

The background of the cover is a monochromatic orange-red illustration. In the upper right, a large, ornate golden bull statue is visible. In the foreground, a large crowd of people in traditional robes is gathered in a desert-like setting. Some people are standing, while one in the lower left is kneeling near a small bull. The overall scene suggests a biblical or historical context of idolatry.

Idolatry Revisited

Recognizing the False
Gods We Serve Today

Joseph S. Salmawobil

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Appreciation

I would like to express my heartfelt gratitude to my dear friends, Osei Kwame Jnr., Benedict Gyimah Aidoo, and Wisdom Chofugyie, for their invaluable time in reading this manuscript, providing corrections, and offering insightful comments that have greatly improved its quality. May God bless you abundantly.

Above all, Glory be to the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, world without end. Amen.

Idolatry

Idolatry, which violates the first of the Ten Commandments, has led humanity astray since Adam and Eve, shifting worship away from God toward lesser things. While dictionaries define it as worshipping objects or excessive devotion to something (Merriam-Webster), idolatry takes many forms within and beyond the church. Here, "church" refers not only to the whole body of Christ but also to each of us as individuals, who are temples of the Holy Spirit (cf. 1 Cor 6:19).

The Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC) defines idolatry as the act of divinizing what is not God, including the worship of false gods, created things, or even concepts that take precedence over worshiping the one true God (CCC 2113). During his General Audience on August 1, 2018, Pope Francis asked,

“What is a ‘god’ on the existential plane? It is what is at the centre of one’s life and on whom one’s actions and thoughts depend. One can grow up in a family that is Christian in name but centred on reference points that are foreign to the Gospel.

Human beings cannot live without being centred on something. And so, the world offers the ‘supermarket’ of idols, which can be objects, images, ideas, and roles.”

We create ‘gods’ for ourselves in many forms: our own selves, money, power, positions, political parties, football clubs, jobs, and partners, among others. This happens when these objects, ideologies, actions, and associations become the central and controlling forces of our lives, leading us to make decisions based on them rather than on God. When God is at the centre of our lives, every action should reflect the thought, “How does this show that I love God or contribute to my love for Him?” We cannot have two centres in our lives; if God is not the centre, something else will be, making us idolaters.

This reflection serves as a starting point for deeper introspection about our relationship with God and the idols that may hinder true worship.

The idolatry of self

Though very subtle at times, the idolatry of self is among the most dangerous forms of idolatry. It occurs when we place ourselves at the centre of life, prioritizing personal desires and ambitions over our devotion to God, while relegating God to a secondary role or “an object” to help accomplish our goals. It happens when we prioritize ourselves above God, acting against His will. In describing the first sin of man, the CCC states, “In that sin, man preferred himself to God and, by that very act, scorned Him. He chose himself over and against God, against the requirements of his creaturely status and therefore against his own good. Constituted in a state of holiness, man was destined to be fully 'divinized' by God in glory. Seduced by the devil, he wanted to 'be like God,' but 'without God, before God, and not in accordance with God’” (CCC 398). Idolatry of self occurs in many ways; some include:

Putting God into our corner

We put God in our corner when we refuse to relate personally to Him, lose faith in Him, and turn to Him as a

last resort. When we rely on our abilities, gifts, wealth, friends, and associations to solve our needs and claim no need for God, we only run to Him when everything else fails us. God is not an object to be placed in our corner and used only when needed; He is our Maker and the Almighty One who seeks to relate with us at all times. There are many examples of this in the Bible. For instance, in the parable of the prodigal son, the younger son only thought of and sought after his father (God) after all his wealth, skills, and attempts to help himself had failed (cf. Luke 15:17). The CCC describes prayer as a covenant relationship between God and man in Christ (CCC 2564), which calls for a continuous relationship with God, making Him the centre of everything rather than a last resort.

Relating based on our terms and desires

When we relate to God based on our terms, we attempt to control Him, expecting Him to conform to our plans. We often shape an image of God that aligns with our desires, leading to disappointment when He doesn't fulfil our expectations. This approach reduces our relationship with

God to a transactional one, where His goodness is contingent upon whether He fulfils our requests or not. When we view God through our own expectations and only consider Him good when He answers our prayers as we wish, we essentially worship our own desires rather than God Himself. True worship recognizes that God's goodness is inherent, regardless of our personal image or expectations, and understanding this helps avoid the path of disappointment and self-centred faith. Peter, like other Jews of his time, had an image of who the Messiah was supposed to be: "a military leader" to liberate them from Roman dominance (cf. Pesikta Rabbati 36). Therefore, when Jesus, whom he knew and confirmed was the Messiah, started talking about dying on the cross, Peter was disappointed and rebuked Jesus for it (cf. Matthew 16:21-22).

