



# Indigenous knowledge incorporating pastoral healing and pilgrimage tourism: The case of Ngome Marian Shrine

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## Abstract

Indigenous knowledge is not obsolete or something for the past but is relevant today as ever before. Ngome began as a shrine after alleged Marian apparitions. These apparitions were to the servant of God, Sr. Reinolda Franziska May OSB (Order of Saint Benedict). The alleged apparitions gave rise to the place becoming the most-visited holy place in the Diocese of Eshowe-Zululand, in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. Healing, both spiritual and physical has allegedly been found to occur at Ngome Marian Shrine. This paper reveals the spiritualism, and healing which may be found by visiting the shrine, and the secrecy of indigenous knowledge is highlighted in this pilgrimage tourism. Through engaging in pilgrimage tourism, versions of pastoral healing methods are profiled. The study adopted a qualitative method and a literature analysis was the focus of this paper. Reflections on the pastoral healing process of visiting the shrine is the essential discussion. Narrative description and perceptions of visiting the shrine are briefly discussed. The pilgrims' testimonies of visiting Ngome Shrine are described to reflect how indigenous knowledge and pastoral-theological practices of Christianity can contribute to healing. The findings narrate perceptions and attitudes that transform many factors that confront societies globally to a lesser or greater extent.

**Keywords:** Indigenous knowledge, pastoral-theology practices, religious tourism, Socio-cultural behaviour, Shrine.

## Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to incorporate in the indigenous knowledge usage the value of visiting pilgrims. Ngome Marian Shrine is in the Northern part of KwaZulu-Natal province in the Republic of South Africa. This area, like many in Africa, is predominantly rural but has a profound history, culture and heritage preservation. The relationship that exists between the 'so called' hidden traditional practices in rural villages and the public influence of the western and Christian practices remains an issue. This paper aims at unconventionally stating that a concrete awareness of the importance of ethical practice are embedded in cultural context must be forged. That is, attitudes, values, customs and mores that are constructive are to be valued and those that are destructive are to be problematized with a specific purpose of engaging in a fruitful dialogue.

Indigenous knowledge and pastoral theology research will be reflected through-out this paper. Theology and indigenous knowledge versions of healing methods are to be profiled so that they



can contribute in the dialogue of this paper. The society is faced with many problems and human sufferings which cannot be cured because of the clash between Christianity or religious beliefs with traditional herbs and what is often considered to be un-Christian behaviour. Human problems as Louw (1997) argues are not always linked to personalities, "but correlate with the position and status which people adopt and hold within a certain network of relationships". For the purpose of procedure and delimitation, this paper focuses on the study by (Ncube, 2002) which focuses on the notion of sickness, death, and resting in peace.

## Reflection on documented literature

### (a) Reflection on spirituality, beliefs, indigenous knowledge and societal behaviors

How does the society deal with and cope with crises and tragedies on a daily basis? Ncube (2002) in his study demonstrated how *ukubhula* (divination) was to be treated as a symbolic action that helps society in coping with healing in socio-cultural issues and in the identification of conflict that existed in the society. Ncube (2002) in his pastoral view stated that a review and interpretation of human relationships with spirituality was required.

Ncube (2002) further stated that the terms could be used loosely, while seeking to tease out from investigation of the context what they might mean. Since these terms have long been inflected with notions deriving from Western culture they are as much applicable in African society. While the distinction is useful, it is not watertight in contemporary practice. Whereas *ukubhula* as presented in the Zulu English dictionary (1948) composed by C. Doke and W. Vilakazi is of the opinion that *ukubhula* is a process of consulting a diviner to experience the divine, exorcise, diagnose the evil that has shown itself (*ukubhula umhlola*) or to diagnose a disease (*ukubhula isifo*). These concepts are commonly used in rural areas of KwaZulu-Natal which are mainly Zulu culture dominated. Pilgrimage tourism is generally practiced in this part of the country. Religious tourism here focuses on visiting important religious sites.

