

## Iconographical and Hermeneutic Interpretation of Artworks of the Stations of the Cross in Saint Benedict Catholic Cathedral, Òsogbo and Peter and Paul Catholic Pro-Cathedral Church, Ilé-Ifè, Nigeria

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**Abstract:** *The passion of Christ plays a significant role in Catholic services and devotions, especially the popular Way of the Cross, or Way of Sorrows, which is observed during Lent before the Easter celebration. The symbolic representation of these events at various locations in visual form is venerated in the Catholic Faith. The paper examines and interprets the meanings of the Stations of the Cross representations in the study area to establish the significance of art in the service of the Roman Catholic Church. The article employs a qualitative research approach. Art-historical analysis, which is formal, was used to analyse the data, while iconological and hermeneutic interpretations of the works were given, engaging Kant's Theory of metaphor. It was found out that the fourteen Stations of the Cross are commissioned by the church for meditation and devotion during Lent and all Fridays of the year to commemorate the crucifixion of Jesus Christ, who was killed on Friday. Findings also show that the Stations of the Cross are generally symbolic of the Catholic Faith, representing the passion, suffering and crucifixion of Christ on the Cross, which is the symbol of shame and humiliation. The article concludes that Stations of the Cross are venerated and holy objects consecrated to evoke worship and the divine presence of God during the devotion of The Way of the Cross.*

**Keywords:** art, church, metaphor, passion of Christ, Roman Catholic, Stations of the Cross

### INTRODUCTION

The Roman Catholic Church, or simply The Catholic Church, is among other orthodox churches worldwide that venerate art as a symbol and a medium of meditation on God. Religious arts and symbols are creative images designed to aid and inspire the individual to reflect on the spiritual (Eke 2020, 139). Eke's view is the intention of Catholics when they use art in worship. They believe that representing aspects of worship with visuals will connect them with the divine God. To a Catholic, a work of art is like a sermon prepared by the preacher; in this case, the artist creates art symbolically to communicate the invisible. Symbolic art possesses the power to permeate deep thoughts in believers, thereby strengthening their belief (Menyah, 2001). Works of art with Christian themes, in various forms, are considered spiritual because they affect believers who come into contact with them, as they are connected with the spirit through devotion and meditation.

It is believed that the history of visiting and praying in front of each of the ‘Stations of the Cross’ or ‘The Way of the Cross’ started with the early Christian pilgrims who visited the scenes of the events in Jerusalem. These Christian pilgrims walked the traditional route from the supposed location of Pilate’s house to Calvary, praying and meditating on the Passion of Christ. Lough Dearg pilgrimage stands out for its challenging traditions and long history, dating back to the early Irish Church. Pilgrims are deeply moved, gaze at paintings of Jesus’ suffering, and follow the priest with tears as they pray for hours. They kneel on rocks or tread barefoot, with uncovered heads and feet and uncomplaining, offering continuous prayer amidst the rugged terrain (M’Namee 1910, 346-347). Thus, the representation and use of Stations of the Cross as devotional art began and became well known among Catholics, especially for meditation during services or for devotion to the Way of the Cross, or the Way of Sorrows. Stations of the Cross are represented in various images depicting fourteen dramatic episodes of Jesus Christ’s condemnation to death, from His condemnation by Pontius Pilate to His resurrection. These fourteen images portray the events in The Passion of Christ.<sup>1</sup>

Art and metaphor are conceptualised here as the symbolic use of art to communicate knowledge not visible to the naked eye, to provoke the audience’s thoughts about a subject. A visual metaphor is a symbolic representation of a personality, event, or phenomenon created by an artist to help the target audience easily comprehend the message. In this context, Metaphor refers to artworks as symbols of communication and communion with God through devotion and meditation. Visual metaphors are images that are far from conventional. Therefore, it stands out in people’s minds, leaving a lasting impression. This is the understanding of the Catholic faithful when they meditate on images during any of their services or devotions.<sup>2</sup> The symbolic representation of the events of Jesus on the Way of Sorrows in visual form is analogous to metaphor; hence the expression ‘art and metaphor’.

Consequently, the Stations of the Cross metaphorically represent the path Jesus took on His way to Calvary. These are a series of suffering, insults, mockery, times of support and the intense sacrifice Jesus undertakes to save the whole world from the dungeon of darkness and the power of sin. The Stations of the Cross meditate or reflect on individuals and the configuration that governs human beings. The scriptural significance of the Stations of the Cross is to detail the path Jesus walks on his way to the eventual redemption of humanity. This path features Jesus bearing the weight of the cross till His entombment. The path to spiritual paradise (the Kingdom of God) lies in the Stations of the Cross when Catholics acknowledge what Christ endured and see it as a call to action (Ashley, 2020). It is believed that the Stations of the Cross are significant to Catholics and all Christians. It is often called the Passion of Christ or Paschal Mystery in the Catholic Church because of Jesus's intense suffering in the journey of the world’s redemption. Therefore, the Paschal Mystery is the passion, suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, which is very germane to the Christian faith. Saint Paul rightly attests to this when he proclaims that,

“Now, if Christ is preached that has been raised from the dead, how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead? But if there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ has not been raised. If Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain”  
*1st Corinthians 15: 12-14 (RSV).*

The Stations of the Cross remind believers of the gruesome experience of Jesus Christ. Jesus, though divine, became a human without sin or blemish to save sinners. This is the significance of the Stations

of the Cross. These fourteen-piece works of art, displayed in any Catholic congregation, remind humanity of the significant hurdles Jesus passed through before finally giving up the ghost.<sup>3</sup>

Several studies on Christian Art throughout the ages have examined this subject. Scholars such as Lin (2021), De Gruchy (2020), Sharma (2016), Litovchenko, Fomin and Chekal (2015), MacBean (2013), Ghartey (2011), Adogame (2007), Renne (2007), Schmidt (2006), and Molloy (2002) have discussed Christian Art on a global scale. Lin (2021) discusses the Catholic sponsorship of art in the Baroque period, citing the sponsorship of Pope Urban VIII and his family and friends. The paper states that art sponsorship played an essential role in the development of art and provided artists with a suitable environment in which to create during the Baroque period. An article by De Gruchy (2020) focuses on Christianity, art, and transformation. The paper states that some of the greatest works of art in the Western tradition have discerned and enabled us to see the beauty of God revealed on the cross (and) in the manger. Sharma (2016) studies visual interpretations of Christian faith in Indian art. The paper explores the depiction of Christian themes and imagery replete in the paintings and murals in Indian churches.

