

**Deepening Our Relationship with God through the Holy Child Jesus
(Thoughts for Reflection)**

Sr. Teresa Okure, SHCJ

175th SHCJ Jubilee Virtual Conference, 30th July 2021

1. Getting Connected with the Topic of the Presentation

The registered topic of the presentation says, “Deepening Our Communion with God through the Holy Child Jesus”. I had tagged my presentation as I understood it, “Deepening Our Relationship with God through the Holy Child Jesus”, without really noticing the registered formulation. Though there appears to be a change from communion to relationship, in reality there is none; because to have communion with anybody there must first be a relationship. So in the spirit of the biblical jubilee which requires a return to our roots (Lev 25:8-22); to the foundation of our life and constitution by the God who created us in “God’s image and likeness” (Gen 1:26-27; 5:1-2) we concentrate on deepening our relationship with God.

We start with few questions to get us connected with the topic of the presentation, “Deepening Our Relationship with God through the Holy Child”. The questions aim at helping us to reflect on, think deeply about our relationship with God; to grasp, ground and personalise the core issue at stake in this topic. The presentation does not provide answers, except in key cases. Each of us individually and all of us together are to discern the kind of relationship we have with God, and the implications of that relationship for us as individuals and as Family of God. We pause briefly after each set of questions to allow time to reflect.

- a) What is relationship? What is the word for “relationship” in our native languages, for those of us whose mother tongue is not English or another second language? What types of relationship do we have; can we think of?

I see these as key types of relationship:

- ✓ **Natural relationship:** this is relationship by blood, by birth: parents-child, brothers-sisters, uncles, aunties, nuclear and extended family.
- ✓ **Created or chosen relationship:** a man and woman choose to become husband and wife; eventually form a family, become sons- and daughters-in-law of another family.
- ✓ **Contractual relationship.** People enter into covenant/contract with one another, example: members of a religious congregation. It seems people in cultic groups enter into this type of relationship to their own ruin, unfortunately.
- ✓ Other types of relationship exist: such as friends and classmates at school and colleagues at work, relationship between the boss and the workers.

b) What binds people together in these relationships; makes them relate and sustains their relationship? What do people do individually and collectively to sustain these relationships? Can these relationships be deepened? How? What is the word for “deepen” in our native languages, especially with regard to relationship? Do we ever think of deepening relationships? What is the life-span of each of these relationships?

Expounding on these relationships:

- ✓ In the **first type**, natural relationship, blood binds members together; in the **second type**, marriage, a life-long contract between two partners (in Africa we may add and their families) bonds them together; in the **third type**, the covenant forged by the founders of the congregations or groups and the willingness of each member to abide by the terms of that covenant binds them together. If a member decides not to abide by the terms of the covenant or way of life of the congregation or the congregation feels that a member cannot live the life, the relationship ceases. Either the person leaves or is asked to leave by the congregation. The same applies in the vocation to the priesthood.

Only the natural relationship formed by blood is permanent. We say such and such a person was my classmate, roommate when I studied in such and such an institution; my colleague, my boss when I worked in such and such a place or company. This person is an ex-Rev Sister, seminarian and so forth. Even in marriage, which is supposed to be for life, people speak of “ex-wife” and “ex-husband”. Citizens of a country have a lasting relationship with the country of their birth. Some may change their citizenship or have dual citizenship. But no one can have dual blood relationship to parents, by birth.

In all relationships, only the one formed by blood is uniquely permanent. It has no conditions attached. It is not created by choice. One has no say in how that relationship comes to be. One is born into it; just finds one’s self in it, accepts it and owns it: This person is my daddy, mummy, sister, brother, aunt, uncle; etcetera. We never hear somebody say such and such a person was **my ex-father, ex-mother, -brother, -sister, ex-aunt or uncle**. The relationship formed by birth, by blood, created when one first comes into existence at the moment of conception, without one’s choice and decision, is permanent and inalienable.