The main motivation for travel is to meet the spiritual and religious needs of people in a search for authenticity, hence again the motivation can be exploring the culture of other nations or sacred objects (Nicolaidis & Grobler, 2017; Nkwanyana, 2018). Zulu peoples social behaviour is categorised into three areas, the power deriving from the Creator, the ancestors and the medicines (Ncube, 2002). The concept of the Creator (*Umvelinqangi*) contains an idea of twins. Nqangi refers to the first born of the twins. For Zulu people *izulu* (heaven) and *nomhlaba* (earth) are like identical twins but heaven was the first to be born (Qwabe, 2000). The Creator is up in heaven, the ancestors are under the earth, and this means the ancestors and medicine powers are with us on earth. This creates a situation that if anything happens, an explanation should be sought from one member of this trilogy.

The trilogy explains why Ngome shrine is a popular pilgrimage destination for Catholics and non-Catholics. Catholics are encouraged to partake at the Eucharistic celebration daily and highly required to celebrate Holy Mass every Sundays and days of obligation. And, where the situation does not allow to join at a service led by authorized lay leader. The number of Catholics at Ngome increased steadily around 1970, when it was known as the Ngome Estate with tea plantation and timber forestry in operation. Ngome would have looked bleak had it not been for another development which focused on the attention of many Roman Catholic Church on Zululand far beyond its borders and primarily the alleged Marian apparitions – pointing the servant of God, Sr. Reinolda Franziska May OSB to the little outstation hidden away shrine in the Ngome forests.

Just as at Fatima in Portugal, visions are important to enlighten believers at Ngome (Nicolaidis, 2016). A nun had alleged visions of Mother Mary "Our Lady" several times, in the alleged visions,



Mother Mary asked that a shrine be built at a place where seven springs meet, this place was found and pointed out miraculously and a shrine was built. A number of Catholics and non-Catholics have claimed miraculous healing after visiting the place. Ngome shrine has become to all intents and purposes a sanctuary of “Our Lady” which is often visited. Many of those who have visited the Ngome shrine have visited the springs and alleged to have been cured by the water and even by just setting foot in the area (Xulu, 2020).

The purpose of the cited reflection was an attempt to inform that from the Zulu traditional practices, a few things can be learnt from the alleged visions that the nun encountered, beliefs and theology are not difficult to understand. Maluleke (2002) expresses that, the time has come for Africans to take responsibility and full ownership of the presence, significance and consequences of Christianity on the continent to become a fruitful discourse to engage in, in the future. However, such ownership must be a ‘hard-nosed’ one where both the blessings and the curses of Christian presence on the continent are acknowledged. Perceptions must thus move beyond the convenient and sporadic use of Christianity but get to it’s essence.

### **(b) African indigenous Knowledge and traditional healing**

It is important to note indigenous knowledge has been transmitted orally from one person to the next and it is scripted today by western knowledge systems (Nkwanyana, 2016). Indigenous knowledge is resident to the older generation (Nkwanyana, 2016). In times of sickness, people in rural areas are often dependent on the help offered by traditional healers, that is, before they go to the clinic or hospital, which is often far, they start with a visit to a traditional healer. These people have a great command in peoples’ lives to such an extent that it would not be wise to ignore their influence and control. Because of the services they offer, traditional healers are shown great respect by the community, and this includes Christians.

In the Zulu tradition a person is given the needed respect from the time of attack or being infected by a disease to the point of death. This situation is treated in stages, home-based-care, alleviation, and the stage of receiving therapy. However, because of the effects of for example a pandemic that are incurable at some stage, these stages are often frustrating. But then, they provide a psychological satisfaction to the victim. This affords those who are engaged in pastoral work an opportunity to know what to transform in the lives of the community they serve. It tells a story of what is affecting the community and how one can go about doing things with occasional correction.

Bate (2002:148) distinguishes between associative antagonistic symbolic medicines and associative sympathetic symbolic medicines. The former symbolises the evil the medicine is fighting and the latter symbolises the good the medicine wishes to provide. Both approaches provide the individual concerned with hope to confront hardships, pain, sorrow even death at hand with fortitude. In other words, once a person has used a particular medicine or performed a certain ritual, he or she feels more confident to face the reality. It is a psychological phenomenon observed in the context of life lived in its plenitude.

The circumstances of life have changed, diverse contacts with other people have taken place, and the socio-economic and political environment has evolved and brought people progressively to a new way of living and understanding themselves (Saymaan, 2002). There is a need then to have a constant dialogue with the culture so that the fruits of the Gospel may transform the lives of people (Ncube, 2002). Over and above that the lives of those infected patients may be comforted by the approach and the attitude that is found from those who take care for them. Though, it is hard to confront the situation at times, it is important that we should walk in the

footsteps of Christ who loved his own to the point of death and by so doing showed the depth of his love (Ncube, 2002).