Litovchenko, Fomin and Chekal (2015) focus on the early Christian artistic tradition in Byzantine Chersonesos and its origin. The article attempted a critical analysis of symbols in the mosaic of the Chersonesos-Kherson and Syrian monuments. MacBean (2013) examines the symbolism of art as a means of applying hidden meaning and expressing definite ideas. In Africa, works by Ghartey (2011) examine the philosophical and symbolic meanings of art forms in shrines and churches in the Central Region of Ghana, while Adogame (2007) examines the aesthetics and art symbology of the Celestial Church of Christ in the context of continuity and change in a new geo-cultural environment in Nigeria. Renne's (2007) paper discusses the aesthetics and symbolic meaning of Christian art in Africa and the African Diaspora. Schmidt (2006) appraises the arts in the service of the church. The article examines the relationship between the church and the visual arts from the 20th century to the present. Molloy (2002) discusses Christian art and argues that the Christian religion has made considerable contributions to the development of art despite Jewish prohibitions on art.

Nelson (2016), Adeyanju (2015), Folaranmi and Imafidor (2015), Ndubuisi and Emodi (2014), Adoh and Olufemi (2014), Igbaro (2010) and Ifeta (2002) are scholars who have delved into the art in churches in Nigeria. Nelson's paper examines the narratives of Christendom and the stained-glass designs of Yusuf Cameron Adebayo Grillo. Adeyanju (2015) examines the iconology of carved wooden doors in churches in Ile-Ife to establish their cultural and religious significance. The article by Folaranmi and Imafidor (2015) identifies and analyses the existing stained-glass artworks in selected churches in Ibadan, Nigeria. The thrust of Ndubuisi and Emodi's (2014) paper was to investigate the state of traditional sculptures in different Nigerian Catholic Parishes. The paper argues that sculptures are closely related to the liturgy of Catholicism. Adoh and Olufemi (2014) focus on art in the service of the Church in Yorùbáland, South-Western Nigeria, and trace the history of art in churches. Igbaro (2010) examines the relationship between art and religion in Nigeria. He consents that Christianity promoted art in the late 1940s through the experimental workshop of Oyé-Èkìtì in 1947. Ifeta (2002) focuses on stained glass in South-Western Nigeria. He uses the works of Yusuf Grillo, Rufus Ajidaun, David Dale and Akinmolayan as case studies. As substantial as these studies are, little or no attention has been given to analysing artistic representations of Stations of the Cross. They focus on core history but do not provide information on the analysis of artworks in churches, especially those of the Stations of the Cross.

Other studies focusing on the Station of the Cross include Macdonald (2016), Callaway (2007) and Smith II (1974). For example, Macdonald (2016) examines how black South African artists working during and after apartheid revised and symbolically redeployed the Stations of the Cross and, more broadly, the iconographic tradition of the Passion cycle. The paper demonstrates the strategic application of Christ's episodic sufferings to both analogically chronicling historical trauma and articulating aspirant narratives of political resistance, self-liberation, and reconciliation. Callaway's study focuses on the role of sacred art in Catholic identity, establishing a historical and theological framework for sacred art and architecture. Macdonald submits that sacred art and architecture are valuable and practical tools of theology, enabling the faithful to use their imagination to come to know God through his creatures, creation, and history. The thrust of Smith II's study is a personal statement on the crucifixion of Christ, in which he produced a series of fourteen drawings of The Stations of the Cross, which he calls a personal interpretation. Smith II investigates the role of myth in society, focusing on the crucifixion, and culminates in the presentation of this artist's visual interpretation of the Stations of the Cross.

Studies on the Station of the Cross have not been established in Nigeria. Most notable are the short articles on Bruce Onabrakpeya, dwelling on his significant murals and prints for the Catholic Church<sup>4</sup>. In this paper, I examine and attempt to interpret the meanings of the Stations of the Cross in selected Catholic Churches in Nigeria to establish their significance to the Christian faith in Nigeria.

## **METHODS AND THEORY**

This study relies on a qualitative research approach. Interviews, visual observation, and analysis of the 'Station of the Cross' were conducted. An interview guide was developed using open-ended, semi-structured questions. The interview guide seeks information on the meanings and interpretations of symbols, icons, colours and visual elements in the artworks and their significance in the service of the Catholic Church. These allow for the visual identification, icon description, and interpretation of the Stations of the Cross artworks.

Two Catholic churches, Saint Benedict Catholic Cathedral, Òşogbo, and Saints Peter and Paul Catholic Pro-Cathedral Church, Ilé-Ifè, were considered due to their role in the historical establishment of churches in Òşun State. Saint Benedict Catholic Church was established on July 26, 1915, while Saints Peter and Paul Catholic Pro-Cathedral Church was the first to be established in Ilé-Ifè in September 1919.<sup>5</sup> The two towns, Ile-Ife and Osogbo, are historic in Òşun State. Òşogbo is the present capital of Òşun State, while Ile-Ife is the famous birthplace of the Yoruba people in Southwestern Nigeria. Ile-Ife is world-renowned for its naturalistic bronze and brass head dating to the 11<sup>th</sup> Century AD. The first seven artworks of the Stations of the Cross were selected from Saint Benedict Catholic Cathedral, while the last seven were selected from Saints Peter and Paul Catholic Pro-Cathedral Church. The key informants were purposively selected for the oral interviews. They are the priests (present and past) of the two selected churches. These priests were selected for the interviews because of their knowledge and experience as the priests of the churches.

