

The Contributions of Ecclesia in Africa and Africae Munus to Dialogue with Muslims in Nigeria

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Abstract

The Church, after Christ the founder, has always called its members together to ask questions with regard to its future. From the first Council of Jerusalem (cf. Acts 15:1-35) to the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) in Rome, the Church has continuously evaluated her life, examined her mission and intention. All these are in an effort to work in accordance with the life, mission, and intention of Christ. It has sought to resolve issues originating from difficulties and problems from within and without its domain. Through such councils, the Church has always learnt and prepared itself for challenges ahead. A step lower in the ladder, though not unimportant, is the use of Synodal Councils by the Church to resolve or propose meaningful ways for the propagation of the Gospel in particular churches. Therefore, a synod is a council organized for and by particular churches or groups within the Universal Church. This is why there are Diocesan Synods, Synod of Bishops or Synods organized by various Religious Institutes and Organisations. Hence, the call by Pope John Paul II on the feast of Epiphany in 1989 for a special Synod of Bishops for Africa was received with enthusiasm. The Synod eventually took place from April 10 to May 8, 1994, in Rome. The outcome of that synod was the apostolic exhortation, 'Ecclesia in Africa'. In the same vein, the apostolic exhortation, 'Africae munus' of Pope Benedict XVI in 2011 was the result of the second synod of Bishops for Africa in 2009. It is the intention of this paper to view critically the attention paid to Dialogue, especially between Christians and Muslims in Nigeria, as a pastoral response to the Vatican II Council's decree on promoting cordial and sincere interreligious dialogue (cf. *Nostra Aetate*, 2-3).

1. Introduction

The two post-synodal documents – *Ecclesia in Africa* and *Africae Munus* – of Popes John Paul II (1996) and Benedict XVI (2011) respectively point vividly to the contemporary world that God's desire to bring humanity into a peaceful and harmonious family is a continued and continuing project in the history of salvation. This plan of God was made manifest, *ab initio*, in the call of the Patriarchs especially Abraham (cf. Gen 12:1ff) whose patrimony is shared by Jews, Christians and Muslims, and whose optimal manifestation came to fulfillment in the coming of Jesus, the Incarnate Word, "the image of the invisible God, the first born of all creation" (Col 1: 6). Jesus, who was a descendant of Abraham and son of David sent by the Father to restore all things, came and gathered to himself a people which he set apart, a holy nation and a royal priesthood (cf. 1Pt. 2:9) in order to establish the kingdom of God here on earth for the unification of mankind, irrespective of race, colour, language, and religious orientation, 'for all are one in Christ Jesus' (Gal.3:29).

When the work which the Father assigned him was accomplished, he sent the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost to strengthen the apostles to continue the work of evangelization here on earth (Cf. *Lumen Gentium*, LG n.4). In that way, the Church has ever remained faithful to this responsibility in all its ramifications, irrespective of difficulties and obstacles. Moreover, it is evident that the plurality of the modern world and the diversity of culture and mentality have impelled the Church of Christ to explore new means and methods with which to carry out this mission so as to make impact and bear fruit in the world today. Africa as a whole represents this plurality vividly. Thus, in order to fully embark on this mission, the Catholic Church today deems it fit as well as exigent to enter into dialogue with other Christians, brethren of other sects, Jews, Muslims and unbelievers as well, since Christ prays for the unity of all men (Jn 17:12). In Africa as a whole, and in Nigeria particularly, the importance of dialogue with Muslims cannot be over-emphasised, bearing in mind the tremendous respect the latter commands among Africans. To achieve this goal, the Vatican Council II document called *Nostra Aetate* remains a great incentive in the realization of the goal of unity, peace, and mutual co-existence. All are called together to work for this purpose.

2. The Church in Africa and the new responsibility to evangelize

Like other continents, the Church in Africa is not left out in this new and effective trend of evangelization considering the multi-religious atmosphere of the continent. Thus, there has been a great need for the African Church to enhance dialogue, especially with Muslims and members of the African Traditional Religion. This paper will concentrate itself however with discussions on the former. This is because the presently and high level of religious fundamentalism, fanaticism, violence, intolerance and religiously-motivated crises make the issue of dialogue most urgent and necessary. The menace of Boko Haram in Nigeria, Al-Shabaab in Kenya and Somalia are but two cogent examples of the crises bedeviling Africa.

