

Considering Idolatry in The Catechesis of the Fathers of the Church: Towards Enriching the Faith in Nigeria

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Abstract

Man's search for God has time and again zealously veered towards reverence given to created objects or beings in the place of the one true God. This has continued to diminish what the Christian faith in the worship of the one true God stands for. Such attitude has often time culminated in polytheism which was normal in the pagan culture but viewed askance in the Christian culture. The biblical account is replete with tendencies of flagrant idolatry as evident in the case of the "Golden Calf"; and also its outright condemnation too. Many Christians suffered persecution and even martyrdom in the hands of some of the Emperors that forcefully wanted them to sacrifice to the gods. On another note, the Fathers of the Church in their process of spreading and defending the Christian faith, met with vehement opposition regarding pagan worship that not only thrived on but also promoted idolatry. Based on that, this research has established the centrality of the use of reason in the practice of faith and the importance of not abusing God's given freedom in the promotion of any form of practice of faith that does total disservice to God's gift of reason to man. The researcher employed the qualitative method through which information were sourced from pertinent literature and journals. Thus, the research through the exploration of patristic antiquity exposed how their dogged fight against idolatry ultimately enriched the Christian faith in Nigeria.

Keywords: idolatry, Fathers of the Church, faith, reason, evangelization

Introduction

Man is a religious animal (*animal religiosus*) and naturally he is astride of two realms – the spiritual and the physical realms. The latter enjoys existential priority. Most often the realization of the spiritual realm begins with appreciation of physical realities which most often culminates in using them as means of arriving at the supernatural. Consequent upon this natural leaning, his overall outlook and way of life are directly or indirectly, geared towards an avowed search for God. This is manifested in an act of faith that validates the innate religious option. This is more and more deepened, when the obligations and the implications of these beliefs are indisputably professed.

Obviously, faith is not handed down in a void. It is rather handed down and expressed through a human medium. Evidently human agent is not only of unavoidable importance in the transmission of faith, but he/she more importantly remains also the recipient of the message of faith.

Inevitably, however, the human person is born within a cultural set up, with its attendant strings of overt and covert demands and responsibilities. Based on that, the faith he/she receives and equally transmits, is normally flavoured by his life-situation (*sitz-im-leben*) and world-view (*weltanschauung*). It is within this cultural spectrum that faith is suitably appreciated, fully comprehended and summarily internalized. On account of that, adequate attention must be paid to his culture if faith is to be deeply rooted in him. In that vein, Warren (1983:335) opines that: "the Church is not addressing her message of joy to some abstracted, disembodied "humanity" but to particular persons in their full historicity." God is One, but variously understood and differently approached in different cultural ambient. Culture, as a vehicle for transmission of faith, strikes off the wonder regarding the apparent multiplicity in the means and mode of this understanding and search.

Those that were opportune to have encountered some elderly people that were traditional religionists must have realized their ardent devotion towards communing with the divine in their own way and level of understanding. They had unmitigated respect for the sacred geography where they performed their rites. More so, their physical and spiritual preparation all go to confirm that it was not just that piece of wood that they were worshipping but rather a transcendental being perhaps unknown to them. In the words of Awolalu (1976), proselytizing Christians and Muslims in the African context have mislabelled idol to mean false god, when in the reality of most traditions of Africa, the object may be a piece of wood or iron or stone, yet it is "symbolic, an emblem and implies the spiritual idea which is worshipped." The material objects may decay or get destroyed, the emblem may crumble or substituted, but the spiritual idea that it represents to the heart and mind of an African traditionalist remains unchanged.

The Church as reflected in writings of the Fathers of the Church experienced the practice of idolatry at different moments in the history of the growth of the Church. The researcher is to unravel how the Fathers of the Church fought idolatry through their writings and thus strengthened the propagation of the faith.

