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Images and Saints: Reassessing the Relevance of the Council of Trent in Contemporary Nigerian Catholic Practice

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Abstract

The veneration of saints, their images, and relics has been part of Catholic devotion and piety from time immemorial. The images and relics serve as means of instruction and reflection in catechesis and prayer which help to direct the heart and mind to the reality they represent. However, the abuses associated with the sacred use of images and relics, which tend to undermine the orthodoxy of Catholic piety could be said to be as old as the devotion itself. This has continued unabated, even though the Church tries to correct the abuses through conciliar and magisterial documents. Among contemporary Nigerian Catholics, the sacred images and relics are being used as if they possess an inherent power to save and protect. This tendency which is contrary to true Catholic piety appears to divert attention from the powerful God to powerful sacramentals (images and relics). This research therefore concentrates on the problem of abuses and misconceptions associated with the devotion to saints, relics, and images among Nigerian Catholics. It raises the questions: what is the true position of saints, images, and relics in Catholic spirituality? What are the causes of the abuses? How could the abuses be reduced? The objective of the research is to affirm and emphasise the true position of saints, images and relics in Catholic spirituality thereby reducing the abuses. Hence, it is significant in the promotion of true piety and devotion especially among contemporary Catholics in Nigeria. The method of theological analysis is adopted in the research to arrive at a logically consistent and coherent conclusion. The earlier studies on the subject matter could not identify a conciliar document that could be implemented in Nigeria to reduce the abuses. Thus, the novelty of this research lies in proposing the seemingly forgotten decree of the council of Trent as a panacea to the problem. The findings reveal that, apart from ignorance and poor doctrinal catechesis, the abuse could also be traced to the influence of African Traditional Religion on Nigerian Catholics.

Keywords: Catholic Theology, Saints, Images, Catholic Church, Sacraments, Veneration, African Christianity, Religious Syncretism.

Introduction

The presence of images and relics of the saints in the Catholic Church which dates to as early as the second Century[23] has become a part of the Christian life today. Thus, the veneration of images and relics of the saints constitutes an essential part of popular piety. It indicates the presence of the Holy Spirit in the hearts of believers and serves as a veritable means of evangelisation especially for the uneducated (Cf. *Evangelii Gaudium* no. 126). However, as devotion to saints and relics spread, certain abuses also arose which the Church has made series of efforts to correct. This could be seen in the decree of the Council of Trent which seems to be forgotten by the contemporary Church magisterium and Christians in general. The efforts have however not prevented the persistence of different forms of abuses in different parts of the world. In Nigeria for instance, the prevalence of the abuse of images and relics has made it difficult to ascertain their true position in Catholic piety and devotion in relation to the biblical prohibition of images. The Scriptures and the official magisterium of the Catholic Church prohibit the worship of images. Nevertheless, many contemporary Catholics in Nigeria use images and relics of saints as if they were idols to be worshipped. This leads to a devotional misconduct which appears to introduce idolatry into Catholicism. The crux of the problem is therefore the abuse of images and relics of saints which seem to introduce elements of idolatry to Catholic piety and devotion in Nigeria.

The relevant questions in tackling the problem include: How could the veneration of the saints be reconciled with the adoration of Christ as the sole mediator between God and humanity? Is the devotional use of images and relics of saints a violation of the biblical prohibition of images? What are the factors responsible for the widespread abuse of images among Catholics in general? Could there be any factor peculiar to Nigerians? If yes, what is it? And how could it be addressed? In answering these questions, the research aims at ascertaining the true positions of saints, their images and relics in Catholic devotions thereby reducing the abuses and superstitions. Hence, the significance of the research is the promotion of true Catholic devotion and piety through the reduction of abuses. The effort made here is to establish that where such errors and abuses abound, the teaching of Trent could serve as a veritable guide to correct them.

In addressing the issues raised above, the analytical method of textual interpretation and observational analysis is adopted in this research. Relevant texts and magisterial documents on the subject matter are analysed and synthesised using the tools of critical

