's sins is contingent on their own interpersonal forgiveness of people who have sinned against them and his command to Peter to forgive 77 times (Mt 18:21-22; cf. Gen 4:24; see also Luke 17:3b-5), show how very central the topic of forgiveness is in the teachings of Jesus in the gospels. In interpreting this singular doctrine of forgiveness, one of the primary features of the doctrine of justification is an emphasis on the plight of the individual before God. Brokenness is a prerequisite for understanding God's grace, but the Gospels do not leave us in a state of broken despair. After Lent comes Easter! Redemption gives meaning and hope to fallen Christian. Traditional Protestant soteriology focuses on the plight of the conscience-smitten individual before a holy God, while the Catholics emphasize the doctrine of participation and the believer's union with Christ leading to a progressive reality of human salvation in Christ.

In all of these, there seem to be no division that **Forgiveness is a divine mandate**; (e.g., Matthew 18:15-35; Luke 6:37; Ephesians 4:32, Colossians 3:13) and that **the Divine** mandate extends to the need to forgive others and to love one's enemies. There was also no argument regarding the fact that God's forgiveness always deals with the sin that separates humanity from God's holiness. In Luke 7, Jesus makes a direct connection between love and forgiveness as He tells the parable of the two debtors (7:41-43) to illustrate that God will not forgive people who do not forgive others (Matthew 6:14-15; Matthew 18:23-35). While Catholics emphasize the role and mediation of the priests in bringing forth divine forgiveness, Protestants leaves the individual solely at the mercy of God's judgment.

On the question of how one receives divine forgiveness, and consequently salvation, it has always been the Catholic position that the Eucharist is a mystery of salvation. Pope John Paul II, in his encyclical *Ecclesia de Eucharistia* (2003), described the Eucharistic mystery as follows:

When the Church celebrates the Eucharist, the memorial of her Lord's death and resurrection, this central event of salvation becomes really present and 'the work of our redemption is carried out.

This position evidently derives from the Fourth Lateran Council which declared in Canon One that:

There is indeed one universal church of the faithful, outside of which nobody at all is saved, in which Jesus Christ is both priest and sacrifice. His body and blood are truly contained in the sacrament of the altar under the forms of bread and wine, the bread and wine having been changed in substance, by God's power, into his body and blood, so that in order to achieve this mystery of unity we receive from God what he received from us. Nobody can effect this sacrament except a priest who has been properly ordained according to the church's keys, which Jesus Christ himself gave to the apostles and their successors.

The Protestants opposition to this understanding flows from the Reformers disagreement with this understanding of church wherein they see Church as "Creatura verbi" and held that the elect are justified by faith based on the Word; meaning divine forgiveness is attained by absolute faith in the Word – "sola scriptura, sola fidei." This Protestant tradition about sin and divine forgiveness started with Martin Luther. He believed that all our actions stem from God and that God chooses to forgive the sinner by His sovereign grace — that we are justified not by our deeds, but by faith alone. In 1520, Luther wrote a treatise to Pope Leo X, called "The Freedom of a Christian," in which he outlined that:

the word of God cannot be received and cherished by any works whatever, but only by faith. Therefore it is clear that as the soul needs only the Word of God for its life and righteousness, so it is justified by faith alone and not by works; for if it could be justified by anything else, it would not need the Word and consequently, it would not need faith.

Catholic theologians would argue that it is too simplistic to understand the mystery of divine forgiveness as just entirely a matter of faith in Jesus Christ. Robert Cardinal Bellarmine (1542-1621) one of the most influential Catholic ecclesiologists, who taught "controversial theology" at the Collegium Romanum in his *Disputations against the Heretics* insisted on the principle of "extra ecclesiam nulla salus." For him, "while the Church had a visible body it also had a soul. It was possible for someone to belong to the body of the Church but not its soul, which is to be without grace. Similarly

it was possible for someone to belong to the soul of the Church in faith and charity without necessarily belonging to the body of the Church. This conviction will make Cardinal Kasper declare that; “for the Catholics, the idea of church as *creatura verbi* as held by the Lutheran and Reformed theology is fundamentally different from the Catholic understanding of “church” as a sacrament of grace” (Kasper, 2003).

This position was what Martin Luther had disagreed with when he spoke against the “evils” of the Catholic Church, especially, the practice of indulgences and confessions as grounds for divine forgiveness. Luther at first had believed in the efficacy of private confession, but in 1528 he rejected the Lateran Council Canon of Pope Innocent III which encouraged Catholics to avail themselves of private confessions through the priests. Luther canvassed for only two sacraments; Baptism and the Eucharist; he interpreted Matthew 16:19 where Jesus gave the keys to bind and lose to mean that it was not just to the apostles alone that Jesus spoke but that all Christians had the injunction to hear confessions and to absolve each others’ sins and thus he taught that all Christians should confess to one another, thus mixing up the doctrine of the “common priesthood of all the baptized” with the “ministerial priesthood”. Trent condemned Luther’s call for lay people to hear confession; and advocated private confessions, a power reserved to ministerial priests and bishops alone; they alone possess the power of the “keys,” to unlock the door to heaven – meaning in this case, absolution.