1. Idolatry: exposing the inner meaning

The term idolatry is derived from the Ancient Greek word *eidololatria* (εἰδωλολατρία), which itself is a compound of two words: *eidolon* (εἶδωλον “image/idol”) and *latreia* (λατρεία “worship”) (Bowker, 2005). Therefore, the word *eidololatria* means “worship of idols”, which in Latin appears first as *idololatria* (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Idolatry> accessed 23/12/2024) which is contracted as in Late Latin to *idolatria*. It has to be understood that there is a difference between the use of images and the worship of images. The former is permissible but the latter is contrary to the Christian faith. Summarily, Maegher (1981:348) presents idolatry as worship or paying of divine honours to a false god as represented by some image or idol in which he is believed to be present. Idolatry is an offence against the virtue of religion and a direct violation of the First commandment. It is also opposed to faith. This opposition to faith is manifestly evident when the external act of idolatrous worship proceeds from an inner conviction, or opinion, or suspicion, that the idol is adorable, because such a state of mind is radically incompatible with faith in the one true God.

On the contrary, the Byzantine Emperor Leo III promulgated a ban on religious images and subsequently promoted a widespread iconoclasm and even a wanton persecution of those that supported the veneration of images. As opposed to iconoclasts of the time there were iconodules or iconophiles referring to those that revere or venerate religious images. In this period of struggle for images technically referred to as iconomachy there were efforts for or against the use or even veneration of images. In this John Damascene (1898:5-6), makes a clear defence of the use of images and icons. In his *On the Divine Image* in direct response to the Byzantine destruction of religious images, John of Damascus wrote in favour of the use of images when he writes,

Therefore I venture to draw an image of the invisible God, not as invisible, but as having become visible for our sake through flesh and blood. I do not draw an image of the immortal Godhead. I paint the visible flesh of God, for it is impossible to represent a spirit (ψυχη), how much more God who gives breathe to the spirit. (p.12)

He went further to insist that images serve the purpose of remembrance either of a wonder, or an honour, or dishonour, or good or evil, to help those who look upon it with the passage of time to avoid evils and imitate goodness.

In the same vein, *Catechism of the Catholic Church* teaches that the Christian veneration of images is not contrary to the first commandment which proscribes idols. Indeed, “the honor rendered to an image passes to its prototype,” (Basil, *De Spiritu Sancto*, 18,45) and “whoever venerates an image venerates the person portrayed in it.” The honor paid to sacred images is a “respectful veneration,” not the adoration due to God alone. (CCC. 2132). Further still, Aquinas affirms that religious worship is not directed to images in themselves, considered as mere things, but under their distinctive aspect as images leading us on to God incarnate. The movement toward the image does not terminate in it as image, but tends toward that whose image it is (*Summa Theologiae* II-II, a.81, ad. 3).

However, it is important to note that idolatry goes beyond false pagan worship. It remains a constant temptation to faith. Idolatry consists in divinizing what is not God. Man commits idolatry whenever he honors and reveres a creature in place of God, whether this be gods or demons (for example, satanism), power, pleasure, race, ancestors, the state, money, etc (CCC 2113).

Following from this, the Church makes a distinction between adoration and veneration using the terminologies *latria*, *dulia*, *hyperdulia*, and *protodulia*. Broom (2014) explains that *Latria*, means adoration that we give to the Blessed Trinity, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Esparza (2023) further affirms that “*Dulia* is **the most fundamental level of veneration in Catholicism – and in broader Christianity**. It is the regular form of honor and respect that is given to saints, angels, and some other holy figures (including relics, and perhaps even places associated with the lives of these saints), but **never to the same degree as the adoration reserved for God alone**. *Dulia* involves the veneration of these figures **as role models and intercessors**, acknowledging their exemplary lives, trying to follow their example, and asking for their prayers. *Hyperdulia* is a **unique form of veneration specific to the Virgin Mary**. Finally, Glorious Saint Joseph is rightly given “*Protodulia*”, meaning that among the saints he is given first place; “Proto” means first!