Requiring that He does our will

Requiring that God does our will reflects a self-centred approach to faith, where we expect Him to conform to our desires rather than submitting to His will. Jesus exemplified true submission in the Garden of

Gethsemane, praying, “Father, if you are willing, take this cup away from me; still, not my will but yours be done” (Luke 22:42). His prayer demonstrates a willingness to sacrifice His comfort for the fulfilment of God's purpose. In contrast, when we are at the centre of our own lives, our prayers may become demands like, “Lord, you must do this for me,” expecting God to align with our wishes rather than His divine plan. This form of idolatry, where we seek to control or manipulate God's actions to fit our desires, represents a significant misunderstanding of faith. There are times when we make declarations in the name of faith in response to “if two of you agree on earth about anything for which they are to pray, it shall be granted to them by my heavenly Father” (cf. Matthew 18:18) and expect them to come to pass when these declarations are not in line with God. True faith involves not only making declarations but also submitting to God's will with love and trust, acknowledging that His plans are greater than our own.

There are also instances where repentance, rather than demanding God's intervention, is required to change what

He has decreed. For example, when Jonah preached to the people of Nineveh, their repentance led to God relenting from the punishment He had intended for them (cf. Jonah 3:10). This demonstrates that instead of attempting to manipulate God through emotions or prayer, we should strive to do His will and, when necessary, repent.

Refusing his help

Refusing God's help shows pride and self-idolatry, as it means trying to be self-sufficient and independent of Him. This attitude harms our relationship with God, making us the rulers of our own lives. We connect with and worship God best when we are humble and accept His help, as well as the help from others. The parable of the Rich Fool (Luke 12:16-21) shows this clearly. The rich man focused only on his wealth and plans, building bigger barns to store his crops and thinking that his self-sufficiency would ensure a secure future. He ignored his need for God and the fact that life is fleeting, his end came that very night.

Hidden idols

Self-idolatry often includes hidden idols like ambition, careerism, and the desire to control. These idols can take the place of God in our lives. When we're overly focused on our own ambitions or careers, or when we want to control everything around us, we may start to rely on ourselves instead of God. This means we don't fully worship the Lord or acknowledge that we depend on Him for everything. These hidden idols can distract us from our true relationship with God and make it harder to see that He should be the centre of our lives, not our own plans or desires.

The Idolatry of Channels

God has provided many channels in our walk of faith to help us learn more about Him and to assist us in worshiping Him better. Through the ministry of men and women of God—pastors, bishops, religious figures, spiritual directors, and others—we are guided towards seeking, knowing, loving, and serving God more effectively. The lives of the saints in heaven inspire us in our walk with God, teaching us how to grow in holiness and devotion to Him. In describing the saints, Pope Francis, during his General Audience on April 7, 2021, taught,

“They are witnesses that we do not adore — certainly, we do not adore these saints — but whom we venerate and who, in thousands of different ways, bring us to Jesus Christ, the only Lord and Mediator between God and humanity. A ‘saint’ who does not bring you to Jesus Christ is not a saint, not even a Christian. A saint makes you remember Jesus Christ because he or she journeyed along the path of life as a Christian.

Saints remind us that holiness can blossom even in our lives, however weak and marked by sin.”

While seeking the saints' intercession and venerating them through devotion is proper, this differs from worship. Only God is worthy of worship, while veneration points us back to Him as the source of grace. The Church has made a clear distinction between idolatry and the veneration of saints or sacred images. While idolatry attributes divine power to created things, the veneration of saints is understood as honouring those who reflect God's glory, with the understanding that all honour given to them ultimately points back to God (cf. CCC 2132).

Relating with Ministers of God

Ministers of God are essential guides in our faith journey, but their primary role is to help us seek, know, and serve God (CCC 1). If we focus on them instead of God, they lose their purpose, and we risk turning them into idols. If we reach the point of honouring and obeying these ministers more than, or equally to, how we honour and worship God, it becomes idolatrous. Idolatry occurs when we begin to believe that the minister is the only source of

power, thinking there is no other way to encounter God more effectively. Some people's lives are controlled and manipulated by individuals parading as ministers of God, leading them to do everything in their power to honour, fight for, or defend every action of these ministers, even when those actions go against the Word of God. Focusing on and honouring ministers of God more than the God of the ministers is a form of idolatry. Our dependence should be on God, not on these ministers.