Historically, the second, third and extending into the fourth century till St. Gregory of Nazianzen and the *Liber regalae Pastoralis* of St. Gregory the Great, saw divergence of opinions on this matter ranging from Tertulian who maintained a rigorous line of thought about soul care of post baptismal minor sins, to a more lenient approach represented by the pastoral writing known as *The Shepherd of Hermas* (Hunter, 1982). The Shepherd of Hermas in the second century regulated penance and reconciliation (Mandate III: 30-31). The Catholic Church, while not denying the grace of God on any one, Roman Catholicism exclusively teaches that “divine forgiveness” was also mediated by the function of the priest at Mass and as confessor and in spiritual direction through repentance and reconciliation.

In the middle Ages, specifically in 1215 at the Fourth Lateran Council, the Form of auricular confession to a priest was accepted by Rome as a normative form of the sacrament and thus the care of souls became associated with the power of divine grace (conferred by ordination of a priest) to heal the deformities of human existence through this sacrament. This function was entrusted solely to the pastors, who were empowered by ordination to diagnose and cure what made people ill through the sacraments of baptism, unction (anointing) and confirmation and penitential manuals were used to administer penance for reconciliation with God and with the church. Pastors were thus established as healers and guides of souls, confessors and counsellors. Later, Pius IX pope from 1846 to 1878 would publish the “Syllabus of Errors” against the liberal ideals of the modern world and convoke the First Vatican Council. The position of the Catholic Church would remain the same until the early twentieth century when preparations for Vatican Council II began. The Dominican Yves Congar and the Jesuit Henri de Lubac would significantly influence the ecclesiology of the Vatican Council II.

The Second Vatican Council II was great for the unity of Christendom. The ecclesiology of Vatican II definitively affirmed that its faith is not the only avenue to salvation in the Bible. It produced documents on Ecumenism, inter-religious dialogue and on religious freedom and allowed Protestants to attend the Vatican Council II. In the document *Unitatis Redintegratio* it declared that non-Catholic Christians also share our founder, Jesus Christ, one baptism and the Trinity and in *Lumen Gentium* #15 it lists the many ways in which the Catholic Church is linked with other Christians and their communities: love for Scripture, faith in the Trinity and in Jesus Christ, common celebration of many of the sacraments along with a mutual sharing in the Holy Spirit. The Apostle Paul, it would seem foresaw the future church when he advised; “Is not the bread we break a participation in Christ’s body? The one bread makes us one body, though we are many in number; the same bread is shared by all” (1 Corinthians 10:16-17). Henri de Lubac building on the Eucharistic theology of St Paul avers that the Eucharist as the sacrament of unity has important implications for the ecclesiality of non-Catholic Christian communities and since schismatic

communities do not produce a true Eucharist they are outside of the unity of the church as the Mystical Body of Christ.

In fact, Yves Congar who is today considered by many to be the father of Catholic ecumenism because of his seminal examination of the status of non-Catholic Christian communities in relation to the Catholics understanding of the church defined the Church as the Body of Christ and is quoted as saying, “for our separated brethren, for having received grace they cannot be considered alien to the mystical Body of the Lord.” The Catholic theologian, Karl Rahner would emphasize the sinfulness of the church as a truth of faith rather than merely a fact of experience (Rahner, 1969) and Avery Dulles (1987) would also concur that the more important aspect of the Church...is the vertical or spiritual dimension of communion with God and Gregory Baum (1965) would also lends support to this position when he says;

If a non-Catholic Christian community listens faithfully to the gospel, shares in the breaking of bread, and otherwise behaves as a living fellowship of Christians, then because of the reality of that living fellowship, this community deserves to be called a “church” in the theological sense of the word, even if we happen to regret the institutional imperfections from which it suffers (Baum, 1965).

and Joseph Ratzinger, in *The Spirit of the Liturgy* (2000), sums everything up when he writes that the total identification of Christ with humanity on the cross is the height of Christ’s achievement and gives the hope that each person’s life may become fruitful.

#### **IV. The Protestants’ Response: Salvation: A Personal Relationship with God**

The on-going debate on divine forgiveness among Protestants today has been championed by some Protestant Pauline scholars who have come up with new perspectives that has unearthed a new understanding of Paul’s use of the Greek word *pistis* (πίστις, meaning “trust,” “belief,” “faith,” or “faithfulness”). Old perspective writers have typically interpreted this word as meaning a belief in God and Christ, and trust in Christ for salvation with faith that he will save us but this New Perspective on Paul” (NPP) is a significant shift in the way many scholars, especially Catholic scholars interpret the writings of the Apostle Paul and has seen current theologians use many tools to make their arguments, including analysis of biblical texts, analysis

of Hebrew and Greek language and linguistics, understanding of historical contexts (including the history of Israel, the church, and surrounding area), and conversations with philosophers, theologians, and public intellectuals across situations and time.

This perspective has been put forth by a variety of theologians including Dunn (Dunn & Suggate, 1994) and Wright (1997). Most of this work is based on scholarship by Sanders (1977). Sanders (1977) studied rabbinical texts from the era of the second Temple Judaism in the centuries on either side of Christ's birth. Sanders claimed that Jews did not believe that they could work their way into God's favour. He argued that Second-Temple Jews were a covenant people chosen by grace. The law was a reflection of God's character (Davies, 1957) and Jews obeyed the law out of gratitude for being God's people. Failures to keep the law, however, were inevitable, and sacrifices were made as a means of restoration to covenant fellowship.