Iconographical and hermeneutic analysis methods were adopted to interpret the Stations of the Cross and to understand their meaning and significance in the selected churches. Iconographical interpretation deals with the identification and analysis of visual elements such as symbols, motifs, and themes in artworks, as well as their context and meaning. On the other hand, Hermeneutic

interpretation concerns the contextualisation of the Stations of the Cross within their cultural, historical, and social contexts. According to Jasper (2004:1), Hermeneutics is a technical term used to describe our understanding of the nature of texts and how we interpret and use them, especially in relation to the Bible, a collection of ancient texts with distinctive and abiding authority. As used in this context, the Bible is what he describes as sacred texts, divinely inspired or “the word of God” as understood by believers (Jasper 2004, 7).

The article rests on Kant’s Theory of metaphor. The theory of metaphor points to a broader creative dimension of cognition and to the cognitive role of art. Forsey (2004, 573) posits that “at the intersection of aesthetics and epistemology lies the idea that works of art can convey knowledge of a kind and can enrich our understanding of the world. Both aesthetics and epistemology are branches of philosophy; while aesthetics deals with the creation, perception, appreciation and law of beauty, epistemology concerns itself with the study or theory of knowledge.

Therefore, the metaphor theory contends that if art can be shown to be metaphorical, art can generate new meaning and lay claim to epistemic legitimacy (Forsey 2004). Similarly, Nuyen (1989, 108) states that “the Kantian theory gives epistemological legitimacy to the visions of poets and artists; it also places those visions at the centre of human rationality.” Representation of the Stations of the Cross in this context facilitates cognition, as the art draws worshippers’ attention to the significance of the series of images depicting Jesus’ journey to Calvary, thereby inspiring them to reflect and connect with the Divine God. According to Kòmóláfẹ̀, “These artworks can inspire worshippers to reflect on the passion of Christ and, thereby, evoke emotions in them due to the artistic skill of the artist embedded in them, and that is why the Catholic Church prefers using artworks rather than photographs, although some rural Catholic churches use photographs of these Stations of the Cross.<sup>6</sup> Hence, the use of Kant’s Theory of Metaphor facilitates the worshippers’ cognition by reflecting on the aesthetically represented events.

### **Art and Metaphor of the Stations of the Cross: Iconological and Hermeneutic Interpretations**

Representations of the Stations of the Cross in various forms and styles are found in all the Catholic churches across the globe. However, this article examines those artworks represented in low-relief Sculpture at Saint Benedict Catholic Cathedral, Òsogbo and Saints Peter and Paul Catholic Pro-Cathedral Church, Ilé-Ifẹ̀. These low-relief sculpture artworks are painted in either gold (monochromatic) or colour (multichromatic). These two styles are used to depict the fourteen Stations of the Cross. The paper classifies these representations based on the styles of colour rendition. Therefore, the first seven stations are represented in low-relief Sculpture with chromatic colour, while the last seven are depicted in multichromatic colour. The multichromatic colours are clearer and more dramatic due to the application of different hues. The artworks are commissioned to reveal that Stations of the Cross are part of the worship experience in the Catholic Church.

They are used as objects of devotion and meditation. According to Reverend Father Peter Adéyemí, the Parish priest in charge of Saints Peter and Paul Catholic Pro-Cathedral Church, Làgèrè, Ilé-Ifẹ̀, “Catholic Church venerates art so much that they spend a huge amount of money to commission the artists to produce artworks. For example, most of the artworks in the Sacred Heart Catholic Church, Òkè-Fíà, Òsogbo (Where he served before) were commissioned by the Church, except for a few donations of artworks from members”.<sup>7</sup> The Stations of the Cross were commissioned for their devotional significance to Catholics, especially during Lent and on all Fridays of the year, to

commemorate the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. Each station of the Cross has its prayer, accompanied by a reading of relevant messages, a meditation on each station, and a preamble prayer for all of them. The preamble is “We adore You, O Christ, and we bless You. Because by your holy Cross, you have redeemed the world.”<sup>8</sup> The accompanying meditation, “I contemplate the wood of that cross. I imagine how heavy it is. I reflect upon all it means that Jesus is carrying it.” This is read and reflected on the second station: *Jesus carries his Cross.*”<sup>9</sup>

### Jesus Condemned to Death

*Jesus Condemned to Death* (Fig. 1) is the first dramatic event of the Stations of the Cross, which happens shortly after Judas Iscariot betrayed and handed Him over to the chief priests and the elders. The representation shows Jesus standing before Pilate, brought by the soldiers like a sheep to its slaughter, in fulfilment of the long-ago Prophecy.<sup>10</sup> The icons or visual elements in the scene include Jesus, Pontius Pilate, His throne, and Roman soldiers. Jesus, the focal figure, was depicted with his hands bound, symbolising his captivity and his willingness to submit to God’s will. The soldiers’ posture surrounding Jesus indicates their aggression, emphasising Jesus’ defenselessness. The soldiers brought Jesus before Pontius Pilate, seated on his throne against a dark background, which suggests the imminent doom of Jesus. Pontius Pilate’s throne symbolises this earthly power, contrasting with Jesus’ divine authority. Jesus’s facial expression conveys sorrow and the acceptability of his doom. An attendant before Pilate with a bowl of water with which he washed his hands, and his gesture reveals the abandonment of responsibility.