Hence, this paper is aimed at evaluating and accessing the contributions of two very important papal

documents, *Ecclesia in Africa* and *Africae Munus* with regard to Christian- Muslim dialogue in Nigeria, and by implication in Africa. A critical look at the first document, *Ecclesia in Africa* behooves us to note that the Synod Fathers unanimously presents the Church as God's family and they equally acknowledged the designation as an expression of the Church's nature particularly appropriate for Africa. This image, however, emphasizes care for others, solidarity, warmth in human relationships, acceptance, dialogue and trust" (EA 65). It invites Christian families in Africa to become "domestic churches" so as to help their respective communities to recognize that they belong to one single Body and promote the quest for dialogue. It is an image that is important not only for the Church in Africa, but also for the Universal Church at a time when plurality of religions and cultures has become an inevitable factor of its connectivity and mutual inter-dependence. To deprive the African continent and the entire global community is this effort to live harmoniously together is to allow world peace to die a slow death, leaving it at the mercy of extremism and fundamentalism of various kinds.

In this document equally, one can observe John Paul II's concern that despite the modern civilization of the 'global village' in Africa as elsewhere in the world, the spirit of dialogue, peace and reconciliation is far from dwelling in the hearts of everyone. In fact, for him, wars, conflicts, racism and xenophobic attitudes still play too large a role in the world of human relations. With this, he brought together the pastoral insights and proposals of the Synod Fathers for a new evangelization of the African continent.

The second document, *Africae Munus* following from the former dealt with the theme of reconciliation, justice and peace as concrete means towards achieving unity of Africans which can be actualized through dialogue with people of other Christian sects, Muslims, Buddhists, Hinduists, etc. *Africae Munus* is the response to the 57 propositions offered by the synod fathers at the conclusion of the 2009 plenary Assembly. In other words, like *Ecclesia in Africa*, the objective of the exhortation is to address the particular needs of the Church in Africa as determined throughout the course of the African synod (Ann Schneibe, 2011).

Each of these documents was anticipated by the wealth of documentation which was handed on after the sessions on them. These include the *Lineamenta* and the *Instrumentum Laboris* containing the reports drawn up before and after the discussions, the speeches and the summaries prepared by working groups before the actual synod. This formed the background of these documents, which called for a *transformation of theology into pastoral care*, namely, into a very concrete pastoral ministry in which the great perspectives found in sacred scripture and tradition find application in the activity of bishops and priests in specific times and places.

In the course of this paper presentation, therefore, we shall discuss the Church's mission in relation to dialogue as well as the understanding of the Church as a dialoguing Church. Cognizance of the existence of Christian-Muslim dialogue in Nigeria, and the need to enhance it, we shall examine some of the factors that militate against this venture and try to offer propositions towards a better and effective Christian-Muslim dialogue in Nigeria deriving from *Ecclesia in Africa* and *Africae Munus*.

3. The Church's Mission vis-à-vis Dialogue : The Post-Vatican II Impulse

The Church understood as 'Ecclesia' or the assembly of the people of God, enables the people of God to understand herself as an assembly always in need of renewal (*Lineamenta*, Catholic Diocese of Nsukka 2009:6). This is why Christ as the light of the world and the sign of its unity impresses it upon the Church – its visible sign on earth – to continue the work of proclaiming the good news of salvation and leading entire humanity to salvation (Cf. LG. No 1). Dialogue, which is exemplified from the moment of creation among the Trinity (without diminishing its Oneness) in the statement, "let us make man in our own image and likeness" (Gen 1:27) remains a task to be fostered by the Church.

When Jesus came to accomplish his mission on earth, he inaugurated the kingdom of heaven on earth through the preaching of the Good news. Throughout his preaching, he implored the method of dialogue to bring his audience to conversion and repentance. For instance, Jesus' encounter with the Samaritan woman (cf. Jn.4) exemplified his disposition to dialogue with adherents of other religions and even, unbelievers. At this episode, Jesus through dialogue was able to convert not only the Samaritan woman but also many Samaritans, who came to believe in Him.

The Church as the obedient bride of Christ has followed the foot-step of her master and founder in her mission to bring the light of Christ to all men and women through preaching and dialogue. The Church is very much aware that the success and fruitfulness of her mission depends to a great extent on her ability to engage all: Jews, Muslims and unbelievers in a dialogue and through that means, call them to conversion and repentance. This dispositional attitude to dialogue is more urgent than ever, especially in Nigeria today.