[23] Parry Ken, "Images in the Church of the East: The Evidence from Central Asia and China" in *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library,* 78 (3), 143-162

thinking and logicality to draw a relevant and coherent inference. The experiential dimension of the research is solely based on the observation of the author. Hence, observational data drawn from the author's own experience are also analysed and synthesised in the same manner to give a practical and experiential dimension to the research within the context of contemporary Catholicism in Nigeria. Its scope borders around the veneration of saints, images, and relics with a particular emphasis on the Church in Nigeria. However, the limited scope of the research does not give room for a detailed and historical examination of every aspect of the veneration of saints, images, and relics. It also does not examine all conciliar and magisterial documents on the issue. It only concentrates on the implementation of the decree of the Council of Trent as a means of correcting the abuses. Furthermore, the research does not claim to offer a final solution that could lead to a total eradication of the abuses.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The following sub-themes formed the nucleus of the literature review: Saints, images, relics, and veneration. Some authors have attempted to evaluate the veneration of the images and relics of saints over the years. Laurenti Magesa, for example takes the theme of the worship of God. Explaining the differences between the worship of God which is referred to as *latria* and the veneration of the saints which is described as *dulia* and *hyperdulia.* He leaves the question of abuses open without attempting to evaluate the situation and the way forward.[24] Obineche[25] agrees that the veneration of images has become a popular practice in Nigeria and laments that many people have elevated it from veneration to worship including Pentecostals who were initially critical of images in the Church. He, however, did not see the implementation of a decree by the Council of Trent as a possible remedy. Like Obineche, Michael[26] also expresses worry over the magical use of the pictures of Church founders and religious articles sold in the Church by Pentecostals in Africa. He finds out that such religious articles are being used as if they are charms. This implies that some Africans understand the use of images as they understand charms, portents and amulets used in African Traditional Religion. He observes the abuses and expresses concern but does not provide recommendations on a possible way out of the situation.

On his part, Eke does not point out abuses[27]; he only undertakes a general analysis of the importance of images in Catholic devotion and catechesis without examining the abuses and superstition associated with the practice in Nigeria. Price tries to take us closer to the Council of Trent in his study of the Calvinist rejection of images and Luther's more tolerant position Price[28]. However, he does not examine the nature of veneration of images in Nigeria and the

[24] Laurenti Magesa, *Anatomy of inculturation: Transforming the church in Africa* (New York: Orbis Books, 2004)

[25] John Okwudiri Obineche, "Iconolatry and Pentecostals Christianity: the Nigeria Experience" in *International Journal of Arts and Humanity (IJAH),* Vol.8 No.31 (2019) 87-97

[26] Matthew Michael, "African Sacredscape and its Ethnometaphysics: The Constructs and Dilemmas of Sacredness in Africa Popular Culture and Theology" in Elias O. Opongo and Paul Bere (ed.), *African Theology in the 21st Century: A call to Baraza* (Nairobi: Pauline Publ., 2021) 102-138

[27] Josephine Marie A. Eke, "Language and Symbolic Arts: Religious Adornments, Arts and Meaning in the Catholic Church Liturgy" in *Open Journal of Modern Linguistics*, Vol.10 (2020) 390-403

[28] Timothy Shaun Price, "A Comparative Analysis of John Calvin and Martin Luther Concerning the First and Second Commandments" in *Ashland Theological Journal* (2008) 61-773

teaching of the Council of Trent. Robert Amo-Broni and Ebenezer Kwabena Acquah[29] focus on the observation among Catholics in Ghana with qualitative research carried out among four Priests, four catechists, sixteen youths and four non-Catholics in Cape Town Ghana. The research finds out that there is a misconception of the use of images in the Catholic Church by Catholics and non-Catholics alike. They therefore recommend proper enlightenment and education. However, the research does not attempt to establish the root cause of the misconception and neither does it call for a return to the seemingly forgotten decree of the Council of Trent as a way of correcting it.

As seen from the works of the above-cited authors, scholars admit to the presence of images and relics of saints in the Church as much as a widespread devotion to them. While some of these authors identified increasing widespread abuses and misunderstanding of Catholic doctrine on the veneration of the images and relics of saints in general, Obineche focuses specifically on Nigeria. However, none of the authors in the literature consulted paid due attention to the source of these abuses in specific relation to the influence of African Traditional Religion where images are worshipped and used as charms and amulets. They also do not identify the teaching of the Council of Trent and the feasibility of applying it to curb abuses and misconceptions. Thus, the gap created by the limitations of the above studies makes this research a necessity.

THE VENERATION OF SAINTS IN THE CATHOLIC CHURCH

The Official Teaching of the Catholic Church on the Veneration of Saints

The veneration of saints is one of the ancient acts of devotion in the Catholic Church. Saints in the Church are holy persons, identified for their "heroic sanctity" who are believed to be in heaven. They are recognized as having an exceptional degree of holiness and closeness to God. Since they live in God's presence, they are looked up to for encouragement and inspiration by the struggling Christians on earth.