2. Idolatry: Patristic catechesis towards enriching the faith

The catechesis has remained fundamental in the life of the Church. It is really an educational moment in the growth of the faith that demands a pedagogical process. It is a process which in the words of John Paul II (1979) includes especially the teaching of Christian doctrine imparted, generally speaking, in an organic and systematic way, with a view to initiating the hearers into the fullness of Christian life (*Catechesi Tradendae* n.18). Patristic thought remains an excellent and enriching model of catechesis. The Fathers of the Church starting with the Apostolic Fathers and the apologists defended the Church against the folly of idol worshipping without denigrating the mastery in the artistic display. In fact, periods of renewal in the Church are also intense moments of catechesis. In the great era of the Fathers of the Church, most of them devoted an important part of their ministry and literary exercise to catechesis; they used their pen in the defence of the faith against pagan idolatry. Prominent among them were the apologists and other Fathers of the Church (*Catechesi Tradendae* 12). On that note, Jensen (2022:3) maintains that the Christian apologists' denunciations of pagan idolatry never attacked works of art *per se*. Instead, they aimed their censure primarily at a specific type of object: cult images of pagan deities that devotees venerated as if they were the gods themselves. Thus, these early Christian writers did not repudiate religious figurative sculpture or painting in any general sense or regard it as idolatrous; the definition of an idol depended on what or who the object depicted and how viewers regarded and treated it.

An excursus into the writings of some of the early Christian writers reflects the untiring effort made in combatting idolatry. In the *Epistle to Diognetus* (1996) there is an exposition of the vanity of the pagan idols. It shows that a god that is made of corruptible or even incorruptible material and indeed a god that is made by human hands is any other thing but a god. He made an appeal to Diognetus on the necessity of freeing himself from the manacles of his old beliefs if he wishes to understand and contemplate the new teaching. With this in mind, he led him through a careful but insistent criticism against the pagan idols and sacrifices. Speaking on the corruptibility and vanity of pagan idols, he writes,

Is not one of them a stone similar to that on which we tread? Is not a second brass, in no way superior to those vessels, which are constructed for our ordinary use? Is not a third wood, and that already rotten? Is not a fourth silver, which needs a man to watch it, lest it be stolen? Is not a fifth iron, consumed by rusts? Is not a sixth earthenware, in no degree more valuable than that, which is formed for the humblest purposes? Are not all these of corruptible matter? Are they not all deaf? Are they not blind? Are they not without life? Are they not destitute of feeling? Are they not incapable of motion? Are they not all liable to rot? Are they not all corruptible? (*Epistle to Diognetus*, 2,2-3)

There is a further demonstration of the uselessness of a god made by human hands and that needs human protector. Definitely, a maker is greater than his creature. Therefore, such a god made by man is less superior to man. Aristides (1988) reflects this in his *Apology* in these words,

And they shut them up together in shrines, and worship them calling them gods, even though they have to guard them securely for fear they should be stolen by robbers. And they did not perceive that anything which acts as guard is greater than that which is guarded, and that he who makes is greater than that which is made. For if their gods are unfit to look after their own safety, how shall they bestow protection upon others? (*Apology* 3). What edge then has such a god over its creator?

This evident worthlessness of the pagan gods reflects in unmistakable terms the meaninglessness of their sacrifices to such materials, which they call gods. "These things you call gods; these you serve; these you worship; and you become altogether like them. For this reason you hate the Christians, because they do not deem these to be gods" (*Epistle to Diognetus*, 2,5-6). This goes to suggest that polytheism is properly only a human invention, deprived of every rapport with the world of spiritual beings. It does not permit any access to God and contradicts the *logos* that is reason. Further still, a second-century apologist, Athenagoras (1994) of Athens likewise castigated those who venerated images for their failure to distinguish matter from God, the sacred from the profane, or the created from the uncreated, or the corruptible from the incorruptible, or the temporal from the eternal. He contended that things known only through the bodily senses are utterly different from what is mentally apprehended, adding that the two are as far apart as artists and their materials. (*Plea for Christians*, 15)

Tertullian (1997) goes deeper to express the fact that idolatry can still exist even without material representation. It is in this context that power, wealth, inordinate ambition, sexual immorality, undue attachment to cellular phones etc

can be an idol. "For it makes no difference whether a moulder cast, or a carver grave, or an embroiderer weave *the idol*; because neither is it a question of material, whether an idol be formed of gypsum, or of colors, or of stone, or of bronze, or of silver, or of thread. For since even without an idol idolatry is committed, when the idol is there it makes no difference of what kind it be, of what material, or what shape; lest any should think that only to be held an idol which is consecrated in human shape. (On idolatry, 3)

