

REPENTANCE AND THE (UN) FAITHFUL DEPARTED

Stanislaus Nnamdi Iheoma¹

ABSTRACT

This paper which examines repentance within the context of the faithful and unfaithful departed presents death as an ambivalent encounter. On the one hand, it establishes in line with canons of faith that death is a transition from the pilgrim church to either the suffering (in purgatory) or triumphant (in heaven) church, for the faithful departed. Death does not destroy the communion shared by all Christ's faithful but rather reinforces it through the transition from one state to another by a faithfully departed Christian. On the other hand, this is not so for the unfaithful departed. In the departure of the unfaithful, death becomes separation and a great loss for the whole community of the faithful. This is because death becomes for the unfaithful departed a departure from the pilgrim church without admittance into either the suffering or triumphant church. In this situation of ambivalence, repentance is presented as the answer that gives certainty to all uncertainties envisaged and encountered in death. Repentance is the necessary batch that distinguishes the faithful departed (saints) from the unfaithful departed (sinners).

1.0 Introduction

The existence of man on earth is a journey that progresses from living to dying. Every created thing is engaged in this journey that begins at birth and ends with death. The end of this journey is shrouded in mystery. Although nobody is sure of the when, where, and how of his/her death, yet everyone is sure that death will come. This certainty is inevitable, but the shadow which hangs over the whole journey and the time tempts one to put a question mark on the

¹ Stanislaus Nnamdi Iheoma is a priest of Ahiara Diocese. He is the Curate of Holy Trinity Parish, Obibi and teaches at Mater Ecclesiae Seminary, Nguru, Mbaise.

sense behind the whole of human life. In this wind of anxiety, all efforts of man to unravel this gruesome mystery have forever defiled every human speculation and calculation. This has led many into thinking and reflecting on the worthlessness of life, since one only lives to die. However, giving a soothing relief to this conundrum is the Christian belief in a life after death for the faithful departed. Christianity presents death positively not as annihilation but as a transformative encounter that leads to a new life beyond and above death. The Christian dead share in the communion of the faithful (rightly called communion of the saints) even in death and as such are regarded as the faithful departed. Hence, death which physically entails a separation of the deceased from the bereaved is not a separation but rather a departure or momentary sleep of which a great reunion is hoped for at the *Parousia*. Gerald O'Collins² succinctly avers that the resurrection *kerygma* is a specific Christian proclamation and message that the crucified Jesus had been raised from the dead to become the effective saviour and ever-present living Lord of the world. In the event of the resurrection lies the solution to the problem posed by the drama of departure (death). The cross and death alone could not explain the Christian faith. The Pascal mystery consists in the fact that the crucified man was raised on the third day, in accordance with the Scriptures (1 Cor. 15:4) as proto-Christian tradition attests. Christ's resurrection is the beginning of our own victory over death implanted in our humanity. Even though our bodies are sown in weakness and are perishable, we carry in ourselves at the same time the desire for glory. Buttressing this fact, Christopher West avers:

God put it there in the beginning - not to frustrate us by dashing our hopes, but to lead us to fulfilment in him. All hopes, therefore must be placed in our resurrection. Then the body that we experience as perishable will be raised imperishable. The body that we experience as weighed down in dishonour and

²Gerald O' Collins, "The Resurrection of Christ", in *The New Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Joseph O. Komonchak, Bangalore: Theological Publication of India, 2011, 880.

*weakness will be raised in glory and power.
For what is sown a physical body is raised a
spiritual body.*³

One of the greatest mysterious wisdom of the Church is that she celebrates and recommends as models many of faithfully departed members who through testimonies of their lives are believed to be in heaven. These faithfully departed children of the Church are celebrated throughout the year as indicated in the liturgical calendar and especially on the 1st of November adequately designated as “All Saints’ day”. Irrespective of the fact that there are people in hell, the Church in her long history has never, no matter how evil one must have lived, proclaimed an individual to be in hell. This mysterious wisdom is rooted in the very humanly incomprehensible manner the first Saint was canonised by Christ on the cross: "today you will be with me in paradise" (the good thief) and His reluctance to pass judgment on the bad thief (Lk 23:39-43). Hence, the good thief who lived an unfaithful life until his sentence on the cross departed this world a faithful man. Such is the mystery surrounding the fate of the faithful or unfaithful departed. This goes a long way to explain the thin line between the faithful departed of All Saints and the faithful departed of All Souls and the unfaithful departed who neither belong to first or second group. This paper which reflects on repentance and the (un) faithful departed will try to establish repentance as the answer to the tragedy of departure (death). Consequently, it is the aim of this paper to argue the immortality of the faithful departed even in their apparent mortality caused by their departure.