Thus, the call to dialogue in the Church has received a new spirit and impulse after the Second Vatican Council which is in itself an Ecumenical Council that sought for dialogue. In that Council, the Church stated with new vigour and enthusiasm the need for dialogue with other Christian sects, Jews, Muslims, and unbelievers. Various documents of the Council promoted and encouraged dialogues at various levels of relationships: *Unitatis Redintegratio* (Decree on Ecumenism), *Nostra Aetate* (Declaration on the Relation of the Church to non-Christian Religions), *Gaudium et Spes* (Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World), *Dignitatis Humanae*

(Religious Liberty), etc. That is, some relevant sections of these documents reiterate and emphasize the necessity of dialogue in the spread of the Gospel. The Council Fathers enumerated the aims and nature of dialogue, basis of dialogue, conditions for dialogue, method of dialogue, subjects for dialogue and forms of dialogue, which will foster a fruitful dialogue in the world today. For instance, it was stated that “the Church... urges her sons to enter with prudence and charity in discussion and collaboration with members of other religions.”(*Nostra Aetate*,n.2). It is a task and a duty which lies upon the Church to courageously embark upon. In the same context, the Council recalled with utmost regret the quarrels and dissensions that had arisen between Christians and Muslims, particularly, and pleaded with all to forget the past, and urging that a sincere effort be made to achieve mutual understanding, for the benefit of all men, to preserve and promote peace, liberty, social justice and moral values. Indeed, the above statement by the Council Fathers reinvigorated the conscious awareness of the Church and her mission vis-à-vis dialogue, which Popes John Paul II and Benedict XVI have endeavoured to realize in the last two decades. Thus, the Church has through their efforts encouraged regional, local, and international synods on the various sections of the globe to promote evangelization, justice, reconciliation, equality, and peace.

4. Background of the Document, *Ecclesia in Africa*

The document, *Ecclesia in Africa*, a Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation of the Holy Father, Blessed John Paul II is the fruit of the four weeks of the Special Assembly for Africa of the Synod of Bishops held from April 10 to May 8, 1994. This special synod was geared towards “a detailed and realistic study of the lights and shadows, the challenges and future prospects of evangelization in Africa on the threshold of the Third Millennium of the Christian faith especially at the very moment when human events seemed to be tempting Africa to discouragement and despair” (EA n.1). The special assembly for Africa of the Synod of Bishops was heavily influenced and motivated by the Second Vatican Council when some African bishops conceived the idea of a form of meeting to discuss the evangelization of the continent of Africa. One of the fruits of this Council was the creation of the Symposium of Episcopal Conferences of African and Madagascar (SECAM) in July-August 1969, during the visit of Pope Paul VI to Uganda.

The special assembly for Africa of the Synod of Bishops chose the theme “the Church in Africa and her evangelizing mission towards the Year 2000: You shall be my witnesses” (Acts 1:8). The theme captures all the various aspects of the evangelizing mission which the Church must take into account at the present time: evangelization, inculturation, dialogue, justice and peace and the means of social communication (EA 16). The Holy Father in the spirit of dialogue stated that he wished to address the Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation in the first place to “Pastors and Lay Catholics and then, to our brothers and sisters of other Christian confessions, to those who profess the great monotheistic religions, in particular, the followers of African traditional religion, and to all people of good will who in one way or another have at heart Africa’s spiritual and material development or who hold in their hands the destiny of this great continent” (EA n.7). This opening statement of the Holy Father captured in its entirety the openness of the Church to corroborate and dialogue with all people of goodwill irrespective of one’s religion or creed. With this dispositional attitude, the Holy Father set out the ground for a new method of evangelization through dialogue.

5. Contributions of the Documents to Dialogue with Muslims in Nigeria

The papal document in line with the venerable tradition laid down by earlier documents, proposes for the benefit of the faithful and men of goodwill a fruitful and effective means to dialogue with Muslims in Nigeria. The document notes that the Synod Fathers were faced with two fundamental questions. How must the Church carry out her evangelizing mission and how can African Christians become ever more faithful witnesses to the Lord Jesus? These questions are still re-echoed today as the Church in Nigeria carries out her evangelizing mission.