Being more closely united to Christ, those who dwell in heaven [the saints] fix the whole Church more firmly in holiness... They do not cease to intercede with the Father for us, as they proffer the merits which they acquired on earth through the one mediator between God and men, Christ Jesus…. So by their fraternal concern is our weakness greatly helped. (CCC 956)

It is also noteworthy that all Christians are equally addressed as saints. For example, the Apostle Paul writes to the saints in Rome (Cf. Rom 1:7). But only the perfected ones in heaven who have been canonized by the Church could be venerated.[30]

The veneration of saints is closely related to the concept of the communion of saints (*Communio Sanctorum*). This is expressed in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (CCC) as follows: "We believe in the communion of all the faithful of Christ, those who are pilgrims on earth, the dead who are being purified, and the blessed in heaven, all together forming one

[29] Robert Amo-Broni, Ebenezer Kwabena Acquah, "Iconographic Art in Religious Worship in Ghana: The Catholic Culture in Focus", in *Journal of Philosophy, Culture and Religion*, Vol. 53 (2021) 15-45

[30] Arnold Angenendt, *Geschichte der Religiosität im Mittelalter*. (Darmstadt: Wiss. Buchges, 1997) 306.

Church; and we believe that in this communion, the merciful love of God and his saints is always attentive to our prayers" (CCC 962). This communion of saints is seen in the union of the Christians in heaven (the triumphant Church), the Christians in purgatory (the suffering Church) and the Christians on earth (the militant Church). The saints in heaven pray for the Christians on earth and the Christians on earth venerate the saints in heaven. Expatiating on the relationship between the earthly Christians and the heavenly saints as expressed in the veneration of the saints in the Middle Ages, Arnold Angenendt points out that the veneration of the heavenly saints by the earthly Christians is an expression of the admiration of the saints and confidence in their intercession as a means of obtaining spiritual aid: "The less the earthly considered themselves as perfect, the more they admired the heavenly and sought to gain a share in their surplus merit."[31] In other words, the Christians on earth who are striving towards perfection admire the saints in heaven who have already attained perfection; they venerate the saints in order to gain a share of divine grace and attain perfection like the saints in heaven.
The veneration of the saints is not considered as worship in the teaching of the Catholic Church. Catholic theology distinguishes *latria* from *dulia*. *Latria* is worship which is due only to the Trinity (God the father, God the son and God the Holy Spirit). *Dulia* is the honour due to the saints while *hyperdulia* is the higher form of *dulia* reserved for the Most Blessed Virgin Mary.[32] Therefore the veneration of saints in the Catholic Church is a religious honour and not worship that is due to God alone.

The Reformers' Objection to the Veneration of Saints

The veneration of the saints and their intercessory role were criticised and derided as pagan acts by the Reformers who opined that faith in Christ does not need the intermediary role of other intercessors[33]. Martin Luther and other reformers rejected the invocation of saints. Luther saw in Christ the only reconciler and mediator between God and humanity. He also believed that Christ is the only heavenly mediator. "For there is one God and one mediator between God and men, even the man Christ Jesus." (1 Tim. 2:5.) Luther interpreted this scriptural passage literarily. He therefore argued that humanity does not need the invocation and intercessions of the saints. The teaching of Luther and his followers on the veneration of saints as contained in their profession of faith holds that: "It cannot be proved from the Holy Scriptures that one should call upon the saints or seek help from them. For there is only one God and only one mediator between God and men, namely the man Christ Jesus (1Tim. 2:5). He is the only Saviour, the only High Priest, source of grace and intercessor before God (Rom. 8:34). He alone has promised to hear our prayer."[34]

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[31] Angenendt, *Geschichte der Religiosität,* 305. (translated by me) (origianl text in German: Je weniger sich die Irdischen als vollkommen erlebten, desto mehr bewunderten sie die Vollendenten und suchen an deren überschüssigem Verdienst Anteil zu gewinnen)
[32] Magesa, *Anatomy of inculturation,* 240
[33] Willibald Sauerländer, *Der katholische Rubens*. (Müchen: Beck Verlag , 2011) 81.
[34] Günther Gaβmann et al (Hrsg.), *Das Augsburger Bekenntnis Deutsch*. (Göttigen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht , 1978) Article 21. (Translated by the author. Original text in German: Aus der Heiligen Schrift lässt sich aber nicht beweisen, dass man die Heiligen anrufen oder Hilfe bei ihnen suchen soll. Denn es ist nur ein Gott und nur ein Mittler zwischen Gott und den Menschen, nämlich der Mensch Christus Jesus (1Tim. 2,5). Er ist der einzige Heiland, der einzige Hohepriester, Quelle der Gnade und Fürsprecher vor

According to Luther, people honour the saints when they thank God for the saints, when they strengthen their faith through the examples of the saints, and when they imitate the saints[35]. He therefore regards the invocation of the saints as an abuse of prayer and a compromise of faith in Christ.[36] However, it is plausible to believe that the invocation of the saints does not contradict the fact that Jesus is the only mediator between God and humanity. The Scriptures encourage Christians to pray for one another. The prayer of the righteous is powerful if it is earnest. (James 5:16). If Christians on earth can pray for one another, then the saints in the presence of God in heaven are also in a good position to pray for Christians on earth. Abraham, a friend of God interceded for the people of Sodom when God was about to destroy them (Cf. Gen. 18:16 -33). Likewise, the saints, who are the friends of God in heaven, constantly intercede for sinners who need God's mercy.