Fig. 1: Artist Unknown, 1st Station of the Cross, (Jesus is Condemned to Death), 2007, Relief Sculpture 60 by 90cm, Saint Benedict Catholic Cathedral, Pópó Òsogbo. Photograph by Ayòbámi Paul Oyèwúsi, 2018.

Contextually, Jesus' condemnation is a historical event during the Roman Empire's judicial system. It represents the secular world's rejection of Jesus' divine mission on earth. The Bible calls this Jesus' trial.<sup>11</sup> Culturally, Jesus' condemnation signifies the Nigerian Catholics' experiences of persecution, injustice, or marginalisation of believers generally. Jesus' condemnation suggests his sacrifice for humanity's salvation and the Church's struggles with worldly power. What this dramatic gesture means to Christianity, mainly Catholicism, is that since Jesus Christ suffered and endured this kind of humiliation and condemnation without sinning, Christians should be ready for the same.<sup>12</sup> However, they must endure it as Jesus did and receive the Crown of Glory.

### Jesus Bears His Cross

The second dramatic episode of the Stations of the Cross represents Jesus bearing His Cross. Two Roman soldiers guided Him to the Golgotha, where He was nailed to the Cross (Fig. 2). The main icon here is the figure of Jesus, whose posture and gaze portray his physical and emotional burden, signifying humility and meditation. The next icon is the Cross he bears, which is heavy, conveying the weight of sin he carries upon himself. He accepted this heavy Cross with meekness and a high sense of commitment. It represents Jesus' redemptive sacrifice and humanity's salvation. The appearance of the Roman soldiers symbolises captivity, while the dark background depicts desertion and Jesus' isolation.



Fig. 2: Artist Unknown, 2nd Station of the Cross (Jesus Bears His Cross), 2007, Relief Sculpture 60 by 90cm, Saint Benedict Catholic Cathedral, Pópó Òsogbo. Photograph by Ayòbámi Paul Oyèwúsi, 2018.

Historically, the episode reveals the Roman crucifixion practices and Jesus' physical suffering, signifying his dignity and composure. This represents Jesus' condemnation and sentencing in the Bible.<sup>13</sup> Jesus' cross-bearing confirms Christians' struggles with hardship and persecution. His

sacrifice offers hope and redemption amid struggles and adversity.<sup>14</sup> The representation of Jesus bearing His Cross implies that no matter the heaviness of contemporary Christian's sorrows and suffering, they must develop the same characteristics as Christ. Meekness, self-denial, and commitment to whatever one is doing are the keys. One must also be ready to take up one's cross and face life's challenges, come what may.<sup>15</sup>

### Jesus Falls for the First Time

The iconic and visual elements represented in the third station of the Cross (Fig. 3) are Jesus, the Cross, Roman Soldiers, and the background. Jesus was falling and struggling with the Cross in his hands, which conveys physical and emotional exhaustion. Agony in the garden of Gethsemane had already weakened and exhausted Jesus, which made Him fall under His Cross for the first time. The enormity of stress, strokes, mockery, and the weightiness of the Cross had a severe effect on him. His strength failed him, being in the form of humans, which He deliberately chose to feel the kinds of pains humans experience. The heavy Cross symbolises Jesus' burden, redemptive sacrifice, and humanity's salvation. The Roman Soldiers emphasise his accusation and captivity, while the dark background symbolises Jesus' isolation.



Fig. 3: Artist Unknown, 3rd Station of the Cross, (Jesus Falls for the First Time) 2007, Relief Sculpture, 60 by 90cm, Saint Benedict Catholic Cathedral, Popo Oşogbo. Photograph by Ayòbámi Paul Oyèwúsi, 2018.

The biblical context of the third station of the Cross reveals Jesus' journey to Calvary.<sup>16</sup> Historically, it was the usual practice of Roman crucifixion, and the offender had to suffer physically. So, his fall is a historical event. The third Station of the Cross emphasises Nigerian Christians' experiences of adversity and perseverance: when believers are burdened and faint in spirit, they should endure and

not give in to any temptation, for the tough time never lasts, but tough people do.<sup>17</sup> The thoughts of Jesus' suffering should help believers be watchful and save them from sin. The artist's representation underscores the significance of Jesus' journey to Calvary for the redemption of human souls.

### **Jesus Meets Mary His Mother**

The painful journey to Calvary continued with several wounds he had sustained as a result of falling. In this event, Jesus is the central figure, with a sorrowful yet determined expression; Mary, his mother, walks to meet him in sorrow; the Roman soldiers and a dark background signify Jesus' deserted journey. Jesus and Mary's gesture emphasises a mother-son relationship that represents Jesus' humanity, Mary's maternal love and affection, and the Church.

Culturally, this gesture of Jesus meeting Mary emphasises Mary's maternal love and care, exemplified in African communal values, particularly the Nigerian Catholics' experiences of family values and community relationships. There is no doubt that a deeper understanding of Jesus' humanity, Mary's maternal role, and the significance of their encounter has been gained.



Fig. 4: Artist Unknown, 4th Station of the Cross, (Jesus Meets Mary His Mother), 2007, Relief Sculpture, 60 by 90cm, Saint Benedict Catholic Cathedral, Pópó Òşogbo. Photograph by Ayòbámi Paul Oyèwúsi, 2018.

### **Simon, the Cyrene Forced to Carry Jesus' Cross**

This scene features Jesus, the Roman soldier and Simon from Cyrene, who was seized and forced to take the Cross after Jesus (Fig. 5). Simon's emotional gesture represents compassion and solidarity for Jesus, whose expression symbolises suffering and exhaustion. He had already fainted in strength<sup>18</sup>. The chaotic dark background signifies turmoil. Cross-bearing symbolises discipleship and sacrifice, while the interaction between Jesus and Simon stresses mutual support, shared burden, and solidarity.