### (c) The importance of visiting Ngome Shrine

An in-depth African indigenous knowledge practice is visible and witnessed from the pilgrims during consultation with the Creator as will be done traditionally when incense is burnt and used when talking to the ancestors. Rifai (2015) explains that religious tourism raises awareness of humanity's common heritage and provides resources for preservation, and it can contribute to local development and it builds cultural understanding. The United Nations World Tourism Organisation raises challenges that may occur during such travel, including the preservation of religious monuments and sites, the upholding of respect for local traditions and inclusive development of local communities. All these cited challenges can be effectively managed, this requires a deeper understanding of the experience desired, and there should be an interaction between the site and visitors. McGettigan, (2003) explains the importance of religious tourism by giving a classification of Christian pilgrimage sites as follows:

(a)	Shrines of relatively low value, as a tourist attraction where majority of visitors are either members of religious tour groups or consider themselves to be pilgrims
(b)	Shrines of high value as a tourist attraction, where tourist tend to outnumber pilgrims
(c)	Shrines primarily noted for colorful pilgrimage events, where pilgrimages are usually held on an annual or biannual basis.
(d)	Shrines combining touristic importance, pilgrimage festivals and cultic significance, which is visited throughout the year by large number of tourists and pilgrims.

The reality is that a variety of activities and practices take place at different sites, Ngome shrine is based on both sacred and profane motivations. Religious experiences differ for each individual. Situations differ over experience of the course of a visit. Religious sites presents a wide variety of offerings, and in many places, visitors are encouraged to respect the sanctity of the site. At Ngome Shrine, the springs are to be respected to allow for engaging in spiritual practices.

### Images at Ngome Marian Shrine (all are Authors own)





Image 1. Ngome Marian Shrine church built on rocks as was requested by mother Mary, the tabernacle of the most-high.

The Mother of God/God bearer (*Theotokos*) is necessarily related to Christ and the Body of Christ that is the Holy Church and the “Bride” of Jesus Christ. The Virgin Mary is thus an essential component of the liturgical prayer life and sacred tradition of the Roman Catholic and also the Eastern Orthodox Church (Nicolaidis, 2014). To Saint Ambrose, Mary possessed great strength and was the most dignified of all women: “There was nothing wild in the eyes, nothing wantons in the words, no immodest movement; there was no posture gentler, no comportment more relaxed, as if the sight of her body was a likeness of the mind, a figure of worth” (Ambrose of Milan, *De Virginibus* II, 2, 7).



Image 2. Ngome Marian Shrine Grotto. A grotto is a natural or artificial cave used by human in both modern times and antiquity and historically or prehistorically (Urban dictionary, 1999-2020).



Image 3. Priest praying for the tourist for healing and blessings

Only Catholic priests are allowed to perform this pastoral healing at Ngome Shrine, which may be performed for Roman Catholics or non-Catholics to receive desired healing. This ritual is done only by Roman Catholic priests to sustain the spirituality of the place and to avoid the misuse of the place for any other ritual.



Image 4. Spring mouth view, it has been artificially paved for ease of tourists and pilgrims to get water from the spring as was directed by the mother Mary.

The value of the site requires silence and fulfilled satisfaction. In most cases religious tourism is combined with leisure, and expectations of religious destinations differ; accommodation will be one item required to be available at the pilgrimage site hence Ngome Shrine has adopted this notion of accommodating pilgrims. Pilgrimage tourism is a substantial motive for the global movement of people, whether the pilgrimage is for religious purposes or the journey is undertaken for entirely profane motives or influenced by secular desires is immaterial (Di Giovane, 2015; Nicolaidis, 2014; Nicolaidis, 2016).



## Reflections on the visiting of the pilgrimage Ngome Shrine

The methodology used in this study was qualitative. A discourse analysis was used. A discourse is a general idea that language is structured according to different patterns that peoples' utterances follow when they take part in different domains of social life (Jorgensen and Phillips, 2002). Discourse analysis is concerned with the studying of written texts and spoken words to reveal the discursive sources, how these sources are maintained and produced to transform economic, social political and historical context; Discourses are used in everyday text for building power and development of new knowledge (Maree, 2017).