The central problem of this new perspective is that if Jews indeed were essentially grace oriented (as Sanders claimed), then; (1) Either Paul misunderstood Judaism of his time. Or (2) theologians such as Augustine and Martin Luther misunderstood Paul. But we know that Paul widens the circle of grace from just salvation to the Jews alone to include all who accept Jesus as Lord, including the Gentiles and this fact alone brings the discussion on justification to a new level; it takes salvation for the Jews alone as a condition for soteriology and places it in ecclesiology; emphasising membership in a covenant community (i.e., God's acceptance of Gentiles in God's covenant people). If we understand this discussion in this perspective, then we can justify the on-going discussion between the Catholics and other denominations starting from the Lutheran reformation.

The attempt to respond to the perceived challenge of modernity through a mixture of concession and resistance was what led to the impact of Karl Barth's work and that of Rudolf Bultmann. First there was the turn to myth in theology which has become a major part of the ongoing development of the liberal wing of theology and has helped in developments within the field of Old and New Testament scholarship. Emile Durkheim had attempted to destroy the foundations on which the sacred stood by averring that the sacred does not necessarily refer to the divine and that anything could be classified as sacred: rocks, trees, pebbles, and pieces of wood and

more that sacred things are created by the society. He had based his thesis on Wilhelm Wundt before him, who had interpreted religion as a social phenomenon, the product of group fantasy. Rudolph Bultmann, came to the rescue by calling for the “demythologization” of the New Testament and Rudolf Otto, took up the challenge and set forth the most distinctive phenomenological analysis of the concept of the holy, Paul Ricoeur reconnects myth to historical epic by emphasizing their shared narrative element concluding that the experience of the mysterious, the “wholly other,” before which one trembles, provokes tremendous terror and fear (*mysterium tremendum*). The *mysterium tremendum* in its daunting, overwhelming power provokes the sense of divine wrath and judgment and at the same time, *mysterium* has another aspect, “something uniquely attractive and fascinating.” However, it was Mircea Eliade who championed the idea of cosmos from chaos and how man shifted from primitive to modern.

Today, several religion scholars and anthropologists and psychologists have theorized about the potential importance of people’s experiences of divine forgiveness. For instance, Thomas Csordas, (1994; p. 25), attests to the fact that divine forgiveness is considered to be an essential aspect of healing, and experiencing the “intimacy of divine presence assists psychologically and aids inner spiritual healing Oftentimes their emotions have roots in shame from their past for which they feel they did not enjoy divine forgiveness. Being forgiven for wrongdoings can help to assuage feelings of guilt and other depressive self directed emotions. In fact, several studies have found that self-forgiveness has been positively linked with mental and physical health (Fisher & Exline, 2006; Lawler et al., 2003; McCullough & Witvliet, 2002; Toussaint, Williams, Musick, & Everson, 2001), low self-consciousness (Ross, Kendall, Matters, Wrobel, & Rye, 2004), positive emotion (Ross et al., 2004), and lack of shame (Tangney & Boone, 2004).

In all of these, one thing is clear, divine forgiveness is the promise of Christ. He knows that our sins could become overbearing on our lives and the experiential feeling of divine forgiveness is healing and this in itself is the best route to positive mental health. Many people seek psychotherapy because of struggles with depression, and one of the hallmark symptoms of depression is

excessive or inappropriate guilt (American Psychiatric Association, 2000). A sincere feeling of divine-forgiveness promotes psychological health and well-being. Feeling forgiven by God, or the experience of divine forgiveness, has been linked with feelings of self-acceptance and other markers of well-being.

#### **V. Healing the Shame of the Past**

The first step to healing us from the shame of our past is prayer and next is through dialogue and then standing together on the Word and Sacraments. Jesus prayed for the unity of his disciples (John 17). Although the origins of these controversies were theological, they left bitter memories. Like Pope John Paul II prayed; “we beg for forgiveness and for our brothers and sisters to forgive us” (Great Jubilee, 2000). There is also need for dialogue. The dialogue of the Catholics with the Reformed Tradition (United Church, Presbyterians) on John Huss, Zwingli and John Calvin from 1984-1990 called for a common understanding; a reconciliation of memories. Catholics who suffered in the hands of reformers also need healing from bitter memories. The Catholic-Mennonites dialogue was called: Memories and Reconciliation – Calling for healing of bitter memories. The Catholic-Lutheran dialogue considered the many positive things that came out of the Reformation (Augsburg Confessions) and culminated in the 1999 joint declaration. Catholics are engaged in on-going dialogue with the Anglicans, Methodists and Presbyterians. Concerning the Eastern Orthodox Church, late Pope John Paul II opened dialogue with them and travelled out there and returned the relics of St. John Chrysostom and St. Gregory of Nazienzen as a reconciliatory action to healing the bitter memories of 1054. These dialogues have sure followed four steps:

1. Accurate historical understanding of what happened
2. What we did to create the bitter memories
3. Acknowledgement of repentance.
4. Working together now to create new memories for the future.

Participant churches are always reminded that these crises arose as theological controversies and were nothing personal. For instance, the first crisis that led to division arose at the Council of Chalcedon (451) over the nature of Jesus Christ – Homoiousus (true God and true man). Today, most church members don’t even care to know what the issues are; most have taken the division as a personal that bitter

experience, making them indispose to pray together with perceived enemies. This is similar to the 16<sup>th</sup> century division of the Lutherans over the theological understanding of justification by faith and what the council of Trent taught about it. Today, practices of both churches have seen Lutherans moving away from “sola scriptura” and Catholics embracing “sola scriptura.” Thanks to Vatican II document, “De Verbum.” Even the Baptists have really embraced this document.