Relating with the Saints in Heaven

Another form of idolatry, which is particularly tempting among Catholics, is the belief that saints have the power to grant prayer requests, when in fact, they play intercessory roles. Saints are part of our Christian journey as "clouds of witnesses" (cf. Heb 12:1), but their roles should not be mistaken for something they are not. Care must be taken not to turn devotion to them into worship. Pope Francis, in his General Audience on February 2, 2022, specifically warned against misunderstanding the role of the saints, saying:

“Sometimes even Christianity can fall into forms of devotion that seem to reflect a mentality that is more pagan than Christian. The fundamental difference is the fact that our prayer and our devotion as faithful people is not based, in these cases, on trust in a human being, or in an image or an object, even when we know that they are sacred. The prophet Jeremiah reminds us: ‘Cursed is the man who trusts in man, [...] blessed is the man who trusts in the Lord’ (17:5, 7). Even when we fully rely on the intercession of a saint, or even more so that of the Virgin Mary, our trust only has value in relation to Christ. It’s not that the path toward this saint or toward Our Lady ends there, no. It goes there, but in relationship with Christ. Christ is the bond that unites us to Him and to each other, and that bond has a specific name: it’s the ‘communion of saints.’ It’s not the saints who work miracles, no! ‘This saint is so miraculous...’ No, stop there. The saints do not work miracles; only the grace of God acting through them does. Miracles are done by God, by the grace of God acting through a holy person, a righteous person. This must be made clear. There are people who say, ‘I do not believe in God, but I believe in this saint.’ No, this is

wrong. The saint is an intercessor, one who prays for us, and we pray to him; he prays for us, and the Lord gives us grace: The Lord acts through the saint.”

Relating to Sacred Images

The use of sacred images has a long history in the Church and can play a significant role in deepening our faith. Sacred images, such as crucifixes, icons, and statues of saints, serve as visual reminders of the divine realities they represent. They are meant to lift our hearts and minds to God, helping us to focus on the mysteries of our faith and the examples set by those who have gone before us. However, the Church teaches that these images are not to be worshipped or treated as though they possess any inherent power. They are symbols that point beyond themselves to the divine, and their purpose is to aid in devotion, not to become objects of devotion in and of themselves (cf. CCC 2132).

The distinction between veneration and worship is crucial in this context. Veneration, or *dulia*, is the honour given to the saints, who are revered for their holy lives and their closeness to God. *Hyperdulia* is a special veneration given

to the Blessed Virgin Mary due to her unique role in the history of salvation. Worship, or *latria*, on the other hand, is reserved for God alone. The Church has consistently taught that while it is appropriate to venerate the saints and use sacred images to aid in prayer, all acts of worship and adoration are due solely to God.

This distinction is emphasised in the Catechism of the Catholic Church, which explains that the honour given to sacred images and the saints is meant to direct our worship towards God. The Catechism states, “The Christian veneration of images is not contrary to the first commandment which proscribes idols. Indeed, the honour paid to sacred images is a ‘respectful veneration,’ not the adoration due to God alone” (CCC 2132). The images remind us of the spiritual truths they represent and help to make the invisible mysteries of our faith more accessible to our human senses.

In Exodus 20:4-5, God commands, "You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth; you shall not bow

down to them or serve them." This commandment was given in the context of preventing the Israelites from falling into the idolatry that surrounded them. The key concern here was not the creation of images per se but the worship of these images as gods.

The use of sacred images in Christianity is rooted in the Incarnation of Christ, the belief that God became visible in the person of Jesus Christ. Because God took on a visible, tangible form, it became permissible to create images that depict Him and the saints who have lived in His likeness. The Second Council of Nicaea in 787 AD clarified this by affirming the proper use of icons in worship, making it clear that these images are to be honoured, not worshiped.