2. Outcome of Getting in Touch with the Topic

What has all this to do with deepening our relationship with God through the Holy Child Jesus? I hope you see where the reflection is leading us. In speaking of our relationship with God we need first of all to establish the kind of relationship we have in mind. This relationship is, should be the natural type of relationship that exists in families, that binds children to parents and siblings to siblings. If we do not see our relationship with God in this light or at this depth, our relationship with God will be faulty and unsustainable. At best we will see God as a king, judge, one who watches to see and record in a book the evils we do daily or reward us for the meagre good we do. This contractual approach to our relationship with God can never help

us to establish a right, true and genuine relationship with God or let alone deepen it. This type of relationship with God requires gospel faith or acceptance.

3. Jesus' Child-Parent Relationship with God

We are speaking of deepening our relationship with God through the Holy Child Jesus. Jesus is God's uniquely begotten child; he is so, both as God and as human being. As God, we have little problem, "The Word was God." (John 1:2). This Word-God, "became flesh" (a human being) (John 1:14). The angel Gabriel told Mary that she was to conceive in her womb (her woman reality) and give birth to son/child, a human being who will also be a son/child of God: "The Holy Spirit will come upon you and the power of the most high will overshadow you, therefore the one to be born of you [as a human being], will be called Holy, the Son of God." (Luke 1:35).

This truth is the core of our faith: Jesus is God's child both as God and as a human being. God-Word became a human being and lived among us to transform us in him and through him into divinity. As Hebrews says, "Because he came to save, help us his lost siblings, he had to become like us through the natural process of birth; that is, he had to relate to us by blood; all human beings are related by blood, the blood of the first *adam* (humanity: "male and female", man and woman), that God created in "God's image and likeness" (Gen 1:26-27; 5:1-2). All human beings are related by their mitochondrial blood or gene from this first *adam* (humanity) which Scripture describes as "male and female" (not simply male, man). As Paul says in his speech at the Areopagus, God "gives to all human beings life and breath and everything. He made from one every nation of peoples to live on all the face of the earth" (Acts 17:25-26).

God-Word became a human being to enable us humans to relate to God as God's biological, flesh and blood children in him and through him. As the letter to the Hebrews says, "Because he came to help human beings, not angels", "he had to become like his siblings in every respect", be "of the same stock" (Heb 2:14-18); "but without sin" (Heb 4:15); sin being essentially alienation from God. Since he was God by nature, he could never be separated from God, from self. The use of "siblings", instead of "brothers" in these passages is my preference. The Ibibio/Efik/Anang language group and most African languages would say *nditoeka*, children born of the same father and mother (not brothers).

Scriptural Evidence on Our Child-Parent Relationship with God

Scripture texts that proclaim and assure us of this truth, that we are flesh and blood children of God and siblings of Jesus, are many. We select a few key ones for our reflection.

John 1:12-13; 3:3-21. The Evangelist John declares that to those who received Jesus, "who believed in his name, "he gave the enabling power [authority, *exousia*] to become children of God" (1:12); adding that their birth from God was as real and as natural birth (by blood, will of humans – parents – and wish of the male. 1:13). In the dialogue with Nicodemus (John 3:3-

21), Jesus emphasises that this “birth from above” (from God), through baptism (water and the Holy Spirit) is an eschatological imperative (a must) if one is to see, enter into, belong to God’s kingdom or relate to God.

The author of 1 John 3:1-4 invites us to “think with what love God has loved us that we should be called children of God”, adding that “we are not just called” children of God but that “that is what we really are”. That the world does know us as God’s flesh and blood children does not nullify that fact. That the world did not recognise that Jesus was truly God did not affect in any way his being truly God. God does not depend on humans to approve or authenticate what God does in order for that reality to be true. The problem believers should worry about is whether we ourselves do realise, know and believe that we are truly God’s children.