Every priest or minister of a church congregation is a healer through the word and sacraments; Reconciliation and counselling and through prayer, mediums by which the grace and forgiveness of God is transmitted. The subject of forgiveness; human and divine has always been in the domain of the spiritual and the religious. In fact Karl Rahner once remarked that this is the meaning of Christianity. The Son of the Father became incarnate and the presence of this fact opens us to salvation. Thus the sacramental structure of salvation is hinged on divine forgiveness by the logos’ incarnation; God became flesh and makes salvation possible (Rahner; 1993). Jesus comes to give himself to us so that we might give ourselves to one another. “Love one another as I have loved you” (John 13: 34).

Christians believe that salvation for sinners involves receiving God’s free gift of forgiveness as manifested through Jesus’ atoning death on the Cross. People’s proclivity to move on from the shame of the past is influenced by this religious understanding. People benefit from receiving God’s forgiveness, or divine forgiveness, to help them move on and achieve peace and self-acceptance about a transgression they committed. Halligan (1997) theorized that accepting divine forgiveness can heal narcissism and both interpersonal and intrapersonal wounds, as well as feelings of emptiness. Divine forgiveness is freedom to move on from the shame of our past. My reason for saying this is predicated on the first preaching of Jesus where he defined the reasons for his mission:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor, he has sent me to heal the broken hearted, to preach deliverance to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set liberty to the enslaved and to announce the Lord’s year of favour (Luke 4: 18-19).

This above quotation of Jesus summarizes what the Christian life is all about and what Christians are called to know about God. The Church avails us of different approaches to savour divine forgiveness.

For Catholics, the sacraments, especially the Eucharist and Confession help Christians to relieve human anguish and guilt. For the other Christian denominations, confessing one's sins and accepting the Lordship of Jesus Christ is deemed sufficient and for the others, the grace of God is freely outpoured even in our passivity. It must be said that in all these channels, God's mercy and forgiveness is freely given. At the heart of Christian spirituality is the healing relationship with God. We were broken and dead in our life of sin when God in His mercy and love reached out to us in Christ (Ephesians 2: 4-5).

The theme of eternal life is fundamental in the Gospels and other books of the New Testament; "...so that whoever believes will in Him have eternal life" (John 3: 15); "for my Father's will is that everyone who looks to the Son and believes in him shall have eternal life, and I will raise them up at the last day" (John 6:40). In the dialogue with Nicodemus (John 3:1-5), the gift of eschatology is anticipated; "unless one is born again, of water and the spirit (baptism) they can never be saved." In John 6:28-58, the heavenly bread is presented as the source of life. He is the bread come down from heaven in order to give life to the world. Those who eat this bread will never die.

Jesus, in obedience to the will of the Father, does not want the death of anybody but life for all through the resurrection on the last day (John 6: 37-39). Divine Life is a messianic and eschatological gift. Full salvation, eternal life and perfect happiness are promised to those who eat this bread and they will never be hungry again. The promise of eternal life is Jesus' promise to those who come to him in faith and it includes the resurrection on the last day when the incarnate one will raise those who eat his body and drink his blood up. The gift of eternal life is assured for those who eat the heavenly bread; that is, to those who internalize and interiorize Jesus. The understanding of how this Christological and eschatological fact play out in our collective and individual soteriology has been the cause of a collective shame from our past calling for divine forgiveness and freedom to move on in faith.

## **VI. Forgiveness: Freedom from the Haunts of the Past**

The Late Pope John Paul II continually asked for forgiveness for the past and present sins of the Catholic Church. For example, he asked for forgiveness for the sins of the church against Galileo Galilei

(1564-1642. Although a genuinely pious Roman Catholic, for championing heliocentric views, he was tried by the Inquisition, found “vehemently suspect of heresy”, forced to recant, and spent the rest of his life under house arrest. The Pope said, then; “there is need for us to ask for forgiveness and do public penance for our sins and shame of the past. We can no longer continue to pretend that these sins never happened. They happened and we know they did. The mystery of evil in the world like the mystery of suffering remains an inescapable dimension of the human experience because it is the consequence of both sin in the world and human frailty.”

Pope Benedict XVI in his Easter Sunday message of 2011 *Urbi et Orbi* (to the city of Rome) stated;

here in this world of ours, the Easter alleluia still contrasts with so many painful situations: deprivation, hunger, disease, war, violence. Yet it was for this that Christ died and rose again. The tension between evil in the world and our hope of salvation in Jesus Christ is at the heart of the Christian faith. The whole idea of salvation flows from our humble dependence upon God. It calls for our admittance of our weak nature and an acknowledgment of God’s grace through divine forgiveness. Only through a higher power outside of himself can man come to that focal point that he stands in need of salvation.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu titled one of his books, “No future without forgiveness” (Tutu, 1999). As I reflect over this absolute truth, I cannot but wonder if the church would have had a future if Jesus had not forgiven the apostle Peter. Although there could be no greater shame for Peter than his denial of Jesus three times (Matthew 26:69-75), Jesus still founded his church around him (Matthew 16:18) even as he suffered the indignity of Peter’s denial. He had earlier boasted that he would never deny Jesus, proudly proclaiming that even if the others left him, he would not desert him. Peter learned the futility of pride the hard way. One can imagine the shame Peter felt when Jesus turned and looked at him. From the table of the Last Supper, Jesus was preparing Peter and the rest for the divine forgiveness that comes by going to the Paschal mystery.