The scene contextualises Simon's reluctant gesture in the Bible, and, culturally, it highlights the Nigerian Catholics and Christians' general experiences of their responsibility as followers of Christ and their duty within the society in which they live, because being a Christian requires sacrifice, solidarity, and responsibility to God and humanity.

The significance of Simon's act to people is that they should be humble enough to share others' burdens. If there is anything to glory in, it should be to find oneself in other people's shoes. The compulsory task of carrying the Cross becomes a privilege, joy and blessing to Simon, the Cyrene. This episode teaches believers to share other people's burdens by simply rendering assistance when needed most.



Fig. 5: Artist Unknown, 5th Station of the Cross (Simon, the Cyrene Forced to Carry Jesus' Cross), 2007, Relief Sculpture, 60 by 90cm, Saint Benedict Catholic Cathedral, Pópó Òsogbo. Ayòbámi Paul Oyèwúsi, 2018.

### **Veronica Wipes Jesus' Face**

The sixth station of the Cross depicts Jesus being weary, exhausted, and sweating, emphasising his suffering, as well as a crowd of people and Veronica, who was filled with compassion. Veronica's handkerchief symbolises her empathy, kindness, and Jesus' imprint, a sacred relic. Seeing Jesus in pain and His face covered with the sweat of blood, she wiped His face with her handkerchief. The image of His face was printed on the handkerchief (Fig. 6b). Her action represents her devotion and kind-heartedness and thereby exemplifies Christian love.

Veronica's action, though not recorded in the Bible, emphasises human connection with Jesus' suffering and suggests the Church's role in caring for one another. Culturally, the gesture reveals Nigerian Catholics' experiences of community, care, and compassion. The significance of this episode to Nigerian Catholics is that they should practice their piety so that people around them will see the image of Christ formed in them.<sup>19</sup> A believer is yet to be through and be called a saint until they are transformed into the likeness of Christ.<sup>20</sup>



Fig. 6a: Artist Unknown, 6th Station of the Cross (Veronica Wipes Jesus' Face), 2007, Relief Sculpture, 60 by 90cm, St Benedict Catholic Cathedral, Pópó Òsogbo. Photograph by Ayòbámi Paul Oyèwúsi, 2018.



Fig. 6b: Kólá, 6th Station of the Cross (Veronica Wipes Jesus' Face), 2009, Relief Sculpture in Cement and Paints, 60 by 90cm, Peter and Paul Catholic Pro-Cathedral Church, Làgèrè, Ilé-Ifè. Photograph by Ayòbámi Paul Oyèwúsi, 2018.

### Jesus Falls the Second Time

Jesus fell the second time as He continued the arduous journey to the Golgotha (Fig. 7). The event recorded a visual representation of Jesus (falling under his Cross the second time), expressing exhaustion and symbolising human nature of weakness. Jesus' Cross, which is large and heavy, conveys his sacrifice and humanity's sin. The Cross bearing symbolises Jesus' redemption and salvation for the world. The presence of the Roman soldiers and their attitude suggest mocking, emphasising Jesus' humiliation, loneliness, and abandonment.

Contextually, this indicates the nature of our struggles in Nigeria, and Nigerian Catholics and Christians generally suffer hardship due to their confession. However, they persevere, having understood that it is for a while. This is significant to contemporary believers because no one is immune to suffering and discomfort in this world, but they should persevere and be resilient. The artist's metaphorical representation justifies its significance and meaning in worship.



Fig. 7: Artist Unknown, 7th Station of the Cross (Jesus Falls the Second Time), 2009, Relief Sculpture 60 by 90cm, Saint Benedict Catholic Cathedral, Popo, Oşogbo. Photograph by Ayòbámi Paul Oyèwúsi, 2018.

### **Jesus Consoles the Women of Jerusalem**

In His suffering and wounds, a large crowd, including women, followed Him, mourning and weeping over His pain (Fig. 8). The significant icons and visual elements in the scene are Jesus, His Cross, and the women. Jesus' gesture includes compassion and empathy, symbolising divine love and mercy. The women of Jerusalem's expressions of lamenting, mourning, and weeping symbolise human suffering and sorrow. Jesus's focus on women emphasises interaction and solidarity. The dark background colour, as applied by the artist, could symbolise desertion, while the piece generally has dramatic reactions to the scene. Historically, medieval artists emphasised Jesus' sorrow and women's lamentation; the Renaissance artists depicted dramatic emotions in a realistic style, while Baroque artists used chiaroscuro to create intense emotions.

Hermeneutically, the scene emphasises Jesus' concern for the Church and community. The symbolic meaning is that everyone should weep for their sins and repent because of the terrible Day of Judgment ahead.<sup>21</sup> The depiction of the scene by the artist is significant to contemporary believers in that they should be encouraged and strong in any pain they are going through. They should not allow people's comments to wear them out or weigh them down.<sup>22</sup>



Fig. 8: Kólá, 8th Station of the Cross, (Jesus Consoles the Women of Jerusalem), 2009, Relief Sculpture in Cement and Paints, 60 by 90cm, Saints Peter and Paul Catholic Pro-Cathedral Church, Làgèrè, Ile-Ife. Photograph by Ayòbámi Paul Oyèwúsi, 2018.