THE VENERATION OF SACRED IMAGES AND RELICS IN THE CATHOLIC CHURCH

The Official Teaching of the Catholic Church on the Veneration of Images and Relics

Sacred images refer to the pictorial representation of Jesus Christ, the Blessed Virgin Mary, and the saints in the form of photographs, painting, or sculpture. In other words, a sacred image is a work of art which depicts and portrays a sacred person. Relics on the other hand are the remains of saints or of eminent persons.[37] That is, the body or parts of the body (primary relics), personal possessions of the saints and the objects the saints touched in their earthly lives, as well as all things brought into contact with the saints' graves (secondary relics).[38]

Catholic devotion and liturgy are often associated with the use of sacred images. Examples of such images include the crucifix, statue of the Blessed Virgin Mary as well as images of the saints which are venerated with gestures such as bowing, kissing and so on[39]**.** In the teaching of the Catholic Church, the veneration of images is to be seen in relation to their relationship to the prototype. In other words, one venerates an image in view of the prototype. The prototype is not present in the images and the images have no power of their own that could work miracles. The miracles happen as a demonstration of divine power.[40] This implies that the honour and veneration is given ultimately to our Lord Jesus Christ, the Blessed Virgin Mary, and the saints whose images are painted or moulded and not the images themselves. Our Lord Jesus Christ, the Blessed Virgin Mary and the saints are also not present in the

Gott (Röm. 8,34). Er allein hat versprochen, daβ er unser Gebet erhören will.)

[35] Manfred Kießig (ed.), *Glauben Lehren bekennen Augsburger Bekenntnis, kleiner Katechismus* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus Mohn, 1980) Article 21

[36] Ulrich Köpf, "Protestantismus und Heiligenverehrung", in Peter Dinzelbacher und Dieter R. Bauer (Hrsg.), *Heiligen Verehrung in Geschichte und Gegenwart,* (Ostfildern: Schwabenverl, 1990) 320 – 344 (326)

[37] Cf. Arnold Angenendt, "Was sind Reliquien", in Stephanie Hartmann (ed.), *Der heilige Leib und die Leiber der Heiligen,* (Frankfurt am Main: Haus am Dom, 2007) 28 – 33 (28)

[38] Angenendt, "Was sind Reliquien", 28

[39] Obineche, "Iconolatry and Pentecostals Christianity", 92

[40] Philip Zitlsperge, "Trient und die Kraft der Bilder: Überlegungen zur Virtus der Gnadenbilder", in Peter Walter und Günther Wassilowsky (ed.), *Das Konzil von Trient und die katholische Konfessionskultur1563 – 2013* (Münster: Aschendorff Verlag, 2016) 335- 372 (337)

images. The images also do not possess any spiritual power on their own to work miracles and answer prayers. No offering, prayer, petition, request, or supplication can therefore be made to the images but the Almighty and omnipotent God. He alone works miracles and answers prayers even through material things and the work of human hands like statues and images that are blessed and sanctified.

Images play a relevant role in recalling the invisible realities to have the proper attention and concentration at prayer. They serve as teaching aids in religious instruction and catechesis. Religious art and sacred images, are therefore, means of expression which bring to human consciousness the reality depicted therein[41]. The psychological and pedagogical relevance of sacred images in Catholic devotion and piety is well expressed by Josephine Marie A. Eke that, they aid the mind in transcending to the sacred. She opines that the images and relics found in the Church remind the Christians of the mysteries of the Lord's Passion and death (the Cross), the Annunciation (Mary's image), the Holy Eucharist (the Last Supper). According to her, the images also teach the virtues and qualities of the Christian life such as simplicity, obedience, purity, holiness, penance, and perseverance in the face of suffering[42]

The Veneration of Images and Relics: From the Middle Ages till the Reformation

There was an ever-growing veneration of images in the Middle Ages. Images were purified, dressed, and anointed. This veneration of images played an important role not only in popular piety but also in the liturgy. People prayed before them and carried them around in processions.[43] People chose them as godparents, swore by them, and many believed that they could also heal the sick, cast out devils, give the blessing of the womb, bring about victories and even raise the dead[44].