Just as visiting of holy sites serves to allow people to practice popular piety and to carry out Christian faith formation in the Church, it is true of Ngome that it is a place of prayer. In general, the holy sites have today become the meeting place of pilgrims and tourists; two types of visitors exist which include both believers and nonbelievers (Wiśniewski, 2018).

Resembling other popular pilgrimage sites such as Lourdes (France), Fatima (Portugal) and many more, the story of Ngome began with alleged Marian apparitions. In this instance these apparitions were to the servant of God, Sr. Reinolda Franziska. The alleged apparitions gave rise to the most-visited holy place in the Diocese of Eshowe- Zululand, in KwaZulu-Natal. South Africa, Traditional Africans generally rise up to high places as they believe these are spaces to meet with the divine. In moments of disasters, they seek blessing by moving towards higher places like mountains, a phenomenon not foreign to the Judeo-Christian religion, for example, "Come let us go to the mountain of the Lord." (Isaiah 2:3). Ngome is a small unique place where people meet God in a special way. Since the beginning of Christianity, Wiśniewski (2018) observes, sacred places have constituted privileged space because they are considered God's chosen places, where pilgrims have sought contact with God.

The late bishop Mansuet Biyase of Eshowe gave recognition to Ngome as a place of prayer thus allowing the people to receive special graces. Worth noting, the term shrine has been commonly or loosely used here due to semantics and above all because of the relevance and impact of Ngome on the lives of people. The ongoing stability and the disposition of pilgrims to this place provide an ever-increasing hope that Ngome shall rightfully be declared a shrine in the future, (c.1230). Observing c.1208, the bishop as pastor of souls availed the place to pilgrims beyond the jurisdiction of the Diocese of Eshowe.

Apart from holy springs, there are two chapels, a parish church and peace-filled grotto. In one chapel there is a clear inscription, a mark of the occasion when the chapel was blessed by the Archbishop Jabulani Nxumalo bishop emeritus of Bloemfontein then auxiliary bishop of Durban (c.1207). The parish church as a sacred building designated for divine worship was blessed by late bishop Mansuet Biyase to which the faithful have the right of entry for the exercise, especially the public exercise of divine worship (c.1214; 1217 §1).

Chapels are not sacred on the basis that liturgical celebrations are undertaken there but that they are dedicated and blessed for this purpose. In a sacred place only, those things are to be permitted which serve to exercise or promote worship, piety and religion. Anything out of harmony with the holiness of the place is forbidden (c.1210). Other use may however be permitted by a bishop for individual cases provided they are not contrary to the sacred character of the place. Certainly, it is an encounter with God because an *ordinary pastoral ministry*, which is animated by the fire of the Spirit, so as to inflame the hearts of the faithful can enable one to respond to God's love ever more fully in their lives (Pope Francis, 2013). The manner in which the Rt. Rev. Bishop X.T. Kumalo (the current bishop of Eshowe) and the custodian of the sacred place



demonstrates this pastoral care and his zeal for souls to meet God can be clearly demonstrated in the following example: As far back as 2012, he declared the third weekend of August every year a diocesan pilgrimage. Additionally, he generously allowed and availed the facilities of Ngome for the pilgrims within and beyond the Southern African Catholic Bishops Conference. In other words, it is available to all those seeking to experience the fire of the Holy Spirit.

Given that a variety of activities and practices take place at different sites, Ngome is susceptible to drawing right intentions (the ideal) and profane motifs(vice). That, Ngome was declared a place of prayer, an emphasis made was that only those things which serve the exercise or promotion of worship, piety, or religion which are permitted in a sacred place; anything not consonant with the holiness of the place is forbidden (c.1210). Capaross (2004) observed that the setting aside for worship of a sacred place is exclusive in itself since the holiness with which it is invested does not permit its habitual use for non-religious purposes at the same time, since this would involve the loss of the sacred character, when taking things into consideration (c.1212). In an individual case, however, the diocesan bishop can permit other uses which are not contrary to the holiness of the place.