1.1 Clarification of Concepts

Death (Faithful Departed/unfaithful Departed)

Death can be defined as the separation of the soul from the body. This separation puts the body in death conditions like motion-less, life-less, open to corruption, etc., as it terminates all the vital activities of the body. It is the cessation of life and all associated processes, the end of an organism’s existence as an entity

³ Christopher West, *Theology of the Body Explained; A Commentary on John Paul II’s Man and Woman He Created Them*, Boston, Pauline Books and Media, 2007, 331.

independent from its environment and its return to an inert, non-living state. Theologically, “death is the final point of the human person’s individual history.”⁴ It is an encounter with God; limitation of life; an entrance into eternal life; consequence of original sin; last enemy of man; participation in the life of Jesus Christ; a sacrament and theological act.⁵ In this paper, death is seen as a departure, and the state of the departed at the time of his/her death (departure) determines whether he/she belongs to the camp of the faithful departed or the unfaithful departed.

Repentance: Repentance means to have a change of mind, “to think differently afterwards”. In this sense, repentance is a sincere turning away, in both the mind and heart, from self to God. It involves a change of mind that leads to action—the radical turning away from a sinful course to God. A person who is truly repentant recognizes God the Father as the most important factor of his or her existence. Repentance is seen as a stage in Christian salvation where the believer turns away from sin.⁶ In Roman Catholic theology, repentance is part of the larger theological concept of penance.⁷ In this paper, repentance is presented as the answer to the mystery and tragedy of departure (death).

2.0 The Tragic Spectacle of Death

Death is a mystery; this is aptly seen in St. Paul who likens death to a mystery (*μυστηριον*). Corroborating this fact the Council Fathers in *Lumen Gentium* noted: “that it is in regard to the mystery of death that man’s condition is most shrouded in doubt. Man is tormented not only by pain and by breaking up of his body but also, even more, by the dread of forever ceasing to be.”⁸ St. Augustine buttresses further that from the moment a man begins to exist in body, which is destined to die, he is involved all the time in a process whose end

⁴Zachary Hayes, “Death,” in *The New Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Joseph O. Komonchak, Bangalore: Theological Publication of India, 2011, 272.

⁵ Cf. Anthony Dimkpa, Lectures notes on *De Novissimi*, Seat of Wisdom Seminary Owerri, 2017/2018.

⁶ Bruce Demarest, *The Cross and Salvation: The Doctrine of Salvation*, Wheaton: Crossway, 1997, 38-39.

⁷ Bruce Demarest, *The Cross and Salvation*, 37.

⁸*Lumen Gentium*, 48.

is death.⁹ This mystery ascends the throne of tragedy because the possibility of substitution is completely doomed to failure. Every man must assume his own death himself.¹⁰ In this view Battista Mondin¹¹ avers that our life is always a life moving towards death; the whole of human life is a dialectic process between time and eternity. The tragic event of death is mysterious and tragic because it is universal, inescapable, imminent, inexorable and fearful.¹²

The universality of death lies in the fact that all men fall to the scythe of death. Death looks no one in the face before striking its murderous blow. Death has already fixed the hour of its arrival for everyone. Concerning the inescapability of death, Mondin posits:

*There is nothing to do against death: any battle begun against death is doomed to failure. Nothing could succeed in getting the better of this adversary... Even if one obtains some small, brief success, it serves only to delay for some time the decisive blow.*¹³

The tragic spectacle of death lies in the fact that it is inexorable. Death is not stopped when confronted with innocent smile of the child, nor with the robust strength of the athlete or the warrior, nor with the wisdom of the scholars, nor with the piety of the monk. Before death every prayer, supplication and invocation is vain. The spectre of death advances inexorably towards all men.¹⁴ Given these preceding characteristics of death, it appears frightful. It gives rise to horror, aversion and anguish in man. Human persons detest death and do not wish to hear it being spoken of. In death man leaves history forever, and with it his circle of family and friends. This is the bitterest pang of dying; it gives death the character not only of

⁹ "Homo ex quo esse incipit in hoc corpore, in morteest" (Augustine, *De Civitate Dei*, XIII, 10).