Regarding the material nature of these gods, Aristides wonders on the low mental state of the worshippers of these gods who saw that they are sawn out and hacked and docked by the workmen, and besides aging with time and falling to pieces, and being cast from metal, and yet did not discern concerning them that they were not gods" (*Apology*, 13). In fact, these sacrifices and offerings to these gods are not useful because God does not need these sacrifices. Plato (1995) forcefully argues that to say that the gods need our offerings is to make "holiness a mutual art of commerce between gods and men" (*Euthyphro* 14e, 1995:184). In that regard, Plato (1995:184) further affirms: "I take it there would be no art in offering anyone a gift of something that he did not need...what advantage could come to the gods from the gifts which they receive from us?" (*Euthyphro* 15a). "For God, creator of the universe, has no need of odours or of blood. These things are the food of devils"(*Ad Scapulam* 2,11). More so, Justin the Martyr (1996) referring to the self-sufficing nature of God adds: "He does not need the material offerings which men can give, seeing, indeed, that He Himself is the provider of all things...He accepts those only who imitate the excellences which reside in Him, temperance and justice and philanthropy, and as many virtue as are peculiar to a God" (*Apology* 10,1). It actually goes against what a god should stand for. It strikes a blow on the incorporeality and immortality that ought to be the fundamental nature of a god. Substantiating such incorporeality Arnobius (1997) argues that, "...If a god, as is said, has no body, and cannot be touched at all, how is it possible that that which has no body should be nourished by things pertaining to the body, - that what is mortal should support what is immortal, and assist and give vitality to that which it cannot touch?" (*Against the heathen* 7,3). From the foregone exposé it is abundantly clear that "there is no cause...for pleasure in sacrifices...nor is there a reason why they should be offered, since there is no pleasure afforded by them; and if perchance there is some, it has been shown that it cannot in way belong to the gods" (*Against the heathen* 7,4).

More still, the Christians are considered to be superior to the pagans due to their behaviours, which show a mystery of love.

3. Idolatry in faith experience

The Fathers of the Church were defending the norm of faith in all its ramifications. All their efforts as noted by the Congregation for Catholic Education (1998) were based on a solid cultural foundation because they "accepted many contributions from Greco-Roman philosophy, but rejected its grave errors and especially the danger of syncretism which was so widespread in the then-prevailing Hellenistic culture. They also avoided rationalism that risked reducing the faith to only the aspects that were accepted by Hellenist rationality" (*Instruction on the study of the Fathers of the Church in the formation of priest*, n.31.2). On the contrary, faith has to be the substratum of any philosophy that is worthy of the name. In the words of Gilson (1983:52) "it is faith that tells us what is there to understand, that purifies the heart, permitting reason to discuss with profit and rendering it capable of finding the understanding that God reveals." Consequently, "a philosophy that intends to be true love of wisdom must begin with faith, of which will be understanding. Any religion that wishes to be absolutely perfect must tend toward intelligence starting from faith" (Gilson p.53).

From the foregoing, it is apparently clear that both the Oriental and Occidental Fathers understood properly the culture of their time. Their knowledge of the classical culture was evidenced in their writings. Quasten (1995:14,17) recalls "Gregory Nazianzus, who was on good terms with numerous rhetors, praised classical culture and eloquence. Basil requested the young to take the honey and leave the gall. Hilary emerged from a background of philosophy and remained faithful to it... Jerome was so impregnate by Latin authors that Magnus was able to reproach him for the abundance of profane citations." Consequent upon their background of classical culture, they were able to apply that knowledge in defence and propagation of the faith. That goes to demonstrate that "many of the Fathers had an excellent preparation in the disciplines of ancient Greek and Roman cultures. From them they borrowed lofty civil and spiritual values and enriched their treatises, catecheses and preaching with them. By imprinting the Christian stamp on the ancient, classical "*humanitas*," they were the first to make a bridge between the Gospel and secular culture..." (*Instruction on the study of the Fathers of the Church in the formation of priest*, n.43.b). By so doing, one could sharply notice that their "providential task was not only to defend Christianity, but also to re-think it in the Greco-