Forgiving someone who has hurt us by praying the “Our Father” is healthy practice spiritually and psychologically. In praying the “Our father,” Jesus taught us to say; “forgive us our sins,” because, he recognizes that we are human and the holy community is not the one that is not sinning but the one that is continually open to divine forgiveness. There will always be sin because sin is part of human

nature but the best quality of God is that he forgives our sins. Sin breaks our fellowship with God. The sin of Adam and Eve (Genesis 3) represented a barrier of the fellowship with God. The sin was committed by a free decision of Adam and Eve. It was a “deviation” from the right way by missing the mark and it was also a “rebellion” against an agreement. Thus sin is a personal, voluntary and deliberate transgression and trespass of God’s norm and thus guilt in conscience makes it manifest to the soul. There is no one who does not sin (Psalm 53:1; 1John 1:8) and sin is what intimately brings us into relationship with God and the gift of divine forgiveness makes our relationship with God indissoluble.

After his resurrection, Jesus will ask Peter thrice, “Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?” He said to Him, “Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.” He said to him, “Tend My lambs” (John 21: 15-17). Peter as yet had not entered into the Paschal mystery but afterwards, he increasingly entered into the mystery of Christ’s passion, death and resurrection. Through this communion, he came to understand that the paschal mystery is a mystery of divine mercy. In his last book, *memory and Identity*; Pope John Paul II wrote; “in sacrificing himself for all of us, Christ gave a new meaning to suffering, opening up a new dimension, a new order; the order of love” (John Paul II: 2005).

Talking of shame of the past; Simon Wiesenthal (1976) in the Anthology; *the Sunflower*; expands on the possibilities and limits of forgiveness and tells how he was unable to forgive a Nazi soldier who had asked him for forgiveness. This soldier had rounded up a group of Jews, locked them up in a building and set it on fire, killing everyone inside. The soldier, now on his death bed, troubled in conscience came confessing his complicity and hoping to get absolution from a Jew. Simon Wiesenthal listened to his story in silence and then left without uttering a word. He asked at the end of his account, “what would you have done?”

When Jesus Demands Love even for Enemies (Matthew 5:43-44) he makes a demand that can require more than merely human resources for forgiveness. It is clear that Jesus intends for us to go beyond what we could do on our own. When Corrie Ten Boom, who spent several months in a German prison camp during World War II, met one of the soldiers from that same camp a few years after the war,

she was able to forgive him even though she had lost most of her family in a Nazi concentration camp. As she continued to lecture on grace, one day a man came to shake her hand after such a talk and introduced himself a former prison guard at the concentration camp. This experience is similar to that of Pope John Paul II who traveled some distance to a prison in order to extend forgiveness to the man who had attempted to kill him. The same man, Ali Agca, now freed from jail, attended the Mass for the Beatification of Pope John Paul II in May 2011. Stories like these always thrill and baffle us. These stories give us hope that what is horribly broken can be changed, healed and made right.

Some of us are still holding on to these past mistakes too; mistakes of people who have hurt us. In all of these various situations of conflict, we count on God's grace to transform our hearts. We are to bring our "enemies", and ourselves, to God in prayer for His intervention in our lives. There may be times when I think I want Him to love me less, to let me hold onto my petty thoughts of revenge, my hate and anger, but I see the foolishness of being left there. Jesus defines love as righteousness which involves a freedom that enables us to move towards our enemies in a new and surprising way. This is true of Jesus, the One who fulfills all righteousness. He loves those who oppose him and prays for his persecutors. What amazing good news it is that Jesus does not allow his enemies to determine how he will treat them. Therefore, they do not need to remain his enemies.

In Luke 7: 36-50, a woman who was a public prostitute and sinner was not embarrassed to come forward publicly and knelt at the feet of Jesus. Amid the general embarrassment, Jesus said to Simon his host, "this woman knows she is a sinner; yet prompted by love; she is asking for understanding and forgiveness. God forgives all those who humbly recognize their need for God's mercy. If a new world community must be built, there has to be a way to freedom from the shame of the past and this is what divine forgiveness gives.

The Catholics sacrament of Reconciliation offers a cathartic healing effect. There are past sins that painfully sit in the pits of the stomach and the soul but true confession and forgiveness received helps us deal with the past and helps us create a future. In the sacrament of penance, the Lord Jesus wants us to entrust those sins to him and we can walk away freely. In the act of confession and

forgiveness we are declaring our faith in the future of a relationship and in the capacity of the culprit to make a new beginning. Jesus demonstrated the divine forgiveness to which we are all called to practice when he answers Peter's question on how many times we are to forgive. Not seven times; he replies; but seven times seven times, which is seventy-seven times (Matthew 18: 21-22). Reconciliation helps us to realize God's dream for humanity-helping us know that we are all members of one and the same family. There are the sorts of things that we confess and entrust to the Lord and we can thence walk away in peace. A sincere examination of conscience followed by a good, complete and worthy confession of our sin in the sacrament of penance or reconciliation would liberate us from bondage and heal us.