### **Jesus Falls the Third Time**

The ninth series of episodes of The Station of the Cross shows Jesus falling for the third time (Fig. 9). Jesus' weakening, falling, and struggling to rise conveys exhaustion and defenselessness, symbolising Jesus' extreme weakness. The Cross's size and weight are large and heavy, highlighting Jesus' sacrifice and humanity's sin. The soldiers who were with him and their attitude of mocking emphasise Jesus' humiliation. The intense depiction of colours by the artist highlights the dramatic emotions, and Jesus's suffering symbolises the severe pain Jesus went through. Jesus' perseverance under this intense suffering emphasises his resilience and determination to perfect the work of human salvation. The significance of this to Nigerian Catholics is that they should be resilient and persevere under persecution, as perseverance is essential to Christian discipleship. The artist captures the scene well, using intense, bright colours.



Fig. 9: Kólá, 9th Station of the Cross (Jesus Falls the Third Time), 2009, Relief Sculpture in Cement and Pain, 60 by 90cm, Saints Peter and Paul Catholic Pro-Cathedral Church, Làgèrè, Ile-Ife, Photograph by Ayòbámi Paul Oyèwúsi,

### **Jesus is Stripped Naked**

This scene (Fig. 10) depicts Jesus, who was already humiliated and stripped of His garments. His naked posture conveys innocence, humility, isolation, defenselessness, and submission, while the garment removal symbolises the stripping of dignity, identity, and social status. The attitude of the soldiers, as presented, reveals mocking, which highlights Jesus' humiliation. The artist's use of colours evokes sorrow and shame.

Contextually, the experience of Jesus shows the Nigerian Christians' experiences of marginalisation and persecution. Jesus' exposure to shame implies that the sins of the human generation are exposed, and the devil is filled with shame. He who adopts this perfect work of redemption will overcome sin and shame just as Jesus stripped man of every work of flesh, such as lies, pride, idolatry, fornication, anger, etc.<sup>23</sup>



Fig. 10: Kólá, 10th Station of the Cross, (Jesus is Stripped Naked), 2009, Relief Sculpture in Cement and Paint 60 by 90cm, Saints Peter and Paul Catholic Pro-Cathedral Church, Lågèrè, Ilé-Ifè. Photograph by Ayòbámi Paul Oyèwúsi, 2018.

### Jesus is Nailed to the Cross

The scene exemplified by the artist in Fig. 11 is where Jesus was finally nailed to the Cross. It presents Jesus being nailed to the Cross, suffering and being calm at the same time. His posture underscores surrender, sacrifice, and acceptance of fate, which symbolises divine acceptance and forgiveness. Nailing to the Cross symbolises the ultimate sacrifices, while the Cross represents love, salvation, and redemption. The Roman soldiers' attitude emphasises brutality, indifference, and human cruelty. The dark background colour and muted tones symbolise sorrow and suffering. The work of redemption is done, forgiveness!<sup>24</sup> The work symbolises redemption, as there is no other remission for sin except through the blood of Jesus. There is no forgiveness of sin without the shedding of blood.<sup>25</sup> The scene is significant in encouraging reflection on Jesus' love and redemption.



Fig. 11: Kólá, 11th Station of the Cross, (Jesus is Nailed to the Cross), 2009, Relief Sculpture in Cement and Paints, 60 by 90cm, Saints Peter and Paul Catholic Pro-Cathedral Church, Lågèrè, Ilé-Ifè. Photograph by Ayòbámi Paul Oyèwúsi, 2018.

### **Jesus Dies on the Cross**

The event (Fig. 12) represents Jesus as the main figure, who was lifeless, pierced, and slumped, symbolising surrender, sacrifice, and acceptance of fate. The Cross is central and dominant, symbolising redemption. The presence of Mary and John, who were mourning, symbolises maternal and apostolic devotion. The dark background, as presented by the artist, symbolises the chaotic situation and abandonment of Jesus in his predicament. The colours show the dramatic emotions of Mary, John, and others standing at the scene.

The historical context of Jesus' death on the Cross symbolises a strange darkness covering the earth. Culturally, the event highlights Christians', particularly Catholics', experiences of mortality and redemption. God, whose attribute is holiness, cannot behold the burden of sins carried by Jesus. At this time, the fellowship between God and the Son is broken, as the wrath of God against sin fell upon Jesus. He experienced desolation because of that broken fellowship.<sup>26</sup>



Fig. 12: Kólá, 12th Station of the Cross, (Jesus Dies on the Cross), 2009, Relief Sculpture in Cement and Paints, 60 by 90cm, Saints Peter and Paul Catholic Pro-Cathedral Church, Làgèrè, Ilé-Ifè. Photograph by Ayòbámi Paul Oyèwúsi, 2018.

### **Mary Takes Her Dead Son in Her Arms**

Representation of the thirteenth Station of the Cross reveals Jesus' body already brought down from the Cross and is laid in the arms of Mary, his mother (Fig. 13). This is popularly known as 'Pieta' within the Catholic Church. The word 'Pieta' comes from the Italian word for pity and the Latin word for piety, connoting compassion. The wounded, lifeless body of Jesus symbolises sacrifice and redemption. Mary, the Mother of Jesus, was depicted sorrowfully carrying her dead Son on her lap, symbolising sorrow, protection, and care. It is the symbol of love and affection. The dark colour applied by the artist symbolises grave and grief.

Culturally, the Pieta scene has been used by Catholics as a devotional image to evoke worship and faith. It encourages reflection on Jesus' love, sacrifice, and redemption, thereby indicating resurrection and emphasising hope for Christians. The mission was accomplished as Jesus died. The agony, weariness and torment go as they usher in joy, pleasure, forgiveness, and salvation.<sup>27</sup>



Fig. 13: Kólá, 13th Station of the Cross, (Mary Takes Her Dead Son in Her Arm), 2007, Relief Sculpture in Cement and Paints, 60 by 90cm, Saints Peter and Paul Catholic Pro-Cathedral Church, Lågèrè, Ilé-Ifè. Photograph by Ayòbámi Paul Oyèwúsi, 2018.