In order to respond adequately to these questions, the Synod Fathers identified divisions as a major challenge that the Church in Africa and in Nigeria in particular has faced. To this end, the document suggests an honest dialogue as a remedy to overcoming divisions (cf. EA n. 49). This division which is both *ad intra* and *ad extra* says the division can only be healed through ecumenical dialogue with other churches and ecclesial communities and of dialogue with African traditional religion and Islam (EA n. 49). In the same vein, we would say that for any meaningful and fruitful dialogue with Muslims in Nigeria, each of the parties must come to the dialogue table with sincerity and honesty as the document recommends. The document’s call for the formation of the agents of evangelization can never be undervalued since they would also remain in the vanguard for realizing the goal of authentic dialogue with Muslims and other non-Christian believers. Thus, the duty and honor to proclaim the Gospel which comprises the members of the Body of Christ in its entirety demands a requisite formation for a fruitful evangelization. Since evangelization entails “bringing the Good news into all the strata of humanity, and through its influence transforming humanity from within and making it new” (EA n.54). It requires openness to dialogue through proper formation of the agents of evangelization. In Nigeria today, this formation of the agents of evangelization will not only aid a fruitful evangelization but would also eschew a form of violence or derogatory comments.

In line with this, the decree on Ecumenism suggests that for there to be genuine and fruitful dialogue, the document advocates commitment to dialogue which must embrace all Muslims of goodwill. The documents do this by reminding us Christians and Muslims of our common patrimony, Abraham, in whose faith we all are called to imitate and conform (EA n.66). In the same vein, the document emphasizes that the living God, Creator of heaven and earth and the Lord of history, is the Father of one great human family to which we all belong” (EA n.66). Bearing this in mind, each must bear witness to Him, through our respect for the values and religious traditions of each person, working together for the human progress and development at all levels, especially with Muslims in our own Nigerian and African contexts (cf. *Nostra Aetate*, no.3). Here, the Vatican Council Fathers made the point of similarity vividly clear, thus: *‘The Church has also a high regard for the Muslims. They worship God, who is one, living and subsistent, merciful and almighty, the creator of heaven and earth, who has also spoken to men, they strive to submit themselves without reserve to the hidden decrees of God, just as Abraham submitted himself to God’s plan, to whose faith Muslims eagerly link their own. Although not acknowledging him as God, they worship Jesus as a prophet, his virgin Mother they also honour, and even at times devoutly invoke. Further, they await the Day of Judgment and the reward of God following the resurrection of the dead. For this reason, they highly esteem an upright life and worship God, especially by way of prayer, alms-deeds and fasting. Over the centuries, many quarrels and dissensions have arisen between Christians and Muslims. The sacred Council now pleads with all to forget the past, and urges that a sincere effort be made to achieve mutual understanding; for the benefit of all men, let them together preserve and promote peace, liberty, social justice and moral values. (Nostra Aetate, n.3)*

The recent unanimous attack by Christians and Muslims against legalization of gay marriage in the Nigerian Parliament is a commendable development among Christians and Muslims in raising their voices against unfair and unjust policies and practices, which some global powers supports, and which the document advocates as a common point of evangelizing mission from both religious bodies as true children of Abraham (cf. EA n.66).

For a proper and effective dialogue between Christians and Muslims, the document recommends that each side should respect the principle of religious freedom with all that is involved including external and public demonstration of one’s faith. In this regard, “Christians and Muslims are called to commit themselves to promoting a dialogue free from the risk of false irenicism or militant fundamentalist.” (EA.n.66). These propositions if well taken and digested would contribute immensely and significantly to Christian-Muslim dialogue in Nigeria.

Over and above these, the document calls on Catholics to accept invitations offered to them by believers in other religions and be ready to co-operate in projects undertaken by them for the promotion of integral human development. (EA. n.106). This spirit and attitude towards the progress and development of our society will build a more just and peaceful society in Nigeria, if objectively and sincerely heeded to. In other words, it is a call that is both a duty and responsibility which all must embrace graciously for a better Christian-Muslim dialogue in Nigeria (cf. Nwanaju, I. 2008)

6. The Background of *Africae Munus*

In re-affirming the mission of the Church in Africa, that she may truly be the “Salt of the Earth” and “light of the world” (Matt 5: 13-14), the Holy Father, Pope Benedict XVI in the Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation renewed and continued the call of *Ecclesia in Africa*. This particular document follows from the dictates of “*Ecclesia in Africa*”, discerning the fundamental structures of the Church’s mission in the African continent, a mission which aspires to reconciliation, justice and peace. According to the document, it is inspired by “faith working through love” (Gal 5:6). The African continent is in itself made up of a variety of religions, languages, cultures and ethnic groups and as such, there is the need to bring about a just social order which cuts across ethnic and religious lines. Most importantly, the document offers insights into Christian dialogue with other abiding religions in Africa namely, African Traditional Religion, Islam among many others.