Romans 8:14-17. Paul declares that God’s Spirit bears witness with our Spirit that “we are children of God”. The proof is that “God has sent God’s Spirit into our hearts and it makes us cry ‘Abba, Daddy’”. Generally people say we are God’s adopted children. That is not entirely true according to the Scriptures. The consistent testimony of Scripture is that we are God’s begotten, not adopted children; we are God’s begotten children in the blood of Christ. People who adopt children do not pour themselves, their physical blood or spirit into their children to make them their biological children. Only those who give birth to, beget children by blood transmit something of themselves into their children. We are born of God in the blood of Christ because God’s has put God’s own Spirit or life-principle in us (cf. 1 John 3:9).

In Galatians 4:4-6, Paul says that Jesus, God’s Son, is “born of woman” (not of a woman, v 4). This speaks to the fact that he is a human being as are other human beings (by birth). As Jesus, God’s Son, is born of woman (Gal 4:4), even so in him are believers born of God. They cry “Abba Father”. If Christians are in Christ, God’s Son, like branches of a vine (John 15:1-17) or members of his body (1Cor 12:12-30), then they must necessarily be God’s substantial and consubstantial children. The trunk cannot be an orange tree and yet the branches that grow from it and bear orange fruit be something else. At issue here is what nature offers; not what comes through grafting. We are substantial parts of Christ, by nature, not through grafting; through baptism into him; and through his choosing to become flesh and bold like us. We are God’s children in Christ through faith; and because we are children, we are “heirs of God”, co-heirs with Christ. In him we come into our heritage and no longer “depend on guardians” to manage our affairs for us.

The letter to the Hebrews 1:5, says God has not called any angel “my Son” (Heb 1:5). By calling Christ his Son, God also calls believers in Christ his children by blood, the blood of Christ. In Christ, every citizen of heaven has the dignity of “the first-born” (Heb 12:22-23) with equal rights and dignity, because every citizen is in him, through whom and for whom “all things were created; he is “the first-born of all creation” and “the firstborn from the dead” (Col 1:15, 18).

4. Life Consequences of Our Being Children of God

We are reflecting on our relationship with God through the Holy Child. I trust we can see how this reflection is developing, leading us into the heart of the topic. What is at stake in the topic is not a question of **copying**, or **imitating** the kind of relationship that the Holy Child Jesus had with God, as people imitate their heroes; or doing things we think the Child Jesus did or would have done; or asking him to help us in diverse ways as we do, for example, in the hymn “Jesus Teach Me How to Pray”.

Jesus teach me how to pray,/Suffer not my thoughts to stray,
Keep distractions far away, /Sweet Holy Child.

That is all right; but what is at stake is cultivating our relationship with God through the Holy Child Jesus; allowing God’s life to become incarnate in us. This requires a much deeper understanding of who God is to us, and we to God; from this understanding should flow all we do and how we do it in and through Christ Jesus, God’s Child.

Begotten and Destined to Live as Other Christ

Jesus’ entire life and actions were based on his understanding of who he was in relation to God. His awareness that he was God’s Son by nature, that as a human being, God called him his Son (“This is my beloved son in whom I am well pleased”; Mark 1:11); his realisation that he was Son, the exact representative of God, guided, seasoned and determined how he lived; how he related to all and sundry and to earth’s creatures; it determined everything he did on earth, as a human being, to show us his human siblings how to relate to God as God’s children and to have the same deep, natural, true communion with God that he had.

The term “son” in scriptural references speaks to exact representation, not to maleness. A key witness of this is Revelations 12:5; which says that the woman brought forth “a male son” (*hyios arsen*). English translations say “male child” (e.g., RSV); *hyios* is not child, but son. Greek words for “child” are *teknon* (that which is begotten or engendered) or *pais* (a term of endearment or servant, boy, girl, personal assistant). That the term “son” (*hyios*) means “exact representation” explains why Jesus says: “Philip, to see me is to see the Father”. “The Father lives and acts in me” (John 14:6). “Truly, truly I say to you, the Son can do nothing of his own accord, but only what he sees the Father doing; for whatever the Father does, the Son does likewise” (John 5:19), etcetera. It explains why the owner of the vineyard in the parable of the wicked tenants (Matt 21:33-41) says, “They will respect my son” as myself, understood (v 37). By the same token, the term father does not speak to maleness but to source of being. Jesus tells us that “God is Spirit” (a neuter noun, John 4:24); and the author of 1 John further declares “God is love” (a feminine noun; 1 John 4:8, 16).