#### **V. Psycho –Theological Approach to Healing the Shame of Our Past**

There is a good deal of philosophical, theological and psychological interest in forgiveness in recent years, especially because of the events in the world's history from which the world needs divine forgiveness and freedom from its shame. Some examples of these shameful human acts includes; the trans-Atlantic slave trade (in which over 40 million people died), the holocaust, the Orange Irish Protestants versus the Catholics fights, the South African apartheid; racism; injustices against Native Americans; the enslavement of African Americans and their continued repression; the Rwandan genocide, the Darfur genocide, the horrors of 9/11/2001 and the clergy sexual abuse, etc. While some of these sins have been compensated for through reparation, the shame still lingers and often times causing the sufferers religious conscience guilt and even psychological traumas, in most cases, some of the victims and their say they still find it hard to forgive the perpetrators.

Experiences like these have made the topic of forgiveness the focal point of academic disciplines like psychology, counselling, philosophy, medicine and theology. For example, Pastors can learn spiritually guided forgiveness protocols to help clients deal with emotional forgiveness problems that resulted from harm inflicted by friends or family members. Using religio-psychological protocols on forgiveness can direct clients to let go of unhealthy anger and move past an abusive situation without justifying the abuse. In the context of implementing these techniques, however, the possibility that

religion may have a negative influence on a client's life - believing in an angry God, for example - could be assessed carefully so that therapy doesn't make emotional crises worse.

There are also International Forgiveness Research Institutes being established by Universities and Charities and Foundations are springing to address these causes. But regrettably, little attention is being paid to guilt and shame arising from the past. This is where the churches' spirituality becomes indispensable. Richard Rohr once said, "Pain that is not transformed is transferred." The prolonged arguments about divine forgiveness have traumatized churches and left members seeking spiritual healing from psychological and philosophical places. The church has a great role to play in helping people heal their poor self-image and the crisis arising from the conflicted thinking of belongingness to the right church with the right theology. Some churches and persons are usually harmed beyond the visible shame, pain and embarrassment. Often they become stuck in a cycle of bad relationships with their pastors for not clarifying the truth and with triadic conflicted relationships with the members of the congregation. A denomination or congregation can get stuck in grief over doctrinal issue leading to inhibited congregational anger, shame, blame and anguish.

Hospitality and compassion were two values that made early Christianity attractive. When men and women became Christians, they found in the church a home and a new family. Tertullian of the third century wrote in the in the Apology 39:7; "see how they love one another." These early Christians really took to heart the teachings of Jesus who say "be compassionate as your heavenly Father is compassionate" (Luke 6:36). Today's world feels no compassion for a poor, hungry and dying child neither do we feel compassion towards each other in a dog eat dog world that we live in. To be human is to be compassionate but we wonder why our world is torn by conflict, war hatred and oppression? Why are there so many people in our midst suffering from hunger, cold, lack of shelter, why are there discriminations based on race, sex or religion; why are so many people suffering from alienation, separation and loneliness; why do we hurt, torture and kill each other; why is the world in so much chaos? It would seem like the Christian religion has lost its influence

on her adherents to make them have compassion just like God have compassion through divine forgiveness.

The word compassion is derived from the Latin “*pati*” and “*cum*” which together mean “to suffer with.” Compassion asks us to go where it hurts, to enter into places of pain, to share in brokenness, fear, confusion and anguish. Compassion challenges us to cry with those in misery, to mourn with those who are lonely, to weep with those in tears. Compassion requires us to be weak with the weak, vulnerable with the vulnerable and powerless with the powerless. Compassion means full immersion with the condition of being human (Nouwen, McNeil & Morrison; 1983 p. 4).

God is a compassionate God. God-with-us is his way of letting us know and feel his divine forgiveness that flows from his compassion. While there are no easy answers to questions that come up in peoples’ minds when we as pastors try to offer care and counselling support to people who come to us or whom we encounter in the course of our work, we can let them know that God is a God-with-us who came to share in our lives in solidarity. It does not mean that God solves all our problems, shows us the way out of our confusion or offers answers to our many questions. He might do all of that but his solidarity consists in the fact that he is willing to enter with us into our problems, confusion and questions.

The question that begs for an answer in the minds and lips of many Christians today is; “what has the church got to offer me in my quest to move on from the shame of my past.” Consequently, chapels and churches have become less popular places to visit and spiritual directors have fewer clients (Nouwen, 1971, p. 4). Pastor’s preaching and teachings must contain spiritual as well as theo-psychological insights for the people to help people experience God’s compassion, mercy and forgiveness. In John 12:23, Mary of Bethany took a pound of costly ointment of pure nard and anointed the feet of Jesus and wiped his feet with her hair. She wanted Jesus to help her move on from the shame of her past. Judas Iscariot obviously was blinded to this quest and instead was shocked by this logic of love that clashed with his logic of profit. Just like the house was filled with her fragrance of love for God’ divine forgiveness so is God’s overflowing divine forgiveness to those who seek his face; both believers and non-believers alike.