In discussing the document, Andrea Gagliard Lucci highlighted the image of the hand as the perfect summary of the speech. “Just look at the hands and you will find out that each finger is essential and their unity makes a hand.” A cordial relationship between cultures and religions will pave way for a harmonious living among people of other religions, faith and nationalities thereby emphasizing the respect for the rights of others, what they believe and what they represent.

Based on the aforementioned facts, *Africae Munus* rests solidly on the respect for the human person - that “everyone should look upon his neighbor without any exception as another self (GS n. 27). As a matter of fact, this is what all men desire and we can immediately recall the words of Jesus in the Gospel, “Do unto others what you would want done to you” (Matt 7:12). This powerful statement of Jesus which in moral terminology is termed the first level of conscience called synderesis, is applicable to all men, Christians, Muslims, traditional worshippers, Jews, Hindus etc. This, immediately, arouses also the emphasis of the Gospel on dialogue and good interpersonal relationship among individuals in the world.

7. Contributions of *Africae Munus* to Christian-Muslim Dialogue

Since Christian and Muslim communities are made up of families, *Africae Munus* highlights the importance of family as “the first and indispensable unit which nurtures peace and strengthens dialogue. The family needs to be protected and defended so that it may offer society the service expected of it, that of providing men and women... a social fabric of peace and harmony (AM n. 43). This is because the end point of every dialogue is always to ensure understanding between the dialoguing parties which leads to peace. As a result, Christians and Muslims should emphasize religious tolerance at the family level, bearing in mind the importance of this fundamental stage.

One should also think that by highlighting the rich African heritage, enshrined in the African concept of family, respect for elders, men, women and even the young people, the Holy Father wishes that these be integrated into our human relationship. In fact, there should be an intensified effort to make these rich African values impact positively on the dialogue between Christians and Muslims.

The document underlines the fact that peace in Africa, just as it obtains in other cultures is conditioned by interreligious relations. (AM n.88). As a working principle, it renews the call of *Nostra Aetate* in affirming the Church’s high regard for our brothers and sisters, who are Muslims. This is why, “The Church has a high regard for Muslims. They worship God, who is one, living and subsistent, merciful and almighty, the creator of heaven and earth...” (NA n. 3). It is rooted in the fact that Christians and Muslims share a common patrimony in their belief in one God, honour for Jesus (though not as the son of God but as a prophet for the Muslims), Virgin Mary and Abraham. Therefore, *Africae Munus* makes it clear that, if all of us who believe in one God desire to promote reconciliation, justice and peace, we are already working together to banish any form of discrimination, intolerance and religious fundamentalism (cf. AM n.94). There is, therefore, a clarion call in the document for the spirit of brotherhood between Christians and Muslims since both are of the Abrahamic religion. Above all, and among other things, share a belief in judgment, reward and resurrection. Other points of unity are our common practice of an upright life, worship of God especially by way of prayer, alms-deed and fasting. The great task lies in discovering and strengthening our points of convergence and appreciation of our points of divergence as different coloration of one reality.

The valuable opinions and views of knowledgeable faithful and adherents of both sides should be given a great consideration. This is because it is only those who are well versed in natural wisdom, possess strong religious and spiritual backgrounds, as well as solid academic enlightenment that can enter into fruitful dialogue. If the elites remain faithful to their calling as leaders of thought in the society, then they are the ones who would engage in the dialogue with a view to discovering the real convergence and divergence between the two faiths. In this regard, the Second Vatican Council taught that the Church “urges her sons and daughters to enter with prudence and charity into discussion and collaboration with members of other religions.” (AM no. 92). But this is not always the case, thus a myriad of difficulties in realizing the objectives of *Ecclesia in Africa* and *Africae Munus*.

8. The Bane of Christian-Muslim Dialogue in Nigeria

Nigeria has been described variously in terms of its religiosity: either as deeply religious, or even as the most religious country in the world. Whatever is the basis for such a description, the fact remains that Nigerians have a high sense of religious belief, though sometimes very superficial. This, ordinarily, should have been a compliment for Nigeria based on the social function of religion, but this is hardly the situation. According to Anthony Etuk, the embarrassing contrasting experiences of man’s inhumanity to man in the name of religion speak eloquently of this sad situation, such as the various cases of religious and ethnic hostilities. For instance, over the years, the Christian-Muslim relationship in Nigeria has been one of a fractured nature. In his words, “Religion in Nigeria has conversely constituted itself into God’s military agent on earth which has hound people like mad dogs...”