There is perfect symbiosis, representation, correspondence between God and Jesus: a perfect symbiotic relationship between them such what one does, the other does; the Son/Child does

nothing which is in any way contrary to the nature and character of the Parent, or opposed to or contradicts what the Parent is and stands for. Proof that Jesus is God's Son is that he acted in every way, on every occasion and in every respect as God would act. Brief, God lived and acted in him. Because God who alone is good was in/with him, "He went about doing good." (Acts 10:38). Jesus himself says, "The Father who lives in me does his own works and speaks his own words in and through me" (John 14:9-10, free translation). Jesus, God's Child, did everything as one in whom God lived and worked. This is a great lesson for us who want to actively, not merely verbally or devotionally, deepen our relationship with God; who want to have deeper communion with God.

5. Where Do We Go from Here?

- What does awareness of our permanent, inalienable and unalterable relationship with God require of each of us?
- Where do we stand with regard to our knowing that we are God's flesh and blood children?
- And that as God's flesh and blood children, when people see us individually, and collectively as God's Family, they should see God?

The cumulative answer or way forward seems to speak for itself; it depends on each of us. Let us identify some ways.

Firstly, we need to accept and imbibe the truth that sets us free from a slavish mentality towards God; the kind of slavish mentality that the elder brother of the prodigal son had towards his father "all these years I have slaved for you" (Luke 15:29-30). The truth that we are truly God's children is the truth that will make us dwell with joy and freedom in God's house forever, since only "the son/child remains in the house forever" (John 8:34-35). This is the truth that will make us feel at home, be at home in our relationship with God, no matter what. This is the first and fundamental area we needed to work on if we are thinking of deepening our relationship with God; making our relationship with God truly deep and genuine. Without that foundation, our relationship with God will be sour and will develop many problems.

Secondly, if we know all this, we commit ourselves to study and understudy Jesus so as to know who we truly are in him. The Kampala Document, rightly says,

Ignorance of the Scriptures is traditionally seen as ignorance of Christ. To be ignorant of Christ is also to be ignorant of one's true worth as a child of God. Living the new life as God's child requires that one assumes personal responsibility to understudy Jesus: by regularly reading the gospels individually and in groups.

(Pastoral Exhortation of the Symposium of Episcopal Conferences of Africa and Madagascar (SECAM), Kampala Document: *That they May Know Christ*)

and Have Life in Abundance (John 17:3; 10:10 [Accra: 2019], no. 73; <https://www.secam.org>).

We read the Scriptures, especially the gospels and the New Testament, to grasp and be nourished by the gospel truth that we are truly God's children. We feed on and are fed with God's word, so that we may know to what hope God has called us; the fact that God destined us "before the foundation of the world" to be God's children in Christ Jesus (Eph 1:1-2:22). We feed on the Eucharist, the flesh and blood of Christ, "the living [or life-giving] which came down bread from heaven" (John 6:51, 58); which God gives to nourish God's enduring life in us; to enable us in Christ "draw life from" him; just as Jesus himself "draws life from" God, his source of being (John 6:56-57).

Thirdly we become convinced that any other conception of ourselves in our relationship with God (such as servant, slave or mere creature) misses the mark. These types of relationship may seem to be based on humility; but they are false humility and spirituality, calculated to debase and to deprive us of the lofty heritage and status which God has given us in Christ, raising us in him to God's right hand, "far above all principality and authority and power and dominion" (Eph 1:20-23). Though practices based on this kind of humility may "have the appearance of wisdom in promoting rigour of devotion and self-abasement" (Col 2:16-22, v 22), they are of no value in promoting our deep and deeper understanding that we are God's flesh and blood children in Christ and should relate to him as Jesus did. These types of spirituality stem from us; they blind us or prevent us from recognising, receiving/believing what God has done permanently for us free of charge; to what God has destined us in Christ as pure grace; without our asking, meriting or working to earn it, or paying for it.