¹⁰ Martin Heidegger, *Essere a tempo (Being and Time)*, trans. Bocca, Milan, 1953, 253.

¹¹ Battista Mondin, *Philosophical Anthropology*, Rome: Urbaniana University Press, 1985, 262.

¹² Battista Mondin, 265.

¹³ Battista Mondin, 266.

¹⁴ Battista Mondin, 267.

an end but of penance and expiation. But in spite of the dread surrounding death, the hearty side of the gist is that from Christian perspective death is not an end itself but a means to an end, the end being eternal bliss (life after death) with the Lord. In truth, Christianity presents a way out of this mystery and tragedy of death by the summoning of all to repentance and conversion which enables one experience death as a transformative encounter, a gateway to the afterlife.

3.0 Repentance: The Answer to the Tragic Spectacle of Death

The call to repentance as seen in the mission of Christ (Matt 4:17) and continued in those of the apostles, especially in St. Paul is the eternal and lasting answer of God to the mystery and tragedy of death. It is the final and the fullest word of the self - revelation of the living God as God not of the dead but of the living (Mk 12:27). St. Paul makes a distinction between spiritual and physical death. A repented Christian never dies, even if physically dead he enjoys spiritual immortality even in his apparent physical mortality and decay. Though death is mortality, but it is also the darkness and distortion of spiritual experience which is at enmity with God.¹⁵ The sin of Adam not only made him mortal, it brought the whole of his experience into that condition of estrangement from God which is death. This is why Paul conceives the victory over death as being achieved in stages. He taught that a repented Christian who lives true to his creedal professions can be spiritually “alive in Christ Jesus” (1Thes 4:13-18), while still corporally dead (Rm 8:10); that is, the believer who has, in Christ, “been brought from death to life” (Rm 6:13) because, like Christ, he now “lives to God” (Gal 2:19) is still, because he continues to be part of the present aeon, as mortal as the greatest sinner.¹⁶ Death has been overcome in the spiritual dimension but will be overcome in the fleshy, corporeal dimension only at the *Parousia*. Just as Adam immediately died spiritually after sinning but death’s victory over his body was conclusively manifested after many years, we also receive through baptism the spiritual immediate defeat of death (which can only be lost through mortal sin) but physical and final corporeal defeat of death at the

¹⁵Strandness Harold, *Death: A Study in Pauline Theology*, University of Edinburg Press, Edinburg, 1963, p.119.

¹⁶Strandness Harold, *Death: A Study in Pauline Theology*, p.120.

Parousia, when the body will be liberated from the power of death and transformed into a *σομαπνεθματικον*.¹⁷ For Paul, the total victory over death is already the experience of one man, Jesus Christ. Just as death entered the world through the transgression of one man, the resurrection and life has entered through Christ, who he describes as the second Adam. He now lives the life of the coming age of glory in a redeemed body. In His triumph over death is the result of His triumph over sin in the flesh, wrought by a perfect act of righteousness:

*His obedient acceptance of the undeserved death of a sinner in its fullest dimensions of horror on behalf of his sinful brothers is the most perfect act of righteousness. Because his death was fully representative and substitutionary, he is able to share his victory over death with all who will accept union with him in his death.*¹⁸

From the foregoing explanations, one can confidently assert that physical or natural death is an inevitable, tragic and inescapable mystery (*μυστηριον*) that would befall all irrespective of how sinful or righteous one might be. Given this Pauline notion of the inescapability of death even for the righteous, death appears frightful and gives rise to horror, aversion and anguish in man. This most probably could explain the disappointment of the Christian community in Thessalonica owing to the death of their loved ones who had hoped to witness the *Parousia* (1Thes 4:13-18). They may not have understood properly this Pauline distinction of physical and spiritual death and the idea that death is not an end itself but a means to an end; and beside being an inescapable and inevitable mystery for Paul, it is optimistically a transformative encounter and a temporary sleep which gives an answer to the tragic spectacle of departure (death).

Repentance and the Good Thief: Even though, the unfathomable absolution granted to the "good thief" on the cross by Christ leaves only to divine judgment the yardstick for distinguishing a faithful

¹⁷Strandness Harold, *Death: A Study in Pauline Theology*, p.159.