The trust in the images continued beyond the Middle Ages until the time of the Reformation. The veneration of relics and images of saints was considered an important way to gain an indulgence. Christians were therefore encouraged to buy and venerate images of saints to gain an indulgence. The images and relics became ubiquitous in churches, monasteries, shops and in private homes. The trading on sacred images and relics therefore became a lucrative business which contributed to the addiction to the miraculous powers of sacred images and relics in the Middle Ages.[45] This situation, which continued till the time of the Reformation, caused abuses and superstition, which provoked the criticism of the Reformers.

Reformers' Objection to the Veneration of Images and Relics

The veneration of images has been the subject of debate over time. Those who were against this practice justified their position with the scriptural passages that forbid the making and worshipping of images. They based their arguments basically on Exodus 20:2-5, where God

[41] Cf. Eke, "Language and Symbolic Arts", 391-392
[42] Eke, "Language and Symbolic Arts" 399-400
[43] Cf. Angenendt, *Geschichte der Religiosität*, 372.
[44] Cf. Angenendt, *Geschichte der Religiosität*,371.
[45] Arnold Angenendt, *Heiligen und Reliquien: Die Geschichte ihres Kultes vom frühen Christentum bis zur Gegenwart* (Münster: Beck Verlag,1994) 162

commanded the Israelites not to worship other gods except Yahweh nor make for themselves and worship idols in the image and form of anything whether in heaven or on earth or under the earth.

The criticism of image veneration and the cult of relics preceded the time of the Reformation. Before the Reformation, many people had protested against the pious practice of venerating images and the cult of relics. For instance, Claudius of Turin insisted that, it is pointless and useless to venerate the images and relics of the saints because they possess nothing divine. For him, it is better to imitate the virtuous life of the saints and carry the cross of Christ than to venerate their relics and images.[46] Similarly, Alcuin argued that it is better to follow the life of the saints than to carry their relics.[47] The Reformers took up such earlier arguments against image veneration and the cult of relics and elaborated on them.

The radical reformers destroyed the images. They regarded images as idols and their veneration as idolatry. In the doctrine of these reformers, the veneration of images is a violation of the commandment of God. Andreas Karlstadt was the trigger of the Reformation iconoclasm. His writing published in Wittenberg, caused the first destruction of images in Wittenberg in 1522. Karlstadt defamed the sacred images as carved and painted idols that have no place in the worship of God[48]. He was of the view that the radical simplification of worship required by the first commandment implies the prohibition of all kinds of cultic art[49]. John Calvin also criticised the veneration of images in his *Institutio Christianae Religionis*. He says, "One should have no images at all."[50] In his opinion, the image-friendly Council of Nicaea is itself a proof of terrible distortion of doctrine.[51] The opposition of Zwingli to images led to the removal and destruction of images in many parts of Switzerland just as John Calvin opposed all images within the Churches in Geneva.[52]

However, Martin Luther was not an iconoclast as he was not totally against sacred images. For him, "we are free to have them or not, although it would be much better if we did not have them at all"[53]. He regarded the veneration of images with the intention of gaining indulgences as 'works for righteousness' which he rejected. In his opinion, justification comes only by faith. Therefore, no good work like the veneration of images is necessary for it. Christians should therefore trust in God and believe in him instead of venerating images. For him, images are important only if they play an educational or pedagogical role. So, one may have images, but one must not venerate them. He therefore wanted to limit them to their catechetical function.

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[46] Anton Legner, *Reliquien in Kunst und Kult zwischen Antike und Aufklärung* (Darmstadt: Wiss. Buchges,1995) 325

[47] Legner, *Reliquien in Kunst und Kult*, 325

[48] Angenendt, *Geschichte der Religiosität*, 373

[49] Price, "A Comparative Analysis of John Calvin and Martin Luther", 64

[50] Johannes Calvin, *Unterricht in der Christlichen Religion* (*Intitutio Christianae Religionis* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1988) 47 (Translated by me. Original text in German: Man dürfe überhaupt keine Bilder haben.)

[51] Calvin, *Unterricht*, 47

[52] Randy C. Randall, "The Reformation and visual Arts: An integrated Thesis" in *faculty of Reformed Theological Seminary* (2007) 1-41 (2)