Further Practical Steps

- **We accept that God is our Parent;** not a judge, "a very big God always by our side", "a great provider" of all commodities, a divine supermarket where pastors/shop attendants can sell us all kinds of spurious miracles and favours.
- In speaking of our relationship with God, we become very clear in our minds and consciousness that we are speaking of a relationship that did not start with us. Relationship of children to parents does not start with the child. It takes ages after birth for a child to even become aware of its parents and to think of relating to them. Our relationship with God is pure grace. It is permanent and stands forever.
- We recall that parents have the primary responsibility to relate to their child, if the child is to grow and become a true and responsible human being in every respect. The burden is firstly on the parents; and they love it, if they are true parents. They take full responsibility for the welfare of the child: feeding, clothing, health, education, security; etcetera. The only thing little children give to parents is problem; and true parents love it, knowing that such is the nature of the child. The child on its part trusts

the parents absolutely and feels secure with them and takes it for granted that the parents would care for it.

- In the same way we need to allow God to look after us; we need to believe that God does care for and does look after us. We relate in our hearts and minds and psyche to God as a child relates to its biological parents. God loves us, for “God is love” (1 John 4:8, 16). God cares for us more than a loving mother cares for her feeding baby; “the child of her womb” (Isa 49:15); God cares for us more than God cares for other earth’s creatures (flowers, birds) which are nevertheless very dear to God (cf. Luke 12:22-31). Jesus believed absolutely in God’s love for him through thick and thin, even unto passion, crucifixion and death on the cross; assured of the resurrection, his irreversible victory over death (cf. Eph 2:6-11).
- Needless to say, cultivating and maintaining this kind of relationship with God requires firm, staunch and unalloyed faith, the kind of faith Mary had which enabled God’s son to become her son; which enabled her to become the mother of God. Elizabeth calls her “She-who-has-believed” (*hē pisteusasa*; Luke 1:45); and which sustained her as she “stood” near the cross of her son with his aunt and other equally believing women disciples (John 19:25-27).
- As the child grows up it learns to sustain this relationship by returning love for love. Like Jesus we need to show that we love God by doing what God requires of us in life as Jesus did, especially when it comes to situations where we would rather go our own way. It is not simply a matter of pleasing God; but of living up to one’s true self as God’s child. If I truly believe that I am God’s child, then it is imperative, inevitable that I live and act as God does; otherwise I betray myself as God’s child.
- At times the child might decide to go its own way. Nonetheless, the truth remains that the parent/child relationship can never be annulled or broken. It is permanent. This permanency is established by God; it can never be nullified. Once born as a human being one remains a human being brought to life by one’s parents. One may be a good or bad human being or child; the fact remains that one is someone’s child. This truth can never be nullified. That is why even after many years, adopted children look for their biological parents and siblings. So it is with us as God’s children.
- We may decide to go away from God like the prodigal son did (Luke 15:11-20), but we remain children of God nonetheless. Once born of God we cannot be unborn of God, just as once a person, born a human being from human parents, cannot undo that reality and become a goat or a dog. So no matter how we may think we are unfit for God, unworthy of God, we remember that our natural relationship with God as parent

child can never be broken. It was given to us by God as pure grace. So we return home to a royal welcome by God, as the prodigal son did (15:20-24).

- We need to review our actions and make up our minds to live in all respects as Christ lived, to do nothing except what we see God in Christ doing; we need to buttress our faith in this reality, to support one another in this truth and to proclaim this truth to others.
- We cannot truly deepen our relationship with God in Christ unless we set ourselves to become Eucharist for others to eat and have life in its fullness. Jesus said “For their sake I consecrate myself so that they too may be consecrated in the truth” (John 17:19); that is, so that they too may come to “know you the one true God and Jesus Christ whom you have sent” (John 17:3), may come to know that they are God’s children called to live, act as God’s children and dwell in God’s house forever. This is the ultimate goal of our desire to deepen our relationship with God through the Holy Child.