Roman cultural environment; to find new formulas for expressing an ancient doctrine; non-Biblical forms for a Biblical doctrine; to present, in a word, the faith in the form of human discourse that is fully Catholic and capable of expressing the divine content of revelation by always safeguarding its identity and transcendence” (*Instruction on the study of the Fathers of the Church in the formation of priest*, n.34.2). In this way, they established love for the faith and passion for culture, which in some environment today, is viewed with diffidence. The Fathers also maintained a healthy but demanding rapport between faith and culture; and invite us to overcome any dichotomy between them and to always have Jesus Christ as our meeting point that links us to God and man.

4. Appeal to Reason in the face of idolatry

Man as a human person performs human act. Such human action for it to be worthy of the name must be guided by sound reason. It is the gift of reason and free will that obliges man towards personal responsibility of his actions and towards seeking the truth. Therefore, it is reason founded on truth that propels man to seek God in the right direction; and ought also to guide those who lead others to faith. It is the same reason that shapes man’s desire towards the appreciation of values in others be it religious or otherwise. Even in the expression of his religious conviction, the faculty of reason plays a vital role. Otherwise idolatry could be taken as practice of faith. In that token, Benedict XVI (2006) affirms that “whoever would lead someone to faith needs ... to reason properly, without violence and threats...” It is only through proper use of reason that one could self-consciously evaluate his/her beliefs, attitudes, traditions, and aim at freely changing them when they begin to contravene the principles of right reasoning. Reason must therefore not be incapable of dialoguing with religion.

With the placement of reason as essential in our faith, with the detailed condemnation of all forms of idolatry as acts of impiety, Augustine (1962) insists that it is pertinent to always seek the religion that will bind us to the one omnipotent God, because no creature comes between our minds and him whom we know to be the Father and the Truth. He is the Truth in whose likeness man was formed and bound in unity that nourishes peaceful coexistence. He is the one God from whom and through whom and in whom are all things (*De vera religione* 55,113).

As a matter of fact, it is really obnoxious to consider God’s creature as god, or to appropriate one of the gifts of God as god. Augustine considers them to be in bondage those who take useless signs as god. In no way, will the work of human hands be taken as a god. It is idolatrous and superstitious. Indeed, all the arrangements made by men for the making and worshipping of idols are superstitious, pertaining as they do either to the worship of what is created or of some part of it as God (*De doctrina christiana* 3,7). It is important to re-emphasise the fact that Christians worship the one God who has arranged nature beautifully and accordingly fixing created thing at its proper place. Therefore, He governs all things in such a manner as to allow them to perform and exercise their own proper movements. For although they can be nothing without Him, they are not what He is” (*De Civitate Dei* 7,30). He is indeed a God that made Himself manifest through the incarnation. Thus, with the coming of Christ, his expiatory sacrifice on the cross and his glorious resurrection, our liberation has been assured.

Summarily, Augustine states in unmistakable terms that the

way of the good and blessed life is to be found entirely in the true religion wherein one God is worshipped and acknowledged with purest piety to be the beginning of all existing things, originating, perfecting and containing the universe. Thus it becomes easy to detect error of the peoples who have preferred to worship many gods rather than the true God and Lord of all things, because their wise men whom they call philosophers used to have schools in disagreement one with another, while all made common use of the temples (*De vera religione* 1,1).

Conclusion

In a world proliferated with many religions and denominations, which often create a confused mixture of beliefs, right reason becomes an important tool that helps sift out the true religion. The Christian religion especially in Nigeria is littered with many denominations. Some have gradually but consistently deviated from the principal teaching of the Christian religion which is belief in the suffering, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ; and relapsed into prosperity gospel and a cross-less Christianity. It does seem that the bid to prosper materially has given rise to different forms of idolatry. Based on this fact, decisions about religion must be guided by critical reasoning. Therefore, every heathenish practice must give way to the new light of salvation. When light comes, darkness is overshadowed. When freedom is introduced, the fetters of bondage are naturally shattered. In the same vein, when Christ enters, all forms of idolatry must be discarded.

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