[53] Price, "A Comparative Analysis of John Calvin and Martin Luther", 64

For Daniel Simango, the first commandment on which the radical reformers based their total rejection of images focuses on the relationship between God and the Israelites. They are to submit to God as a son submits to his father and when they worship other gods, they reject God as their father.[54] This implies that the first commandment essentially prohibits the making and worshiping of idols and not all kinds of images as the radical reformers claimed. One may ask: If the first commandment prohibits all kinds of images, then why did God instruct the same people he gave the first commandment to make certain images (Cf. Ex. 25: 18-19, Num.21:8-9)? Thus, if the first commandment implies a total prohibition of images, then the instruction to make certain images would be an act of self-contradiction on the part of God. But since God is perfect and immutable, he could not have contradicted himself. Hence it is reasonable to hold the view that the first commandment only prohibits the images that are adored and worshiped and not all kinds of images. God also saves and blesses his people through such images. For example, through the image of a serpent, the people of Israel who were afflicted by serpents were healed (Cf. Num. 21:4-9). Therefore, even the ancient biblical tradition recognises the blessing of God through certain works of art such as the serpent in the wilderness.[55] The healing was not by the power of the serpent but through the power of God. The same is true of the relics of saints. The Scriptures attest to the use of material things associated with the saints as instruments of God's grace and blessing. For example, God performed extraordinary miracles through Paul, so that even handkerchiefs and aprons that had touched him were brought to the sick and they were healed of their sickness and the evil spirits left them (Cf. Acts 19:11-12).

The Decree of the Council of Trent (1545-1563) on the Invocation of Saints and the Veneration of Relics and Images

The Tridentine Doctrinal Decree on the invocation of saints, veneration of relics and the cult of images has a special structure. It has no preface and no canons. It consists of six paragraphs and is thus longer and more detailed than the decree on purgatory and indulgences. The first paragraph of the decree affirms the relevance of the veneration and invocation of the saints. It also considers their relics as worthy of veneration. Regarding the invocation of the saints, which was heavily criticised by Martin Luther and other Protestant reformers, the decree affirms that the saints reign with Christ in heaven. They intercede for the human race and invoking them is good, wholesome and helpful in obtaining help from God.[56] It states: "The saints who reign together with Christ, offer up their own prayers to God for men; that it is good and useful suppliantly to invoke them, and to have recourse to their prayers, aid, (and) help for obtaining benefits from God, through His Son, Jesus Christ".[57]

[54] Cf. Daniel Simango, "The Law and the Images of God" in *Old Testament Essay*, Vol.26 No.2 (2013) 445-470 (451)
[55] Amo-Broni and Acquah, "Iconographic Art", 15
[56] Dumeige Gervais, (ed.), *Geschichte der ökumenischen Konzilien,* Band. XI (Mainz: Matthias-Grünewald-Verlag, 1987) 593
[57] J. Waterworth, *The canons and decrees of the oecumenical Council of Trent* (London: Hanover Historical text project, 1848) 234

The Protestant Reformers criticised the invocation of the saints because, in their opinion, it contradicts the biblical statement that Jesus Christ is the only mediator between God and humanity. However, the Council insists that the invocation and intercession of the saints does not contradict the adoration of Christ as the only mediator between God and humanity. This is because one obtains benefits from Christ through the saints. The decree therefore describes those who deny the invocation and intercessions of the saints as irreligious and impious. It states:

They think impiously, who deny that the saints, who enjoy eternal happiness in heaven, are to be invocated, or who assert either that they do not pray for men, or that the invocation of them to pray for each of us even in particular, is idolatry, or that it is repugnant to the word of God, and is opposed to the honor of the one mediator of God and men, Christ Jesus, or that it is foolish to supplicate, vocally or mentally, those who reign in heaven.[58]

Furthermore, the decree considers the relics of the saints as worthy of veneration. The bodies of the saints were members of Christ and temples of the Holy Spirit, and they are called to eternal life and glory by God. Therefore, they could be revered by believers. Those who claim that the relics and other holy monuments are not worthy of veneration, and that their veneration is in vain, are condemned by the decree, as the Church had earlier condemned them.[59]

The second paragraph of the decree concerns the veneration of images. It insists that the images of Christ, the Virgin Mary and other saints must be kept, especially in places of worship. The decree confirms the venerability of the images of the saints, and the theological justification for this is their relationship with the prototypes. The veneration of the images is therefore done regarding the portrayed archetypes, which the images represent. That is, by means of the image of Christ, we worship Christ, and by means of the images of the saints, we venerate the saints. The images of Christ, the Virgin Mary and other saints should be venerated, not because one believes that divinity, power, or the prototypes are present in them, as the pagans believe who place their hope in idols. But the honour paid to them refers to the prototypes.[60] Here one sees very clearly the difference between the images of the saints and the pagan idols. The decree also refers to the decisions of the previous councils, especially the Second Council of Nicaea on this matter. It says:

Moreover, that the images of Christ, of the Virgin Mother of God, and of the other saints are to be had and retained particularly in temples, and that due honor and veneration are to be given them; not that any divinity, or any virtue, is believed to be in them; on account of which they are to be worshiped; or that anything is to be asked of them; or that trust is to be reposed in images, as was of old done by the Gentiles who placed their hope in idols; but because the honor which is shown them is referred to the prototypes which those images represent, in such wise that by the images which we kiss, and before which we uncover the head, and prostrate ourselves, we adore Christ; and we venerate the saints, whose similitude they bear: as , by the

[58] Waterworth, *The canons and decrees*, 234
[59] Josef Wohlmuth (ed.), *Dekrete der ökumenischen Konzilien* (Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh Verlag, 2002) 7745
[60] Wohlmuth (ed.), *Dekrete,* 775.

decrees of Councils, and especially of the second Synod of Nicaea, has been defined against the opponents of images.[61]

The veneration of sacred images among Christians is therefore not the same as the worship of idols by pagans. The sacred images are not meant to be worshiped but to enable the Christians to worship God, reflect on the articles of faith and imitate the virtues of the saints.[62]

The other four paragraphs of the decree are devoted to disciplinary measures to prevent abuse and superstition. It assigns a major role to the bishops in ensuring that Christians are well educated about the invocation of the saints and the veneration of images and relics.[63] The Council desires that the abuses which may occur should be completely abolished. Christians should be taught that divinity is not represented by the images as if it could be seen with bodily eyes or represented by colour and figures. Moreover, in the invocation of the saints, the veneration of relics and the sacred use of images, all superstition should be eliminated, and filthy lucre and lasciviousness must also be avoided.[64] The Council assigned another important role to the bishops in this regard. They (the bishops) are to exercise such great care and effort in this area that nothing disorderly or calculated to cause disturbance and tumult, nothing profane and nothing instigating, is done, for holiness is due to the house of God. The Council goes on to declare that no new images, miracles, or relics may be accepted without the approval of the diocesan Bishop. The Bishop decides on the matter after consulting the theologians and pious persons. The diocesan Bishop may also consult with the Metropolitan and the other bishops of the Province at the Provincial Council. In doing so, however, nothing new or hitherto unfamiliar in the Church should be decided without consultation with His Holiness the Bishop of Rome on the matter.[65]

THE ABUSE OF SACRED IMAGES AND RELICS: THE NIGERIAN SITUATION

Just as it was at the Middle Ages and the time of the reformation, many abuses and superstitions associated with the religious use of images and relics are noticeable among Catholic faithful in Nigeria. This is an age-long pastoral challenge arising from ignorance and poor catechesis which is not peculiar to Nigeria. The root cause of the problem in various parts of the world could be trace to ignorance since the abuses are most common among pious Catholics with inadequate catechetical and theological knowledge. However, in Nigeria, the religious use of images and relics with the attendant abuses have become more rampant than ever. The reason for the proliferation of sacred images could be traced to the new wave of Pentecostalism/Charismatic Renewal erupting in Africa today. This movement which is reshaping the face of Christianity in Africa offers a bewildering theology which emphasises faith healing, miracles, and prosperity.[66] The influence of this movement has led to the

[61] Waterworth, *The canons and decrees,* 234
[62] Dumeige Gervais (ed.), *Geschichte*, 234-235
[63] Waterworth, *The canons and decrees,* 235
[64] Waterworth, *The canons and decrees,* 235-236
[65] Waterworth, *The canons and decrees,* 236
[66] Stan Chu Ilo, "Reimagining African Ecclesiology: Missionary and Structural Reform and the Task of an African Illuminative Ecclesiology", in Elias O. Opongo and Paul Bere (ed.), *African Theology in the 21st*

proliferation of healing ministries, adoration, and pilgrimage centres in Nigeria. The centres are established by "priests with special charism". They are often visited and patronised by a multitude of people seeking for divine intervention in form of miracles. At these centres, different forms of sacred images, holy pictures and sacramentals blessed and sanctified by the powerful men of God are sold. The faithful are made to believe that these items possess the divine spiritual power to protect, drive away the forces of darkness, destroy demons/witches and wizards. Hence, they purchase the items, wear them on their bodies and place some in their homes, offices, and vehicles to receive divine protection and blessing. Closely associated with this is the magical use of the traditional sacramentals of the Church such as holy water, rosary, medals and even the oil of anointing.[67] This kind of spirituality that focusses on the efficacy of the religious articles and the spiritual powers of the men of God who bless and sell the article is contrary to true Catholic spirituality and piety. It misdirects the faithful from Christ the High Priest and the author and finisher of our faith. Therefore, it leads to a spiritual misconduct which focuses on the power inherent in the religious articles and the men of God who bless them and not the crucified Christ.