Proper Use of Sacred Images

When used correctly, sacred images can be powerful tools for spiritual growth. They can inspire us to emulate the virtues of the saints, remind us of the presence of God in our lives, and serve as focal points for prayer and meditation. For instance, a crucifix can draw our attention to the sacrifice of Christ, deepening our understanding of

His love and prompting us to offer our lives more fully to Him. An image of the Blessed Virgin Mary can remind us of her perfect obedience to God's will and encourage us to seek her intercession as we strive to follow her example.

However, it is essential to approach these images with the right mindset. We must always remember that the purpose of a sacred image is to lead us closer to God, not to become a substitute for God. The image is a tool, a means to an end, not an end in itself. The danger lies in allowing the image to take the place of the divine reality it represents. When we focus more on the image than what it signifies, we risk falling into the idolatry that Scripture warns against.

The Role of the Saints and Sacred Images in Prayer

In the same vein, while it is appropriate to seek the intercession of the saints and to use sacred images in prayer, these practices must always lead us back to Christ. The saints, as intercessors, bring our prayers to God, but they do not replace God. Our trust and reliance should ultimately be placed in God, not in the saints or the images

themselves. Pope Francis reminds us that even as we honour the saints, our faith and devotion must be centred on Christ, who is the source of all grace and the only mediator between God and humanity.

The Idolatry of Gifts

In our journey through life, God blesses us with many gifts, from natural talents to spiritual charisms. These gifts—whether they are our abilities, material resources, or the opportunities we encounter—are intended to make life comfortable and to equip us for the mission of building His Kingdom. God is generous in giving these gifts, as Proverbs reminds us, “It is the LORD’s blessing that brings wealth, and no effort can substitute for it” (Prov 10:22). However, a danger arises when we allow these gifts to take precedence in our hearts and lives, transforming them into idols.

An idol as Pope Francis has taught in many instances is anything that displaces God from the centre of our hearts, controlling our thoughts and actions. This can include our natural gifts, money, opportunities, or the breakthroughs we pray for. While these are important, they must not be the focus of our lives. If we prioritize them above God, we fall into the trap of idolatry (cf. *Pope Francis Homily after the Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops on 29 October 2023*).

Being Slave to Mammon

Jesus' warning in Matthew 6:24 is clear: "No one can serve two masters... You cannot serve both God and money." This passage highlights the spiritual danger of letting wealth dominate our lives. When money becomes our ultimate goal, it turns from being a useful tool into a demanding master. The Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC) explains that the disordered love of material goods contradicts the order of charity, which should place God above all things (CCC 2113). When money governs our choices, we risk being drawn away from God's path.

Allowing Money to Control Your Decisions and Directions

Money is essential for many aspects of life, but when it dictates every decision we make, it becomes an idol. St. Paul's warning to Timothy reflects the consequences of this misplaced priority: "For the love of money is the root of all evils, and some people in their desire for it have strayed from the faith" (1 Tim 6:10). In our pursuit of financial gain or status, we may compromise our values, ignore God's commandments, or disregard the well-being

of others. When wealth takes precedence over our relationship with God, it creates a spiritual and moral dissonance.

The Bible shows us that blessings from God should never become a stumbling block. In the story of Adam and Eve, their desire for wisdom was not wrong; rather, it was the method by which they sought it—disobeying God—that led to their downfall (cf. Gen 3). Their mistake serves as a reminder that while we may seek gifts from God, we must do so within His will. As James reminds us, “If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him” (James 1:5). Seeking wealth or other gifts apart from God's plan can lead us away from Him, creating idols in our hearts.

Become a Master of Money, Not a Slave

As stewards of God’s blessings, we are called to manage our gifts wisely. Money is a necessary part of life, but it should never control us. The Catechism emphasizes that wealth, while not inherently evil, must be used responsibly, with the common good in mind (CCC 2402).

We are not to hoard riches or allow them to become the driving force behind our decisions. Instead, our focus should be on using our resources to serve God and others. “Those who trust in their riches will fall, but the righteous will thrive like a green leaf” (Prov 11:28).

The temptation to idolize money can lead us to sinful actions—cheating, corruption, or harming others in the pursuit of wealth. However, no amount of money can satisfy the soul's deepest desires. Only God can fulfil us, and as we grow closer to Him, we see that material possessions have limited value in the grander scheme of eternal life.

Money May Answer All, But It’s Not the Ultimate

Ecclesiastes 10:19 acknowledges the practical benefits of money: “Money answers everything.” Yet, it also reminds us that while wealth may solve many of life’s problems, it is not the ultimate source of happiness or meaning. True peace, joy, and fulfilment come from God, not from earthly riches. As Jesus taught, we are to “store up treasures in heaven,” for material possessions are

temporary and ultimately cannot provide the salvation that only God offers (cf. Matt 6:19-21).