¹⁸Strandness Harold, *Death: A Study in Pauline Theology*, p.167.

departed from an unfaithful departed, this, however, does not make baseless the condition that effected his absolution. The sainthood of the "Good Thief" was as a result of his repentance as seen by the remorse and guilt he expressed which warranted his conviction. The suspended condemnation/absolution of the "Bad Thief" was a show of the overwhelming and never ending mercy of God which continues to give the sinner an opportunity to repent until the final seconds of his life. Hence, the forgiveness of the "Good Thief" is not only a show of the depth and immensity of God's mercy and forgiveness but also the immediate transformative power of repentance as the answer to the tragic spectacle of life beyond. As such, just like our Saviour, Jesus Christ, we readily identify as saints those like the "Good Thief" (repented Christians) who are with Christ in paradise but suspend judgement in terms of condemnation or canonisation on those whose fate are not too clear to us like the "Thief on the Left". Repentance was the distinguishing marker between the thief on the right and the one on the left.

Repentance and the Departed: The faithful departed is one whose death is more than the endpoint of biological existence. Death is conquered for the faithful departed at the point where he meets death with the attitude of love gained through repentance, and so transforms the loss of his life into the gain of everlasting life. For the faithful departed, the sting of death is extinguished in Christ in whom the victory was gained through the power of His unlimited love. Death is vanquished when people die with Christ and into him. Subsequently, death becomes for the faithful departed a process that culminates in an encounter with God, a moment towards which he has been journeying, as he awaits the judgment God will pronounce on him. His anxiety can be overcome only in a loving confidence like the supplication of the Good Thief, "remember me when you come into Your Kingdom" (Lk 23:42). The Christian must understand that the call God directs to man in death is one of love, an invitation into the life of God. To understand God's call as one of love does not do away with the awesomeness of death; even the faithful anticipate it with fear. In the call for repentance, the tragedy of death has found its most profound transformation as a home coming awaiting future reunion.

3.1 Canons on Repentance and the Hope of the (Un) Faithful Departed

“From thence He will come again to judge the living and the dead”: The 7th Article of the Christian Creed which reads: “From thence He (Christ) will come again to judge the living and the dead”,¹⁹ expresses the undeniable conviction of Christians of the necessity of repentance as a prerequisite to pass the judgment test of the second coming of Christ. This conviction is as old as Christianity itself and today continues to form the basis of the Christian *kerygma*. Before Jesus began His earthly ministry, John the Baptist was on the scene preaching repentance and the imminent coming of God’s kingdom: “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” (Matt 3:2). Jesus also continued in this line: “the time is fulfilled and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the Gospel” (Mk 1:15). The whole of the synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke) and the earliest letters of St. Paul were all written in anticipation of the imminent second coming of Christ and as such prescribed repentance as a necessary *sine qua non* for admission into this kingdom. The Old Testament is replete with several prophetic summons to the people of Israel to repent from their sins. The coming of the Lord has always been seen as a day of joyful celebration for the faithful either living or dead and a day of weeping and regrets for the unfaithful either living or dead.

“Thy Kingdom Come”: Christians pray, not only in the Lord’s Prayer: “Thy Kingdom Come”, but also and above all in the Eucharist, to hasten Christ’s return by saying: *Marana Tha!* “Our Lord, come” (Rev 22:20). This eager wait is a heart-warming longing of a faithful repented Christian awaiting the Master’s coming in glory.

“I believe in the resurrection of the dead and life everlasting”: These two articles of faith sum up the Christian hope, belief and perception of life after death for the departed. These articles of faith on the resurrection glory and eternal life (life after death) form the last two articles of our apostolic profession of faith. This is a hope which is itself a belief anchored on the mystery of Christ. As the

¹⁹ CCC, no. 668-682.

eternal and incarnate Son of God, Christ is the ‘omega point’ of history. Through Him and in Him creation returns to the Father. Hence, St. Paul maintains that the resurrection of Christ opens the way to the resurrection of believers on the last day. Hence, he refers to the risen Christ as the first fruit of those who have fallen asleep (1 Cor 15:20; 23). In this line, Paul emphasizes the futility and meaninglessness of life if death had the final word. He insists that if Christ had not been raised from the dead, then faith has lost its power - your faith is futile. The consequence is that believers would still be in their sins, and those who have died in Christ would have perished (1 Cor 15:17-18), and the struggles and labour of daily life would have no meaning.²⁰