The effects of the pitched battles between the two religions are felt both in the short run and the long run. As a major factor breaching the peace of Nigeria, several debates and discussions have been held in its wake and indeed, remains the concern of this discussion. This becomes very urgent especially in the face of Boko Haram and its terrorist impunities against both the civilians and the military alike. The question on the lips of so many people is: how did Nigeria come to this level of religious extremism, in spite of its acclaimed religiosity and plurality of cultures, which should have been a good balance for its mutual co-existence? A few points could enlighten us better on the causes of poor dialogical relations among the people.

9. Poor Religious Education

It is a fact that some of the young people of both the Christian and Muslim blocks are either uninformed or misinformed by their fanatical fundamentalist leaders. This results in religious intolerance on the part of the faithful and as a matter of concern, on the part of the young people who are the future leaders. Therefore, those who do not profess faith in their kind of religion must be converted by all means or made to face difficult times. Here, dialogue is not an issue at all because each side sees the other as followers of what one would describe as “defective religion”. As hard as it is to believe, this has resulted in increased number of home-grown terrorists. The Boko haram experience is an evident example. Nigeria has, therefore, continued to experience attacks and reprisal attacks

all in the name of religion.

10. Lack of Proper Knowledge of the Tenets of Islam and Christianity

Poor religious education naturally results to lack or poor knowledge of the tenets of these religions. It has been emphasized as an obvious fact that the Jews, Christians and Muslims are people of the Abrahamic religion and as such, have a common patrimony. This is clearly seen in some of the names they answer. In describing this, the Israeli Prime Minister had this to say about Christians and Muslims, during the United Nations' Summit in New York in 2012 "you call him Ibrahim, while we call him Abraham." Despite this seeming relationship, it is a regrettable fact to note that many of the adherents of the two religions are lacking greatly in this knowledge. Due to this poor knowledge, some fanatics and religious bigots make erroneous projections and create self-styled principles of how and what they want their religion to be thereby, causing divisions and dissensions among themselves resulting to a lot of killings and loss of lives.

11. Lack of Openness

In order to ensure a rewarding and fruitful dialogue, there should be a mindset and attitude. This call is a call for an open mind. Openness here is a call to receive each other in charity and respect, bearing in mind that no one is an embodiment of all wisdom. It is sad to note that the opposite experience is the case in Nigeria. The Christian-Muslim dialogue in Nigeria has always been marred by this very factor. The situation has always been what one would describe as an attempt to dialogue, each side holding tenaciously to its own beliefs, making little or no room to accommodate the views of others which will lead to open-minded acceptance.

12. Lack of Sincerity and Honesty among the dialogical partners

In every human undertaking that involves interaction between two people, one cannot ignore sincerity as necessary ingredients to smoothen relationship. The Nigerian history is rife with many cases of religious wars. Time and again there has been call by the government of different dispensation for dialogue, time and again, this has yielded no result and one begins to wonder how sincere was the call in the first place. In answer to this, we turn our attention to the nature of man, who while willing the opposite may accept a particular proposal. This is what one would call pretended sincerity. This in itself is a very big problem to grapple with in Nigeria. This ugly trend is also seen among some of the religious leaders who in the public will condemn religious violence but support it indirectly.

13. The Menace of Boko Haram to Dialogue and Mutual Co-existence

Anyone conversant with the happenings in Nigeria since July 2009 (Kukah 2010; Anyanwu, 2010; Nwanaju 2010) would agree with the reality that the country is far from realizing the efforts of the Second Vatican Council in its clarion call for the promotion of dialogue between religions, especially between Christians and Muslims in Nigeria. The seeming defeat of *Nostra Aetate* seems to have been extended to the serious efforts made also by Pope John Paul II and Pope Benedict XVI to enhance cordiality and mutual co-existence between Christians and Muslims in Africa in general, and Nigeria in particular, through the two post-synodal apostolic exhortation under our consideration in this paper. Instead of harmony and peace, the activities of Boko Haram have pointed to a high-class terrorism in defiance to the call for reconciliation, justice, and peace, which was the central message of *Africae munus*. In conjunction with some acclaimed international terrorist groups like Al-Qaeda and Al-Shabaab, Boko Haram under the false religious auspices of Islam can be unequivocally termed a terrorist group. The crimes listed by the United Nations under this category would place Boko Haram properly.

Thus, the United Nations' Convention Against Terrorism, tagged 'Transnational Organised Crime' (The Palermo Convention), Article 3(2), which has also condemned terrorism as a serious crime against humanity, can be seen as an indictment of extremist religious groups like Boko Haram in their intercontinental heinous atrocities, which Jakkie Cilliers (2003) has conceptualized as follows:

crimes committed in more than one state;

crimes committed in one state but has a substantial part of its preparation, planning, direction or control taking place in another country;

crimes committed in one state but involves an organized group that engages in activities in more than one state, or crimes committed in one state, but has substantial effects in another state.