The Proper Use of Gifts

Gifts such as talents, money, opportunities, and breakthroughs are meant to enhance our lives and to enable us to serve God more effectively. However, they are tools—not ends in themselves. We are called to use these gifts to support one another, especially the poor, and to advance God’s Kingdom (CCC 1939, 2444). When we focus on the Giver rather than the gifts, we maintain a healthy perspective.

Pope Francis echoes this sentiment when he teaches that our talents are gifts from God, and they are to be used for the common good: “Our talents are not a private possession; they are a responsibility to share for the benefit of all.” When we recognize that our gifts are not our own, but are meant to serve others, we can avoid the temptation to idolize them.

While money, talents, and other gifts are important, they should never take the place of God in our lives. By

keeping Him at the centre of everything we do, we can use these gifts to glorify Him rather than allowing them to control us. As Jesus said, “Seek first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things will be added to you” (Matt 6:33). Let us strive to keep our focus on God, the Giver of all good things, and trust that He will provide for all our needs in His perfect timing.

The Worship of Associations

As social beings, we naturally form connections with various groups and associations that help us grow, contribute to society, and shape our identities. Friendships, nations, ethnic groups, political parties, and even football teams provide us with a sense of belonging and community. These associations, when properly ordered, enhance our lives and can be vehicles for doing good. However, when these affiliations become the ultimate focus of our lives—when we prioritize them above our relationship with God—they can lead us into idolatry.

The Role of Associations in Our Lives

Associations serve important roles in our lives. Friendships bring joy and support, while national and ethnic groups foster pride and shared culture. Political parties allow us to advocate for causes that benefit society, and involvement in sports or social clubs provides a sense of camaraderie. The Church encourages participation in such associations, recognizing the importance of community. As *Gaudium et Spes* teaches, "man cannot

fully find himself except through a sincere gift of himself" (GS 24). In this sense, associations help us express our human dignity by enabling us to give ourselves to others.

However, the problem arises when we allow these associations to take precedence over our relationship with God. The Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC 2113) warns that "idolatry consists in divinizing what is not God." This can happen when we place our associations—whether they be friendships, ethnic groups, or political parties—on a pedestal, allowing them to become the central focus of our lives, thus leading us away from God.

The Dangers of Idolatry in Associations

The idolatry of associations manifests in various ways:

- **Friendships:** Friendships are essential, but when we prioritize them above our relationship with God, they can lead us into sin. For example, if a friendship encourages immoral behaviour or distracts us from our spiritual duties, it has taken on an idolatrous role in our lives.

- **Nations and Ethnic Groups:** Loyalty to one's nation or ethnic group is natural, but when it leads to xenophobia, discrimination, or hatred, it becomes idolatrous. The Bible reminds us that, in Christ, "there is neither Jew nor Greek" (Galatians 3:28), and we are all equal before God. Nationalism or ethnic pride that breeds division contradicts the Gospel's call to unity and love.
- **Political Parties:** While political engagement is important and encouraged for promoting justice, idolatry occurs when we prioritize political ideology over our faith. Blind loyalty to a political party, especially when it goes against the teachings of Christ, becomes a form of idolatry. Pope Francis has spoken about the danger of turning politics into an idol, warning that political divisions should not compromise Christian values.
- **Sports Teams and Hobbies:** Enjoying sports or hobbies is not wrong, but when these interests dominate our time, thoughts, and energy, they risk becoming idols. When loyalty to a football team,

for example, leads to hatred toward others or consumes our focus, we stray from keeping God at the centre of our lives.

The Catechism cautions that "man commits idolatry whenever he honours and reveres a creature in place of God" (CCC 2113). When any association—be it social, cultural, or political—takes precedence over God, it distorts our lives and spiritual well-being.

Discrimination and Division: A Sign of Idolatry

One of the clearest signs that an association has become an idol is when it leads to discrimination or harm toward others. The Bible teaches us that all human beings are created in the image and likeness of God (Genesis 1:27), and therefore deserve dignity and respect. When we allow our allegiance to a group or association to lead us into prejudice or exclusion, we are in danger of idolizing that group. This can happen with national identity, political affiliations, or ethnic groups.