“We look forward to the resurrection of the dead”²¹: In this profession of faith as contained in the Nicene-Constantinople Creed, we hear the testimonies of the New Testament: “The dead who are in Christ (the faithful departed) will rise” (1 Thess. 4:16); “Christ is now raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep” (1 Cor. 15:20). This manner of speaking implies that the fact of Christ’s resurrection must be extended at some time to those who are Christ’s (the faithful departed). Since our future resurrection is “the extension of the very Resurrection of Christ to humankind,”²² it is well understood that the resurrection of the Lord is the model of our own resurrection. Christ’s resurrection is also the cause of our future resurrection: for “death came through a man; hence the resurrection of the dead comes through a man also” (1 Cor 15:21). Through birth in baptism in the Church and in the Holy Spirit we rise sacramentally in the Risen Christ (cf. Col 2:12). The resurrection of those who are Christ’s must be considered as the culmination of the mystery already begun in baptism. For this reason, the resurrection is presented as the supreme communion with Christ and with the brethren and also as the highest object of faith: “and thenceforth we shall be with the Lord unceasingly” (1 Thess. 4:17). Therefore the final glorious resurrection will be the

²⁰ Igbo Philip, *Resurrection in the Old and New Testaments* (Enugu; Claretian Publications, 2013), xviii-xix

²¹Denzinger, S 150.

²² Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Letter *Recentiores episcoporum Synodi*, Introduction, AAS 71 (1979): 941.

most perfect communion, even bodily, between those, now risen, who are Christ's, and the glorious Lord. From all this it is evident that the resurrection of the Lord is, as it were, the "space" of our future glorious resurrection and that our own future resurrection must be interpreted as a corporate and an ecclesial event.

4.0 Prayers for the (Un) Faithful Departed

The Christian conviction of praying for the dead is based on the belief of life after death. This belief in life after death is Scripture-based: 'therefore (Judas Maccabeus) made atonement for the dead that they might be delivered from their sin' (2 Mac 12:46). Based on the Church's belief in purgatory, she recommends almsgiving, indulgences and works of penance undertaken on behalf of the dead.²³ Christians are enjoined in line with the tradition of the Church to offer prayers for the eternal repose of the deceased. Pious solidarities like the Purgatorians have always promoted this pious act. However, the merits of these prayers go to the dead in Christ (faithful departed), those who though repented are still undergoing purification for temporary punishment accrued from sins already forgiven. Hence, the church remembers in her prayers for the dead the faithful departed (members who departed this world living true to their baptismal promises and creedal commitments as faithful members of Christ's body). Hence, the prayers and masses maybe said for the unfaithful departed but the merits of these prayers are not lost because they are channelled to the faithful departed in purgatory who need them for their eventual journey to eternal bliss.

One could legitimately argue that baptism makes one an irrevocable member of Christ faithful (C. 204) and as such there could be no concept of an unfaithful departed for a baptised Christian. To explain this the Church distinguishes between Character and Grace. Thus, the Council of Trent rejects and anathematizes anyone who holds that: "a baptized person, even if he wishes it, cannot lose grace, no matter how much he sins, unless he refuses to believe" (Sess. VII, *De Baptismo*). In this line, the Catechism of the Catholic Church teaches that: "For all the baptised, children or adults, faith must grow after Baptism. For this reason the Church celebrates each year at the Easter Vigil the renewal of baptismal promises. Preparation for Baptism leads only to the threshold of new life.

²³ CCC, no. 1032.

Baptism is the source of that new life in Christ from which the entire Christian life springs forth" (CCC 1254). This suggests that the faith (not the character) received in baptism can be nourished or malnourished based on the recipient's quality of Christian witnessing. This quality of Christian witnessing is predicated on living true to one's baptismal promises and commitment. As such, a member of Christ faithful who at baptism "theoretically" professes his/her belief in God and renounces Satan only to go back "practically" either through actions and inactions professing Satan and renouncing God is still a member of Christ faithful with his/her indelible baptismal character, but an unfaithful member through the failure to live true to his/her baptismal promises. If this supposed "Nominal Christian" happens to depart (die) in this state of unfaithfulness, he/she does not qualify to be called a "Faithful Departed", in the strict sense. In this sense, he/she becomes a nominal faithful departed by the virtue of his/her baptismal character but in grace an unfaithful departed.