The emerging form of African Christian Piety which emphasises the miraculous powers inherent in religious articles is however not peculiar to the Catholic Church in Nigeria. In addition to the protective invocation of the blood of Jesus which is the hallmark of Pentecostalism in Nigeria, the Pentecostals also use religious stickers and pictures of their general overseers (G.O) as means of divine protection. The stickers and pictures are placed in the homes, offices, and vehicles for protection against witches and wizards, demons, and sorcery.[68] There are also handkerchiefs, bracelets, necklaces, oil of anointing and protective gears sold by different Pentecostal Churches as means of the divine intervention of the God of "daddy G.O". These religious articles which are used like the traditional charms and talisman are now regarded by many as Christian Charms[69].

The peculiar root of these abuses and superstitions could be partly traced to the influence of African Traditional Religion on African Christians. Although the African Traditional Religion is justifiably a monotheistic religion in principle, the adherents believe in a Supreme Being who is directly unapproachable by mere mortals. Thus, prayers, offerings and sacrifices are made to the divinities in the name of the Supreme Being who is directly unreachable and unapproachable. Their images are also accorded the adoration due to God because they are considered to represent the invisible God. Influenced by the above African traditional notion and perception of God, many unenlightened Catholics in Nigeria treat the sacred images as if they were images of African divinities or gods that could be worshipped. The sacred images are, therefore, considered by such persons as a replacement for African gods and divinities since they are erroneously perceived to occupy a similar position and play the same role. The attempt to replace African divinities and gods with the saints and sacred images leads to

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[67] Ilo, "Reimagining African Ecclesiology", 179

[68] Michael, "African Sacredscape and its Ethnometaphysics", 119

[69] Michael, "African Sacredscape and its Ethnometaphysics", 120

syncretism and tends towards idolatry. The practice is incompatible with Christianity and the Catholic theological teachings on the veneration of saints and images. Hence the invocation of the saints as if they were African gods or the profane use of sacred images as if they were African deities, divinities or charms is an abuse of the Catholic faith. The same could be said when one puts one's confidence and trust on the sacred images as if they possess any special power of their own apart from the power of the supreme God who could work through them. Such practice is superstitious. It is contrary to true Catholic piety and devotion.

FINDINGS

The findings of this study reveal that:

i. Ignorance is a major factor responsible for the abuse of sacred images and relics among Catholics in Nigeria
ii. False doctrinal teaching propagated by pious people with inadequate knowledge of theology contributes to the abuse of images and relics in Nigeria.
iii. The minsters' quest to make money from gullible Christians could be responsible for the proliferation of religious images and articles among Nigerian Christians.
iv. The magical use of sacred images and other religious articles is a consequence of the inability to distinguish their use in Christianity from the use of charms and amulets in African Traditional Religion.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the above findings, this study makes the following recommendations.

i. The implementation of the decree of the council of Trent on the veneration of saints and images could contribute towards the reduction of the abuses.
ii. The Catholic Bishops Conference of Nigeria (CBCN) should domesticate the decree in Nigeria, thereby making its content known to Catholics in Nigeria
iii. A national guideline to regulate and moderate the sacred use images, relics, and other religious articles in line with the decree of the Council of Trent should be issued by the Catholic Bishops Conference of Nigeria (CBCN)
iv. The different forms of religious articles, ornaments and sacred images being produced and sold in Nigeria should be evaluated by the bishops for approval or prohibition as the circumstances may require.
v. The teaching and education of the faithful on the true doctrine and theology concerning the use of images and relics as directed by the Council of Trent should be intensified in Nigeria.

CONCLUSION

The decree of the council of Trent which is one of the laudable efforts made at reducing the abuses associated with the veneration of saints and images in the past is relevant to the Nigeria situation and context. Its implementation could therefore serve as a panacea to the problem in

Nigeria. The Council made no new doctrinal pronouncement and offered no new theological teaching on the sacred use of images and relics. It rather reaffirmed the ancient doctrine of the Church and the decision of earlier councils, especially the Second Council of Nicaea (787). However, it acknowledged that the abuses and superstitions arise from false doctrine and the misrepresentation of the true doctrine especially among the uneducated. This is also true of the situation among contemporary Catholics in Nigeria. In addition to this is a peculiar factor which could be traced to the influence of African Traditional Religion that allows the worship of images. In all, the abuses associated with images and relics among contemporary Catholics in Nigeria are quite like those of the Middle Age and the reformation era, to which the Council of Trent adequately responded. Hence one could say in conclusion that, the implementation of the decree of the Council could serve as a veritable means of correcting the abuses in Nigeria. The unique contribution of this easy to scholarship therefore lies in contextualizing the seemingly forgotten decree of the Council of Trent in Nigerian situation, and adopting it as a panacea to the abuse of images and Saints among contemporary Nigerian Catholics.

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