To this end, it becomes one of the tasks of the diocesan bishop to appoint a priest rector to ensure that sacred places are not violated by gravely injurious actions done in them with scandal to the faithful, actions which, in the judgment of the local ordinary, are so grave and contrary to the holiness of the place that it is not permitted to carry on worship in them until the damage is repaired by a penitential rite according to the norm of the liturgical books (c.1211). Rightly so as an ecclesiastical authority (c. 1213) the rector freely exercises his powers and functions in the sacred place. The power of the rector implies adherence to norms issued by the diocesan bishop to protect and preserve the sacred place.

Arguably, the vigilance of the rector of Ngome is important given the ecumenical and interreligious disposition of the place of prayer. Whilst he has to be diligent, on the other hand he has to give heed to the words of Pope Francis that rectors of shrines and sacred place are to be hospitable to pilgrims and tourists alike (Pope Francis, 2016).

The rector as a spiritual father guides, teaches and directs people to transit from influence of popular myths to divine realities. The task of teaching is important on the basis that religious experiences of pilgrims and tourists differ for each individual. The central focus of Ngome as a place of prayer for all people is not to be distorted and obscured in any way by contradictory practices to prayer that would eventually injure the sacredness of the place, or negatively impact the divine worship and acts of piety.

Needless to say, at Ngome, means of salvation are supplied more abundantly to all by the diligent proclamation of the Word of God, the suitable promotion of liturgical life and the cultivation of approved forms of popular piety (1234 §1). Given, the sacredness of the place, pilgrims whether in groups or individuals, engage in various prayers and spiritual exercises such as rosary, adoration, singing, etc. In gratitude or to enable pilgrims or tourists to freely express their special intention(s) to the almighty votive offerings of popular art and piety are kept on display in the shrines or nearby places and guarded securely, (c.1234§2). In many places, visitors are encouraged to respect the sanctity of the site, for example, the springs are to be respected to enable individuals to engage in spiritual practices without unnecessary distractions.

Why do pilgrims and tourists flock in numbers to Ngome? One of the areas that pilgrims appreciate at Ngome is the opportunity to receive the Sacrament of Reconciliation/Forgiveness. In African cosmology, reconciliation is a long process as one has to make peace with all parties involved,





which include God, spirits, the living, and the living-dead and other people (Manda, 2017). The embracing of forgiveness involves the reformation of whole communities at a level so deep that collective identities are transformed (Manda, 2017). Citing Daye (2004:62) Manda, puts it that it requires revision of the very myths and narratives that tell a person who they are and who their friends and enemies are (Manda, 2017).

Today, pastors at Ngome spend hours listening to the plights of troubled families, communities and individuals. Psycho-spiritual counselling and exorcism of those possessed by spirits are services generally available at the shrine. Even though rectors of shrines need not be the ones directly ministering such rites, they can employ the services of other ministers. To exorcise in particular, the diocesan bishop is to give permission only to presbyter who has piety, knowledge, prudence, and integrity of life (c.1172§2). Issuance of permission to exorcise is essential because an exorcist is not the only participant in the drama of exorcism (Young, 2016). In this way, safeguarding and protection of good reputation of all people is a right needing to be held in highest esteem (c.220).

A shrine is a house of forgiveness, where each person meets the tenderness of the Father who has mercy on all, excluding none, (Pope Francis, 2016). The sacrament of reconciliation is conducted by ordained priests on daily basis whereby pilgrims are offered an opportunity to tell their stories as they open their hearts to talk to God. Therefore pastoral ministry ought to create safe spaces where individuals, groups and communities can publicly confess and share their wrongs and human rights violations, (Manda, 2017).

Healing is provided mainly in the form of sacrament of the Holy Eucharist as well. The Holy Eucharistic celebration and sacramental dimension of the shrine in general helps to avoid superficiality in the everyday life of pilgrims and tourists, (John Paul III, 2000). The centrality of penance and Holy Eucharist in a shrine has in recent history been developed by pope Francis that the shrine is a sacred place where the proclamation of the Word of God, the celebration of the Sacraments, especially reconciliation and the Eucharist, and the witness of charity express the Church's great commitment to evangelization. It is therefore characterized as a genuine place of evangelization, where from the first proclamation up to the celebration of the sacred mysteries, the powerful action with which God's mercy works in people's lives is made manifest (Pope Francis, 2017).