The above characterisation establishes the distinction between Christian faithful departed in heaven (celebrated at All Saints) and in purgatory (remembered at All Souls) and the Christian unfaithful departed who are neither in the camp of All Saints nor in that of All Souls, and as such enjoys no merits of our prayers for the faithful departed. This is why the routine prayer for the dead: "may the souls of the FAITHFUL departed, through the mercy of God rest in peace" has the emphasis on the qualifying adjective "Faithful". Thus, only the departed who were faithful can benefit from this grace of our prayers for the dead.

4.1 Over Enthusiastic Expectation of Rapture (End Time):

There seem to be in Christendom a strong misguided and misconstrued opinions about end time which is based on a wrong interpretation of 1Thess. 4:17. This has led to an increasing and ever enthusiastic expectation of the end-time and the rapture as evident in many Christian and non-Christian cycles. The term "rapture"²⁴ is

²⁴ Rapture theology originated in the eighteenth century, with the Puritan preachers Increase and Cotton Mather, and was popularized extensively in the 1830s by John Nelson Darby and the Plymouth Brethren, and further in the United States by the wide circulation of the Scofield Reference Bible in the early

derived from the text of the Latin Vulgate of 1 Thess 4:17: "we will be caught up", "seizure", "kidnapping", which derives from the Latin *rapiemur*.²⁵ Advocates of the so called rapture, which has taken up a movement of its own, believe that it is predicted and described in Paul's first Epistle to the Thessalonians 4:17, where he uses the Greek ἀρπάζω, meaning to snatch away or seize.²⁶ This term is an eschatological concept of some Christians, particularly within branches of North American evangelicals consisting of an end time event when all Christian believers who are alive will rise along with the resurrected dead believers into Heaven and join Christ.²⁷

According to Cozby Dimitri, the main thrusts of their doctrines could be summarized thus:

Those who are alive and remain unto the coming of the Lord shall not precede those who are dead. (1 Thess 4:15). The dead in Christ will resurrect first (1 Thess 4:16). The living and the resurrected dead will be caught up together in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. (1 Thess 4:17). The rapture will occur during the Parousia. "Those who are alive and remain unto the coming (Parousia in Greek) of the Lord, shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air" (1 Thess 4:15-17). The meeting with the Lord will be permanent. "And so shall we ever be with the Lord" (1 Thess 4:17).²⁸

20th century (see Ian S. Markham, "John Darby", *The Student's Companion to the Theologians*, Wiley-Blackwell Pub, London, 2013, p.263-264)

²⁵ Wikipedia search on "Rapture", Retrieved 22 February 2019.

²⁶ Wikipedia search on "Rapture", Retrieved 22 February, 2019.

²⁷ McKim, Donald K (2014-04-09). *The Westminster Dictionary of Theological Terms*, Second Edition: Revised and Expanded. Presbyterian Publishing Corporation. p. 261. Retrieved 22 February, 2019.

²⁸ Cozby, Dimitri (September 1998). "What is 'The Rapture'?". Rollinsford, New Hampshire: Orthodox Research Institute. Retrieved 2021-03-22.

From the above outline, one can vividly draw the conclusion that this doctrine is based on false reading and literal misinterpretation of First Thessalonians 4:17. As such the Church rejects this false interpretation and the use of "rapture" as a specific theological term. The Catholic Church rejects the idea of a preliminary return of Christ because it depends on a false interpretation of First Thessalonians 4:17.²⁹ The Church holds that Christ will come again once and for all and not in two stages.³⁰ The Church does not accept the teaching that a group of people will be left behind on earth for an extended Tribulation period after the events of 1 Thessalonians 4:17.³¹ This false doctrine naturally misleads many Millennialists³² into the further error of trying to set the date for Judgment Day. According to their calculations, the last day will come precisely 1,000 (or 1003.5, or 1,007) years after the date of the rapture. In this line, the fact that many individuals or religious groups that have dogmatically predicted the day of the rapture, a practice referred to as "date setting", have been thoroughly embarrassed and discredited, as the predicted date of fulfilment has invariably come and gone without event, renders this argument a wishful thought.³³ Consequently, we must agree with Barclay that Paul's apocalyptic or rapture-like picture of the day of the Lord seen in First

²⁹Cozby, Dimitri (September 1998). "What is 'The Rapture'?"

³⁰ <https://web.archive.org/web/20121109035607/http://www.light-n-life.com/newsletters/09-12-2005.htm> accessed January 27, 2021.