### Jesus is laid in the Tomb

The last scene in the episode of the Station of the Cross, as depicted in Fig. 14, shows Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus taking down the body of Jesus from the Cross. Joseph and Nicodemus' act conveys reverence and devotion. The lifeless body of Jesus was wrapped in linen and placed in the tomb, emphasising separation from the world. Jesus' posture symbolises surrender, sacrifice and rest, while his burial symbolises humanity's mortality. Mary, the Mother of Jesus, gazes with sorrow. Representation of the tomb symbolises darkness, silence, and separation from humanity. The dark, dull, and solemn colours used by the artist emphasise death as finality. The death of Jesus underscores his ultimate sacrifice for humanity.

Historically, the scene highlights the Ancient Jewish burial practices. Jesus' death is significant as it offers salvation, and his burial indicates the perfectness of Jesus' redemptive work of the whole world and inspires Christian hope. The suffering ended, and here comes triumph. He had been made as an expiation for the world's sin, and whoever believes and accepts Him as Lord and Saviour will live forever.<sup>28</sup> His death and burial symbolise the victory He won for humanity, their freedom from sin and the second death.<sup>29</sup>



Fig. 14: Kólá, 14th Station of the Cross, (Jesus is laid in the Tomb), 2009, Relief Sculpture in Cement and Paints, 60 by 90cm, Saints Peter and Paul Catholic Pro-Cathedral Church, Lágèrè, Ilé-Ifè. Photograph by Ayòbámi Paul Oyèwúsi, 2018.

## FINDINGS AND CONCLUSION

The Stations of the Cross are commissioned and generally seen as symbols of the Catholic Faith. The fourteen Stations of the Cross are significant for meditation and devotion during Lent and every Friday of the year to commemorate and reflect on the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. Prayer and biblical meditation are made around each of the Stations of the Cross as an act of devotion and reflection on Jesus' love and sacrifice (1st Station), Jesus' sacrifice and Christian discipleship (2nd Station), Jesus' sacrifice and human vulnerability (3rd, 7th, 9th and 10th Stations), Jesus' sacrifice and Mary's maternal love (4th Station), discipleship and sacrifice (5th Station), Christian love and kindness (6th Station), Jesus' empathy (8th Station), Jesus' sacrifice and love (11th, 12th and 13th Stations), and, Jesus' sacrifice and resurrection (14th Station).

Stations of the Cross are generally symbolic of the Catholic Faith, representing the passion, suffering and crucifixion of Christ on the Cross, which is the symbol of shame and humiliation. Irrespective of the medium and style of art used to create a station of the cross, it is the Catholics' belief that the subject and devotion matter more than the artistic creation. Hence, no preference for artists or manner of representations. Older generations of artists, such as the late Lamidi Fakeye and Dr Bruce Onabrakpeya, have used other means of representation and iconography in their works, distinct from those I have shown in this article. Fakeye and Onabrakpeya were in tune with their local tradition, and

thus their artistic representation of the subject aligned with their beliefs, which were also inculcated by the Catholic Church through the Oye Ekiti workshop in 1967.

The findings also reveal that Stations of the Cross signifies the Nigerian Catholics' experiences of hardship, persecution, injustice, or marginalisation, as well as the resilience or perseverance of believers generally. However, Jesus' sacrifice offers hope and redemption amid the adversity believers face. Meditating on Jesus' suffering, death, and resurrection offers them virtues such as care, love, compassion, humility, respect, and forgiveness. For example, Stations 4 (Jesus meets Mary) and 13 (Mary takes her dead son in her arms) exemplified African communal values, particularly the Nigerian Catholics' experiences of family values and community relationships.

The paper has examined and interpreted the meaning of each artwork of the Stations of the Cross at Saint Benedict Catholic Cathedral, Òsogbo, and Saints Peter and Paul Catholic Pro-Cathedral Church, and has established the relevance of art in the service of the Roman Catholic Church. Interpretations of the artworks were made, using Iconological and Hermeneutic analysis to reveal the significance of the Stations of the Cross, the Nigerian Catholic cultural tradition of reflecting and meditating on these dramatic episodes in Jesus' way to the Cross. Crucifixion, according to Roman practice, is for the most dreadful crimes. It is a symbol of shame and humiliation. To Jesus Christ, what is seen as a sign of shame becomes that of glory. Believers should treasure the symbol and mark of the Cross where Christ has died in any circumstance they find themselves in, in thick darkness and suffering. Remembering the Cross of Jesus and its symbol should bring the greatest solace and blessing to believers' souls (Nun 2018).

Having examined the Stations of the Cross, the article concludes that dramatic scenes from the life, suffering and death of Jesus Christ and His images are the most common subjects in the art of the Catholic Church. However, commissioning the artworks for the Station of the Cross in Nigeria revealed their commitment to serving God through Jesus Christ. The Stations of the Cross are very significant to the Catholic Faith, for they are holy and venerated objects that are consecrated to evoke prayer, worship, and the divine presence of God during the devotion of *The Way of the Cross*. Therefore, this article contributes significantly to the existing body of knowledge by providing a comprehensive analysis of artistic representations of the Stations of the Cross, thereby addressing a notable gap in the literature. Through its in-depth examination, this article fills a significant gap in the scholarly discourse surrounding the iconographic and hermeneutic interpretation of Stations of the Cross artworks.

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<sup>1</sup> Personal Communication with Reverend Father Festus Kómoláfé, Parish Priest of Saint Benedict Catholic Cathedral, Pópó, Òsogbo, Òşun State, Nigeria: February 16th, 2021, within the Church premises.

<sup>2</sup> Personal communication with Reverend Father Peter Adéyemí, Parish Priest of Saints Peter and Paul Catholic Pro-Cathedral Church, Làgèrè, Ilé-Ifè, Òşun State, Nigeria: February 16th, 2021, in the Church Premises.