Ngome as place of prayer is anchored on the Holy Eucharist. Holy mass(es) are celebrated every day and the Blessed Sacrament can be exposed from tabernacle to allow daily adoration. One of other Marian titles in fact Ngome's focal point is "Tabernacle of the Most-High". It is a place of nourishment because the Holy Eucharist is food for earthly pilgrims. Serving Holy Communion is a therapeutic event, which provides comfort in the midst of disruption and crisis (Thesnaar, 2010).

Earlier on, it was noted that pope Francis exhorted that we cannot forget that evangelization is first and foremost about preaching the Gospel to *those who do not know Jesus Christ or who have always rejected him*. Many of them are quietly seeking God, led by a yearning to see his face, even in countries of ancient Christian tradition. All of them have a right to receive the Gospel. Christians have the duty to proclaim the Gospel without excluding anyone (Pope Francis, 2013). Visiting Ngome has led some to conversion, which is as it were, a healing experience similar to an encounter of the apostle Philip with an Ethiopian eunuch who had been a pilgrim to Jerusalem. After Philip had explained the words of scriptures from the prophet Isaiah, the Ethiopian requested to be baptized and he said:

See, here is water! What prevents me from being baptized? And he commanded the chariot to stop, and they both went down into the water,



Philip and the eunuch, and he baptized him. And when they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord carried Philip away, and the eunuch saw him no more, and went on his way rejoicing.<sup>1</sup>

Pope Francis in (2016) observed well that in every person there is a heart in search of God. He carries on to state that pilgrims who arrive at a shrine are often tired, hungry, thirsty, and so often this physical condition reflects that of their state of being. Thus, people in shrines (places of prayer) need to be properly welcomed both materially and spiritually so as to make the visit worthwhile and meaningful.

Being a place of prayer also means it is a place of blessings to all who visit. Pilgrims and tourists are at liberty to raise their hearts to God or request special blessings from priests. Blessings, which are to be imparted first of all to Roman Catholics, can also be given to catechumens and even to non-Catholics unless there is a prohibition of the Church to the contrary (c.1170).

Testimonies have been given relating to the blessings of visiting Ngome Marian shrine, as revealed by the rector of the site. He has received several calls testifying to the blessings and healings received after setting foot at the shrine and by the using of the blessed sanctified water from the springs (Wayne, 2020). This is evidence proven by tourists who visit the place from KwaZulu-Natal within the diocese of Eshowe and beyond. Pilgrims from Lesotho, Botswana, Swaziland, the Democratic Republic of Congo etc. individuals and groups from other dioceses visit the place for an introspective prayer period and blessings. Needless to say it offers concrete awareness of how powerful the place is spiritually. The potential of Marian shrine adds to the statistics of religious tourism as seen by the number of people who come to the place. In fact, the accommodation is never empty, however regulations are in place to sustain the place and to make it easier for the pilgrims to obtain the deep inner peace they desire from their visit to the shrine.

Indeed, all persons even non-Christian believers may receive blessings provided they have proper dispositions (Huels, 2000). It is not only people that obtain blessing but also sacramentals (*items like water, candles, etc.*) are blessed as sacred signs by which especially spiritual effects, are obtained through the intercession of the Church by laying on of hands on those in dire need (c.1166).

## Summary and Conclusion

This paper reveals the concrete awareness of healing and pastoral counseling of visiting Ngome Shrine. Pilgrims are spiritual people seeking spiritually enriching places and this boosts the tourism industry. The Shrine is welcoming to all those who visit it, both Catholic and non-Catholic. Open testimonies have been received from the tourists who have been to the place; some pilgrims have alleged received healing of their infirmities by using the water from the springs and by setting foot to pray at the shrine. Religious tourism is perceived as another form of tourism which could benefit the area and the national industry as a whole because the destination attracts tourists and can potentially attract far more. The tourists visiting pilgrimage sites and time spent at the destination should be seen as value-adding aspects. Ngome Shrine is accommodating all types of tourists and moreover an accommodation facility is provided for those from far away destinations and to those who want to have a silent moment of prayer and bond with the “tabernacle of the most-high; Mary” and receive spiritual healing. A shrine is in essence a house of forgiveness for Christians, where each person meets the tenderness of God the Father who

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<sup>1</sup>English Standard Version Bible, Lk 8: 36-39



has mercy on all, excluding none and exuding immense compassion and grace (Pope Francis, 2016).

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