³¹ Wikipedia search on "Rapture", Retrieved 22 February, 2019.

³² Millenarianism is an attitude evident today in some Christian denominations and even among Catholics. It is a residue of Jewish speculation on the duration of the intermediary messianic reign. It was born into the Christian world in the first two centuries through a literal interpretation of 2 Pt 3.8–9 and Rv 20.4. Papias of Hierapolis in the 2nd century paints a vivid picture of the millennial era (*Patrologia Graeca* 7:1213–15). Among its early adherents, numbered Pseudo-Barnabas, Irenaeus, Justin, Tertullian, Lactantius, and Hippolytus. Never universally held as part of apostolic tradition, chiliasm did tend to replace in the 2d century what previously had been the expectation of an imminent *Parousia*. Such excess indicates the force of eschatological hope in the early Church. An unfortunate inept way of affirming that history is the expectation of Christ, chiliastic dreams revive from time to time [cf. Decree of Holy Office, *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* 36 (1944) 212 (H. Denzinger, *Enchiridion symbolorum* 3839)].

³³Strandberg, Todd. "The Date Setters Diary". Rapture Ready, Archived from the original on 24 June 2007. Retrieved 22 February, 2019.

Thessalonians 4:17 is an attempt to describe what is indescribable.³⁴ He warns that we are not meant to take this interpretation with crude and insensitive literalism. For him, it is not the details that is important but the fact that in life and in death Christians are in Christ- and that is a union which nothing can break even death.³⁵

Dwindling Emphasis on Life after Death: On the other hand, present day Christians have been led to ask whether "life after death" in the Christian understanding exists. The reason is not farfetched. On the one hand, it seems that the African traditional belief in reincarnation is gradually gaining upper hand. Nowadays, most preachers, catechists and teachers who preach life after death engage in many traditional ritual incantations that suggest reincarnation. In fact, people of our time have become insensitive to what the Christian belief and perception of life after death entails. On the other hand, secularization and secularism promote this insensitivity and lead to a consumer mentality; and the "hells on earth" created in the last centuries have also contributed to this dwindling emphasis on life after death. After the experiences of concentration camps, terrorism and natural disasters, people no longer see any value in life that worth its continuation in an afterlife. The contemporary man has set little thought on life after death. It is therefore advocated that in sermons during retreats or missions, the Christian belief on the life after death should always be a standard part of the program presented effectively and evocatively.

4.2 (Un) Faithful Departed in Igbo Traditional *Weltanschauung* (Worldview)

In the Igbo traditional religion, it is almost impossible to get a definite definition of death. It is better described. Literally death is seen as the end of earthly life or the absence of life in a body. Madu R. O. reflecting on the concept of death calls it "not yet or a point of no-return."³⁶ However, what is certain from the Igbo traditional

³⁴ William Barclay, *The New Daily Study Bible, The Letter to the Thessalonians*, Theological Publication in India, 2013, 234.

³⁵ William Barclay, *The New Daily Study Bible, The Letter to the Thessalonians*, 235.

³⁶ R. O. Madu. *African Symbols, Proverbs and Myths*, New York, Peter Lang, 1992, p.216.

worldview is the inevitability and naturalness of death. The Igbo traditional religion accepts death as both natural and inevitable. Also the belief that death is not the final end of man as taught in Christianity is common in many African traditional religions especially that of the Igbo. The Igbo traditional worldview sees man as a composition of both physical and spiritual entities. The physical is the body and the spiritual entity is the soul. At death which is the end of physical life, the body rots away and the soul lives on in the spirit world.

Since only the body decays at death and the spirit lives on, the Igbo traditional belief is convinced of the survival of the human person after death, in ancestors (as the living dead) and in reincarnation. These beliefs in life after death through communion with ancestors and reincarnation, though crude and unrefined from the Christian reckoning, could serve as points of convergence and inter-religious dialogue and enculturation between the two religions. The concept of life after death is seen as a continuing relationship of the dead with the living.³⁷ Subsequently, death is not the end of life. It is rather the transition to another state. Death is the only way of passing from the world of men to the world of the spirits, which is very necessary in order to attain ancestorship (sainthood in Christian reckoning). It is important to point out here that for the Igbo people not any kind of death is a gateway to ancestorship. It is generally accepted there are three types of death in the Igbo traditional worldview: ‘*onwuike*, violent death (literally sudden death); ‘*onwuojoo*’, bad death, or ‘*onwu chi*’, natural death.³⁸ The first two are the most undesirable and could be likened to the death of the unfaithful departed and one must do all one can to prevent the first two. The last, *Onwu chi* or natural death, is not enough. It is generally accepted by most Igbo societies that death can only open

³⁷EmefielkengaMetuh, *God and Man in African Religion*, Enugu; Snaap Press, 1981, 168.