Nigeria is from all indications very vulnerable to terrorist groups and attacks, and the Boko Haram is presently at the vanguard of this vulnerability. Since its open declaration for crime in the name of religion and fight against justice, peace and reconciliation as a veritable path for growth and global sustenance, Boko Haram has killed not less 1,000 people. In fact, Boko Haram has rampaged the North and extended its tentacles to many parts of Nigeria in such a way that one does not really know where its members are hiding. Anayochukwu Agbo (2011:48) articulates the situation thus, "Boko Haram is on the rampage in the North and gaining notoriety everyday because of lack of competent security structure, infrastructure and operatives, coupled with the underlying political

connection”.

14. Evaluation: Some Pastoral Challenges

Both *Ecclesia in Africa* (nn.65-67) and *Africae Munus* (nn.88-94) have endeavoured to highlight the importance of dialogue as integral parts of the evangelizing life of the Church, especially in the African context in general, and in Nigeria in particular. Theoretically, it sounds very exciting. But in reality, dialogue, especially with Muslims, especially in Nigeria is a herculean task, especially because of the factors mentioned above. *Africae Munus* (no.94) did not hide the fact that the ‘Muslim Presence on the African continent’ is a complex situation. It is complex because whereas in some countries, good relations exist between Christians and Muslims; in others, the local Christians are merely second-class citizens, and Catholics from abroad, religious and lay, have difficulty obtaining visas and residence permits. Continuing, the documents highlights the insufficient distinction between the religious and the political spheres in some other countries. In others also, there is a clear-cut climate of hostility. These situations and conditions make dialogue and relations difficult, if not impossible. In Nigeria, the long-standing effort to impose the Sharia on Nigerians cannot be forgotten as a hot-bed of religious crisis, starting from the time a one-time military dictator, General Ibrahim Babangida (rtd) secretly registered Nigeria as a member of the Organization for Islamic Conference (OIC) to the current violent destruction of life and property by the Islamist sect called Boko Haram in an effort to force every Nigerian to become a Muslim.

It cannot be denied that both Synods have contributed immensely in the promotion of Evangelization in the poly-typical circumstance of Africa, through a diagnosis of peculiarly African problems and issues (Aguwuom 1994:6). But one is tempted to imagine, if not argue that the reality on the continent points to the fact that the best result has been the issuance of broad guidelines and general orientations, aimed at ensuring the presence of the Church in Africa. It is another thing to know whether the two synods have really impacted on the actual life of the people in all its ramifications. The challenges of hunger and global marginalization seem to negate the spiritual and religious efforts to make Africans ardent agents of Christian evangelization and promoters of harmony through dialogue and mutual cooperation with members of other religions, especially Islam. Moreover, it does seem that the synods have not succeeded in proffering solutions to the long-standing wounds inflicted by colonialism and slavery – a point which Muslims constantly use against every effort to make them convinced dialogue partners. Although, the majority of the Muslim counterparts in dialogue forget the evils perpetrated by their Jihadists and missionary warriors, they seem to capitalize on the argument that the main actors in the impoverization of Africa were Christians from Europe and America to make every overture for dialogue by Nigerian and African Christians suspect, if not a ploy to further the enslavement of the continent. Perhaps, this is the basis of the current struggle by Boko Haram in Nigeria to categorise everything ‘western’ as ‘fake’, sinful’ and ‘abhorrent’. But, it would be wrong to toe their bizarre line of thought in the wake of the enormous opportunities offered in the global village for self-improvement and mutual inter-dependence. One should also not forget the consistent effort made by the United Nations Organization to promote Human Rights and emancipation of all peoples from every kind of enslavement. Again, if Africa suffered so much in the hands of the Western world so many centuries ago, how could one explain the current spate of internal enslavement of Africans through the majority of its own leaders by way of embezzlement of public fund, corruption, dictatorship, and suppression of human rights and values?