Again, we could see that the contrast between Peter's betrayal of Jesus and Judas' betrayal of Jesus is in the inner self-image that prevented Judas other from seeking divine forgiveness. Jesus had warned that they were going to be "deserters and betrayers" and in fact they were. They both deserted and betrayed Jesus but Peter repented and Judas didn't. Peter expressed contrition by weeping and Jesus accepted his contrition and forgave him. Peter's contrition is the reason why the precept of the church encourages Catholics to go to the sacrament of reconciliation especially at Easter. When we confess that Christ is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, we mean he not only takes away the sin but also the attraction of sin and he continues this liberation work in our world today. Forgiveness brings reconciliation with God and with our fellow human beings and the community. Divine forgiveness is the basis for the mystery of redemption; because God so love the world he sent his son (John 3:16) to reconcile us with himself (2 Cor. 5:18ff).

We could see the inner images of ourselves in Peter and in Judas, but many individuals came to church to seek comfort from their congregations. Being unable to realize this expectation of support could make the individual feel alienated and abandoned by both the church and God (Westgate, 1996). The task of the pastor is to be able to help such parishioners cope with presenting feelings resulting from depression and anxiety from shame of their past. It is therefore important for the pastors to become aware of how belief system can interact with psychological disposition and cause mental health breakdown.

An assessment of the relevance and place of the Church in facilitating healing from the shame of our past and opening us to divine forgiveness for a freedom to move on with our lives becomes the very task of a collective new understanding of what is the biblical foundation for divine forgiveness is based on. For example, in a socially reconstructed world of secularism where much of what the church has to offer is being dismissed as myth and in an attempt to stay relevant, the Church has come to rely too much on rational, scientific theologies for its explanations of her doctrines, could shy away from preaching that the Old Testament understood sin as not just breaking the law but breaking the covenantal relationship. The Old Testament views sin as rebellion (Exodus 23:21); as revolution

(2Kings 8:20); and infidelity leading to separation from the covenantal bond (Ezekiel 7: 15-27). On the hand, the New Testament emphasized the importance of solidarity and collectiveness in praying for forgiveness. Jesus Christ came to free us from the bondage of sin; a Father who sent his Son into the world to suffer for the sin of the world so that they can be free and we are called to develop a relationship with God through his son Jesus Christ.

Henri Nouwen (1992) notably uses a psychological-theological analysis of the parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15: 11-32 RSV) to illustrate the paradigm of the human-divine relationship through divine forgiveness. In his famous work, *The Return of the Prodigal Son: A Story of Homecoming* (1994), Nouwen made an analysis and a personalized meditation on the famous painting of the prodigal son by Rembrandt Harmenszoon van Rijn (1606-1669). Traditionally, greater focus has been placed on the prodigal younger son of the story, however, Nouwen exposes that the parable is also the story of the lost elder son and of the compassionate father. This parable of Jesus restores the ambiguous and distorted image of God which was presented in Genesis beginning with the stories of Adam and Eve through Cain and Abel (Gen. 2:4–4:16). Humanity was created by a loving God who placed us in a paradise of delights with everything we needed not only for survival but for natural beauty and loving communion with our creator. The Genesis narrative would exacerbate humanity's "fallen condition," radically distorting the image of God as a loving creator and present God as cursing not only the tempter-serpent but humanity. We have always lived with this ambiguous God-image until Jesus tells the parable of the prodigal son. Jesus gave the parable of the father and two sons in response to the accusation of the Pharisees and the scribes that he was welcoming sinners and dining with them.

This parable (Luke 15) has been called the "heart of Luke's gospel" as it offers us a radically new God-image, one without ambiguity – a God who is slow to anger and rich in mercy (Exodus 34:6); who desires not the death of the sinner but that the sinner repent and live (Ezra 18:23); who takes pity and relents of intended punishments (Hosea 2: 14-23). Forgiveness is not one of our most natural responses. We have a natural inclination is to shrink from and run away from forgiveness by holding on to hurts and memories of

our pains but Nouwen in his writings leads us to arriving at that spot where God and humanity meet – divine forgiveness.

However, The imagery of the son returning with dirty rags on his back and a contrived speech and the father's costly, unexpected outpouring of visible love that turns the son's heart toward him, **depicts divine forgiveness** and the son's repentance represented simply by his accepting to being found by the father was his freedom to walk away from the shame of the past. Some might think that the father should have laid down some ground rules if the son was going to re-enter the household. But that was not what the father cared about, what does matter to him was that, "this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found" (Luke 15). Divine forgiveness is free of fear and humiliation that the younger son anticipated and is free of concern with vengeance, punishment that the older son anticipated; rather it is realizing the need to come to God as individuals and as a community, supporting one another in our struggles and in failures; listening together to the word of God, in the context of conversion and committing ourselves to continuous living in God's family.

Sandra Schneiders (2008) talking about the need to heal our violent image of God avers that God's forgiveness precedes our repentance. She quoted the 14th century mystic, Julian of Norwich who said; "in God there is no wrath, there is no vengeance, there is no retaliation, there is no punishment and no reparation. God wants only one thing; that we accept the life that is freely given." The freedom to accept God's forgiveness is not merely physical but it also has a spiritual dimension and the challenge we are faced with is how to respond to our own suffering and to that of other. "To suffer with the other and for others; to suffer for the sake of truth and justice; to suffer out of love in order to become a person who truly loves – these are fundamental elements of humanity and to abandon them would destroy man himself" (Pope Benedict XVI).