Inalienable Aspect of Deepening Our Relationship

Finally, we cannot deepen our relationship with God in Christ, yet stay put in our ghettos and cliques and comfort zones, when Jesus sees himself as “the one sent” (mostly in John’s Gospel); when he proclaims that God has anointed and sent him to bring God’s good news to the poor and declare God’s general amnesty to creation (Luke 4:18-19); when he urges us in turn to “Go out to the whole world proclaim the good news” (Mark 16:15) and “make disciples of all the nations” (Matt 28:16-20). He tells us “You received without pay, give without pay” (Matt 10:8); and says of himself “For their sake I consecrate myself so that they too may be consecrated in the truth” (John 17:19); he being “the truth” (John 14:6), the reality or “substance” (Col 2:17).

We cannot be in Christ, develop and deepen our relationship with God through the Holy Child and at the same time promote racism, tribalism, sexism, all the anthropological isms that Jesus demolished, bulldozed and destroyed by his death on the cross, creating a new humanity a new anthropology in him (Eph 2:11-22). He, new anthropology in him, the new *adam*, makes us flesh and blood children of God, members of God’s one and undivided household (Eph 2:.....)

Jesus declares, “Whoever does not gather with me scatters” (Matt 12:30); whoever does not build with him destroys. The purpose of God’s one work in and through Christ is to reconcile, re-unite to the divine self “everything in heaven and on earth” (Col 1:20; cf. John 12:32). The desire to deepen our relationship with others in Christ by crossing boundaries is a touchstone of where we stand in our relationship with God. This crossing of boundaries goes against the common trend whereby in many ways we have turned our relationship with God into self-serving ventures; with skyrocketing racism and other anthropological divides. Any self-serving

approach in our relationship with God alienates us from God; they can never ever help us to deepen our relationship with God.

Example of Paul, Apostle of the Gentiles

When Paul stumbled upon Jesus on the way to Damascus, he retired into the Arabian Desert for about three years to rethink his entire upbringing, life and relationship with God (Gal 1:17). From there he emerged a different person. Instead of being “in the law”, killing for the law, he realised that for him life was Christ, Christ was his life. Once he grasped this liberating truth, everything outside Christ became for him pure rubbish. All that he was formerly very proud of: Jewish race, tribe of Benjamin, good pedigree, unmatched commitment and zeal in the observance of the law, became as nothing (Phil 3:3-11). He had found in Christ his true self and committed his entire life to develop the new, deeper and grace-based relationship with God in and through Christ. “To me life means Christ”. “It is no longer I, but Christ living in me” (Gal 2:20-21). Having discovered God’s love and new life of grace in Christ, Paul ran nonstop the whole length and breadth of the Roman Empire as Christ’s “ambassador” (2 Cor 5:14-21), proclaiming Christ, as God’s Gospel for the entire humanity; treating Gentiles, women and slaves as his siblings in Christ (cf. Gal 3:28).

This is how he deepened his true relationship with God. We today are all beneficiaries of his newfound, passionate, faith-filled and barrier-breaking relationship with God in Christ Jesus. Where, in turn, do I, where does each of us, and where do we together, members of God’s Family, stand in our Christ Child, grace-based relationship with God?

A Prayer

Sustain us, dear God, in our life of childlike relationship with you. Please do not allow us to deviate from this relationship; or to adopt all kinds of self-demeaning and self-serving types for the one and only true relationship with you, in and true Christ, your uniquely beloved Son. With him let us remain in you forever; with him, let us always abide in your bosom and draw active, gospel-based life naturally from you (John 1:18), through the same Christ our Lord. Amen.

Sr. Teresa Okure, SHCJ

Conceived, manufactured and sent on 16th July 2021

Edited and enlarged with biblical references after the Conference,
2nd August 2021