When the first special Synod of Bishops for Africa was announced by the late Pope John Paul II in 1989, there was an indication that the aim of the synod was going to be the promotion of pastoral and organic solidarity in the whole of Africa and the surrounding islands. However, it remains a problem that there were not really, or rather, hardly, any specifications about the synod. According to Madubuko (1994:7), “the result was much speculation around the synod and divergent expectation”. An example was the fact that it was taken for granted by many that the synod was going to hold on the African soil or continent. It has also remained an excitement that the declension of the nouns in the Papal pronouncement read “African Synod” where they should read “Synod for Africa”(7). The holding of the Synod in Rome has not been seen as particularly and pastorally beneficial for Africa as a whole. However, to hinge the inadequate pastoral impact of the Synod for Africa because it was held in Rome is to exaggerate the obvious, bearing in mind that there was not anything really unusual in the venue of the synod, considering the Catholic Church and its traditional structure. For instance, the synod for Europe held in 1991, three years before that of Africa, was equally held in Rome to deliberate on the significance and consequences of the collapse of Euro-communism for Europe and for the Church. Two previous synods for Ukrainian Bishops and Dutch Bishops were also both held in Rome in 1980. The economic concern associated with the participation of almost 157 bishops from Africa cannot in the final analysis be swept under the carpet if Africa is really regarded as disadvantaged from many points of view.

Like the first synod in 1994, the second in 2009 was indeed a great opportunity for the exercise of collegiality, as well as expression of genuine communion. Indeed, they were an indication of the expression of the involvement of the administrative apparatuses (about twenty-four department heads of the Roman Curia) of the Universal Church were dutifully employed and used for the good of the church and humanity, represented by Africa as a continent.

On a very concrete note, it can be said that the two synods have really provided the African Church, represented by its bishops, priests, religious, and laity, the opportunity to tell or narrate their own story, their own struggles, their own challenges, and the make proposals for their own future. Particularly, the expression of the readiness to enter into genuine dialogue with their Muslim brethren is a landmark in the growth of the African Church. One observes also the prominence given to the possibility for dialogue with Muslims and other believers in Africa in the two post-Synodal exhortations, *Ecclesia in Africa* (nn.65-67) and *Africae Munus* (nn.88-94).

The two synods present a great challenge also to the church leadership in Africa, obliging them to promote the welfare of the people, as well as giving good examples interpersonal and interreligious cooperation and dialogue. This means that the hierarchy should not allow itself to be manipulated by the political class who might be out to undermine the power of the church to criticize their negative roles in inflaming the tempers of division and disintegration, as recently manifested in the support given to the Islamist sect called Boko Haram to foster religious bigotry.

From the actual situation in the seminaries in Nigeria where future priests and ecclesiastical leaders are trained and formed, there is very little indication that the curriculum of studies have much place for the section on Dialogue and interaction with other religions in the country and in the continent as a whole. With the paucity of genuine information in this regard, one is tempted to assert that the impact of the two synods would remain on paper, or merely, speculative for a long time to come. In other words, how can the seminaries in Nigeria lack an objective programme to understand how to live existentially and realistically in an environment where plurality of religious beliefs cannot be ignored without serious consequences. This might what real inculturation, which the Second Vatican Council and the two synods for Africa have endeavoured to bring into limelight.

15. Conclusion

The two Synods for Africa in 1994 and 2009 have shown a great stride in recognizing the effort of Africans to evangelize their continent, and share equally in the Body of Christ, the Church. They have made most concrete the expression of incarnating the Gospel values, as well as the obstacles inhibiting their promotion on the African soil. On his own part, Pope Benedict XVI has made some concrete proposals in the post-synod exhortation, 'Africae Munus': increased promotion of devotional reading of Sacred Scripture with the objective of building fraternal community; a continental Eucharistic Congress to celebrate the fraternity established by the Eucharistic, which transcends linguistic, tribal, and ethnic differences; to elicit suggestions from local Churches for new saints; to encourage the bishops to support SECAM (Symposium of Episcopal Conferences of Africa and Madagascar); to promote annual celebrations of Reconciliation Days or Weeks, ideally in Advent or Lent; and SECAM's promotion of a continental year of Reconciliation (in conjunction with the Holy See). It is good to urge Africa to promote reconciliation, justice, and peace. But it is also appropriate to discourage the basic roots of these problems of conflict, injustice, and disharmony, especially, as seen in the unjust structures of colonialism and continued exploitation of Africa through various socio-economic conspiracies and political manoeuvres. In fact, the invisible hands sowing and watering the seeds of discord in Africa should be courageously addressed and confronted, whether from within or outside. This would be a practical means of reducing the negative effects of such groups like Boko Haram and Al-Qaeda on the realization of effective evangelization in Africa. This would be justice. This would make the Gospel fruitful on the African soil, especially through dialogue at all levels.

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