Pope Francis, in *Fratelli Tutti*, emphasizes that a narrow focus on our own group at the expense of others goes

against Christian values. He warns against the "throwaway culture" that discards those who do not fit into certain groups or associations, reminding us that the love of God transcends all human boundaries (FT 2). When we place our association with a particular group above the command to love our neighbour, we fall into idolatry.

Catholic Teaching on Idolatry in Associations

The Catechism of the Catholic Church highlights the importance of keeping our focus on God, warning against the idolatry of associations and worldly allegiances. CCC 2114 teaches that "human life finds its unity in the adoration of the one God." When we give our ultimate loyalty to a group or cause other than God, we risk "endless disintegration," as our lives become fractured by competing loyalties.

A Proper Ordering of Associations

While associations can play a positive role in our lives, the key is to ensure that they remain rightly ordered. As Christians, we are called to engage with society, advocate for justice, and contribute to the common good, but

always with God as our primary focus. Associations must never replace God as the centre of our lives. As St. Augustine reminds us in *The Confessions*, "You have made us for Yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in You." Our ultimate belonging is to God, not to any earthly group or association.

When we allow God to remain at the centre of our lives, our involvement in associations becomes more fruitful and balanced. Instead of being controlled by loyalty to a particular group or ideology, we are free to love and serve others in accordance with God's will.

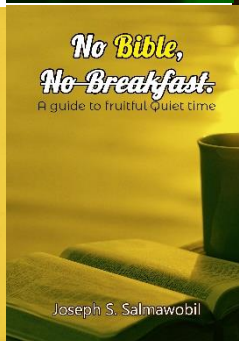
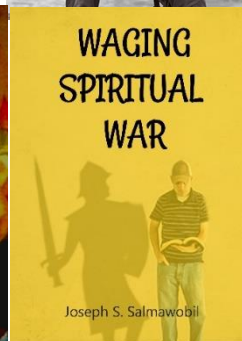
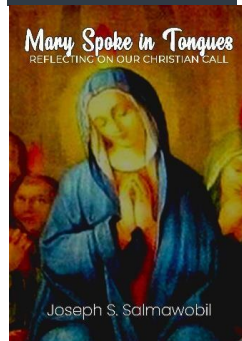
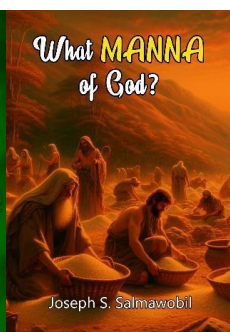
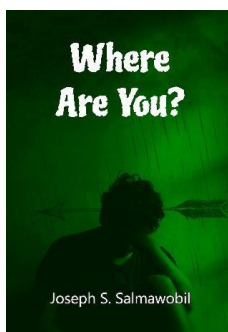
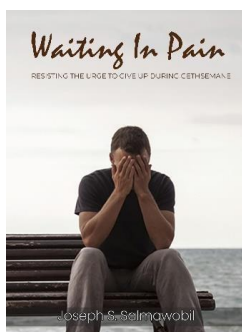
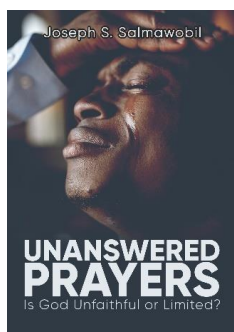
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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

10 years ago, on the 19th of April, 2014, **Joseph Sohyinzor Salmawobil (aka Joe Yapzor)** said “Yes, I do” in response to the creed of the Church and received the three sacraments of initiation (Baptism, Confirmation and First Communion).

Since that time, his life has become more dedicated to Jesus above all things and all he wants to do is to make Jesus visible to all. Through one-on-one ministrations, preaching, writing and other methods he proclaims the Good News of Jesus.

He is the current National Organiser for the Inter-Tertiary Institutions Catholic Charismatic Renewal and the Parish Youth Chairman of St. Theresa of the Child Jesus Parish, Tongo. He has continually served in many other leadership positions in the church and outside the church since 2015.

This book "IDOLATRY REVISITED: RECOGNIZING THE FALSE GODS WE SERVE TODAY" serves as a reflection on the first of the 10 commandments. It throws light on the many forms of idols Christians are often tempted to create for ourselves. It does not cover the entire topic of idolatry but seek to serve as a call to deeper introspection.