Often the shame from our past mistakes lingers on in the interaction of soul, conscience and human action because we still clinging to our tendencies of claiming our freedom as an absolute right and as a result, we still struggle to grapple with the dilemma of seeking divine forgiveness at the same time. It is time to allow ourselves enjoy divine forgiveness that Jesus wrought for us on the

Cross. Divine forgiveness gives the freedom to move on from the shame of our past. “Father, forgive them for they know not what they are doing” (Luke 23:34). Anyone who believes and confesses that Jesus is the Lord is **Christian**. If this interpretation of the Bible were to prevail, virtually all bases for sectarianism would be removed, and toleration would be universal among **Christians**. The myriad other points of Christian theology have set **Christians** at each others’ throats for so long.

### **Conclusion**

Our disagreements and in-fighting on the theology of grace and justification is one clear area where we Christians need freedom from the shame of the past. Classical Protestantism, Lutherans, Calvinists and Catholicism continue to clash on the meaning of soteriology in the face of personal faith response. Martin Luther’s theology of “sola scriptura,” “sola fidei;” “sola gracia” based on “all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus” (Romans 3:24) is confronted by Catholics as erroneous because it connotes “quietism”; a condition of passive faith and also negates man’s freedom to play a role in his justification as the same St. Paul urges all to “work out your salvation with fear and trembling” (Philippians 2:12). The divisions and wounds of the church from the past stand in need of healing. We need healing of the bitter memories from conflicts of the past. Memories like the 1204 experience when western crusaders invaded and plundered and desecrated the orthodox churches. The Mennonites still feel pained that the Catholics and the Lutherans persecuted them in the 16<sup>th</sup> century for their hard stance of refusing to baptize infants and for their insistence for the separation of church and state so also does the USA Catholics need healing from the memories of the 60’s when employers put up signs saying; “No Catholic need apply.” My position is that the first step to healing us from the shame of our past is prayer and next is through dialogue and then standing together on the Word and Sacraments.

While the subject of how Divine Forgiveness is achieved has been the source of great controversies and misunderstandings in all of the history of modern Christendom and has left us revelling in the shame of our past and present understanding of the mystery of what Christ has done for us, we are at least still united on the Bible which has remained the framework for Soul Care or pastoral counselling in

the Christian tradition. Just as the church's theology of salvation has been long, checkered and did not successfully deal with the problem of sin, reconciliation and salvation so also is the church's commitments to the gospel injunction of "love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you and pray for those who abuse you..." (Luke 6: 21-31) have become hyperbolic ideals. Our Christian lives are instead being ruled by "An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth." (Matthew 5: 38). It would seem that we have totally missed the mark. We stand in need of divine forgiveness and freedom to move on from the shame of the past. While issues like divine forgiveness, Scripture and Tradition, the church as communion, apostolic faith have been on the dialogue table, there are some doctrinal topics where agreements still seem remote or perhaps impossible; areas like, infant baptism, Papacy, gender issues around ordination and ministry, etc.

Protestant churches define themselves as churches of the Word and the Catholics say they are a church of the sacraments. The word is contained too in the sacraments. While Protestants give long sermons, they also impart their members with the sacraments of baptism, communion and ministry and Catholics too are beginning to emphasize the Word through Bible Study and homilies. Protestants accuse Catholic theology as Classicism, Scholastic manualism and residue of Thomistic traditions and some Catholics recognize that any revision of Catholic theology had to maintain continuity with the past. That all these discussions have continued to polarise Christendom is not in doubt. These disagreements have inflicted traumatic wounds on the conscience of the individual Christian as they doubt if their faith profession guarantees them divine forgiveness and their answer or non-answer often determine their personal faith response or commitment.

The church as the word and the church as sacrament are two sides of the same coin and neither is fully adequate without the other. If the church celebrates the sacraments liturgically without the word, it would not be a complete vision of the church, and vice versa. The word of God as received in the scriptures is the common treasure of both traditions. What we seeking in not uniformity but unity in diversity. The spirit and the documents of Vatican II provide a paradigm for achieving this. Remember that the Protestant, Anglican

and Orthodox observers attended the Vatican II Council. While they did not vote, they were influential behind the scenes by their suggestions. For instance, the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (*Lumen Gentium*) and the Decree on Ecumenism (*Unitatis Redintegratio*) both promulgated on November 21, 1964, talks about the Word and Sacrament as points of unity. Its other documents also Ad gentes #9; Apostolicam actuositatem #6; presbyterorum ordinis #4; Unitatis redintegratio #2, Sacrosanctum concilium #51; Dei verbum #21 all spoke about the two tables; the table of the Word and the table of the Eucharist which are the pivotal that both Protestants and Catholics have been dangling.

In a time when many souls are starving from a lack in the feeling of divine forgiveness, the church is challenged to stand up as the “legitimate provider of soul care.” But how could the church maintain its respect as soul care provider when she is embroiled in disagreement over the matter of divine forgiveness? My submission is that the church must be tuned simultaneously to the horizontal and vertical dimensions of God-human relation while at the same time guarding against the dangers of religious and psychological reductionism. By this I mean, in the praxis of being church there is need to place less emphasis on “sin” and more emphasis on God’s “love” for us and it is only on this basis that we can best understand the nature of divine forgiveness. Many Christians are confused on how they can both be beloved children of God and at the same time needing redemption from sin. The church must help people get liberated from the guilt and shame of being sinners and help them see themselves as God sees us – Beloved of God.

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