<sup>3</sup> Personal communication with Brother Kenneth Oba, a Seminarian at the Saint Mary Catholic Church, Òlórunsògo Street, Ayètòrò, Òsogbo, Òşun State, Nigeria: May 11th, 2018, in the Church Premises.

<sup>4</sup> Arlington Catholic Herald, "Exhibit in Washington Features Nigerian Interpretation of Stations of the Cross," September 19, 2024, (link: <https://www.catholicherald.com/article/arts/art/exhibit-in-washington-features-nigerian-interpretation-of-stations-of-the-cross/>)

<sup>5</sup> Personal Communication with Reverend Father Peter Adéyemí, Parish Priest of Saints Peter and Paul Catholic Pro-Cathedral Church, Làgèrè, Ilé-Ifè, Òşun State, Nigeria: February 16th, 2021, in the Church Premises.

<sup>6</sup> Personal Communication with Reverend Father Festus Kómóláfé, Parish Priest of Saint Benedict Catholic Cathedral, Pópó, Òsogbo, Òsun State, Nigeria: February 16th, 2021, within the Church premises.

<sup>7</sup> Personal communication with Reverend Father Peter Adéyemí, Parish Priest of Sacred Heart Catholic Church, Òkè-Fià, Òsogbo, Òsun State: May 11th, 2018, in the Church Premises.

<sup>8</sup> Personal Communication with Reverend Father Festus Kómóláfé, Parish Priest of Saint Benedict Catholic Cathedral, Pópó, Òsogbo, Òsun State, Nigeria: February 16th, 2021, within the Church premises.

<sup>9</sup> Personal communication with Reverend Father Lawrence Adébí sí, Parish Priest of Saints Peter and Paul Catholic Pro-Cathedral Church, Làgèrè, Ilé-Ifè, Òsun State: May 15th, 2018, in the Church Premises

<sup>10</sup> Isaiah Chapter 53, Verse 7: The Holy Bible, New International Version.

<sup>11</sup> Matthew 27:11-26, Mark 15:1-15, Luke 23:1-25, John 18:28-19:16: The Holy Bible, New International Version.

<sup>12</sup> Personal communication with Reverend Father Lawrence Adébí sí, Parish Priest of Saints Peter and Paul Catholic Pro-Cathedral Church, Làgèrè, Ilé-Ifè, Òsun State: May 15th, 2018, in the Church Premises

<sup>13</sup> Matthew 27:26, Mark 15:15, Luke 23:24, John 19:16: The Holy Bible, New International Version.

<sup>14</sup> Personal communication with Rev'd Father Emmanuel Dèbò Ìdòwú, Priest of Saint Benedict Catholic Cathedral, Pópó Òsogbo, Òsun State, Nigeria: May 11th, 2018, in the Church Premises.

<sup>15</sup> Mark Chapter 8, Verse 34: The Holy Bible, New International Version.

<sup>16</sup> Matthew 27:31-33, Mark 15:20-22, Luke 23:26-31: The Holy Bible, New International Version.

<sup>17</sup> Personal communication with Reverend Father Peter Adéyemí, Parish Priest of Saints Peter and Paul Catholic Pro-Cathedral Church, Làgèrè, Ilé-Ifè, Òsun State, Nigeria: February 16th, 2021, in the Church Premises.

<sup>18</sup> Luke Chapter 23, Verse 26: The Holy Bible, New International Version.

<sup>19</sup> Personal communication with Rev'd Father Emmanuel Dèbò Ìdòwú, Priest in Charge of Saint Benedict Catholic Cathedral, Pópó Òsogbo, Òsun State, Nigeria: May 11th, 2018, in the Church Premises.

<sup>20</sup> Romans Chapter 12, Verses 1 – 2: The Holy Bible, New International Version.

<sup>21</sup> Amos Chapter 5, Verses 16 – 27: The Holy Bible, New International Version.

<sup>22</sup> Personal communication with Reverend Father Peter Adéyemí, Parish Priest of Saints Peter and Paul Catholic Pro-Cathedral Church, Làgèrè, Ilé-Ifè, Òsun State, Nigeria: February 16th, 2021, in the Church Premises.

<sup>23</sup> Personal Communication with Reverend Father Festus Kómóláfé, Parish Priest of Saint Benedict Catholic Cathedral, Pópó, Òsogbo, Òsun State, Nigeria: February 16th, 2021, within the Church premises.

<sup>24</sup> Luke Chapter 23, Verse 34: The Holy Bible, New International Version.

<sup>25</sup> Personal communication with Rev'd Father Emmanuel Dèbò Ìdòwú, Parish Priest of Saint Benedict Catholic Cathedral, Pópó Òsogbo, Òsun State, Nigeria: May 11th, 2018, in the Church Premises.

<sup>26</sup> Matthew Chapter 27, Verses 45 - 49; Luke Chapter 23, Verses 44 - 45: The Holy Bible, New International Version.

<sup>27</sup> Personal communication with Reverend Father Lawrence Adébí sí, Parish Priest, Saints Peter and Paul Catholic Pro-Cathedral Church, Làgèrè, Ilé-Ifè, Òsun State: May 15th, 2018, in the Church Premises.

<sup>28</sup> John Chapter 3, Verse 16: The Holy Bible, New International Version.

<sup>29</sup> Second death is described as a place of condemnation where punishment is reserved for the ungodly after natural death. The Bible calls it, 'the lake of fire' or 'the fiery lake of burning sulfur'. See Revelation Chapter 2, Verse 11; Chapter 20, Verse 6 and 14; Chapter 21, Verse 8: The Holy Bible, New International Version.

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