³⁸*Onwuike* is the death of any young person especially due to violent accident. It is held by some Igbos that those who suffer violent death will reincarnate to complete their term of life and achieve their destiny. *Onwuojoo* is linked with one’s conduct in life, and determines the type of burial one is given and most important of all, it determines a spirit’s status in the afterlife. Such persons are not mourned or buried in their homes, but thrown into bad bush, *ajoohia*. *Onwu chi*, God’s death or natural death is a blessing from God, it follows a ripe old age.

the gate way to ancestorship under the following conditions which are prerequisite of faithfulness: death at old age, offspring, good moral life before death, appropriate funeral rite and some add good death.³⁹ From the foregoing, it could be seen that *onwu chi* (death of the faithful departed) therefore is not an annihilation; it is described as a good death. Life for the Igbo, according to Metuh, is cyclic; it goes in an alternating cycle between the spirit world and the visible world.⁴⁰

Interestingly, one thing that can be deduced from the Igbo worldview is the fact that life, death and reincarnation are directly and completely under the control of God; it is generally taken for granted that when people have run their course on earth, they return to their master, the supreme being, and live with him in the spirit - world. Going home to the spirit world is not a terminal stage, as the more fortunate among those reaching home would be allowed by the Creator to reincarnate.⁴¹ The Igbo belief is that one's status in the after-life is dependent on one's moral conduct. Those who are guilty of very grievous crimes such as suicide, notorious robbery, witchcraft, etc., become wandering evil spirits who are banished to the desolate, unhappy place between the living and spirit-land.⁴² They are prevented from reincarnating. For them there is very little joy and no hope. Their confusion, frustration and isolation are symbolized by the disorder and darkness of the bad bush where they are dumped.⁴³

Conclusion

From the foregoing, we can conclude that the faithful departed is a repented Christian who is either enjoying eternal bliss in heaven or undergoing temporary purification for sins already forgiven. As

³⁹ Benjamin C. R, *African Religion: Symbol, Ritual and Community*, London, Prentice Hall Inc, 1976, p.91.

⁴⁰Emefielke ngaMetuh, *God and Man in African Religion*, Enugu; Snaap Press, 1981, p.164.

⁴¹EmefielkengaMetuh, *God and Man in African Religion*, p.176.

⁴²EmefielkengaMetuh, *God and Man in African Religion*, p.179.

⁴³EmefielkengaMetuh, *God and Man in African Religion*, p.181.

such, the faithful departed share in the hallowed communion of the saint enjoyed by all Christ's faithful. This communion has to do with the relationship existing among the triumphant Church in heaven, pilgrim Church on earth and the suffering Church in purgatory. Though, the pilgrim Church on earth is made up of saints and sinners, the triumphant and suffering Church in heaven and purgatory, respectively, are made up of repented Christians who have washed their robes in the blood of the Lamb. These people are rightly called the faithful departed. They are faithful because they scaled through the crucibles of life with faith intact. In the Igbo traditional setting, we can say their upright life has won the revered right to ancestorship. They are faithful because they left this world belonging to the choir of saints within the congregation of the pilgrim Church. They, unlike some other members of the pilgrim Church who die as sinners (unfaithful), are called saints. Consequently, when we pray for the dead, the merits of our prayers go to those among the faithful departed who are suffering temporarily in purgatory for remission of sins already forgiven. Thus, the death of a faithful departed is never a separation but rather a departure of which a return is promised at the *parousia*, while the death of an unfaithful departed entails an eternal separation from God and the faithful children of God. Hence, death becomes a tragedy for the unfaithful departed but an event of joyful reunion for the faithful departed.

May we conclude this paper by stating that as we reflect on the intricacies of the repentance and the (un) faithful departed, we should bear in mind that issues about life after death and events thereafter will only be clear when we experience them at the end of time. Until then, we must continue to live with the Christian faith and hope which will never disappoint us.