

THE CATHOLIC CHURCH AND INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE: THE ONITSHA ARCHDIOCESAN EXPERIENCE

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Abstract

The paper analyzed the role of the Catholic Church in fostering interreligious dialogue, recognizing the importance of fostering mutual understanding and cooperation among different faith traditions. This commitment is deeply rooted in Catholic teaching and has been reinforced by key Church documents and papal initiatives. Some of Church documents on interreligious dialogue discussed in this work included Nostra Aetate, Lumen Gentium, Gaudium et Spes, Ad Gentes, Ecclesian Suan and Evangelii Nuntiandi among others. The Church recognizes the value of other religions and seeks to foster respectful exchanges while upholding its own doctrinal integrity. The study discovered that while interreligious dialogue presents challenges, such as theological differences and historical tensions, it remains a crucial aspect of the Church's commitment to ecumenism and global harmony. By embracing dialogue, the Catholic Church continues to work towards building bridges of understanding in an increasingly pluralistic world. At local level, the Catholic Diocese of Onitsha has been effective in engaging interreligious dialogue. Despite the challenges of religious tensions, doctrinal differences, and occasional conflicts, the Catholic Archdiocese of Onitsha continues to uphold dialogue as a vital tool for fostering social cohesion.

Keywords: Church, Dialogue, Interreligious Dialogue, Onitsha Archdiocese.

Introduction

Interreligious dialogue is the respectful exchange of ideas, beliefs, and experiences between people of different religious traditions. The Catholic Church has long been engaged in interreligious dialogue as part of its mission to promote peace, mutual understanding, and cooperation among different faith traditions. Rooted in the teachings of the Second Vatican Council, the Church recognizes the value of other religions and seeks to foster respectful exchanges while upholding its own doctrinal integrity. Dialogue involves two or more persons and shades of opinion. According to Hornby (2015), dialogue is a formal discussion between two groups especially when they are trying to solve a problem or end a disagreement. Interreligious dialogue on the other hand is the coming together of people of different faith for a mutual understanding and respect that allows them to live and cooperate with each other in spite of their differences. This occurs at both individual and institutional levels in which each party is expected to remain true to her own beliefs while respecting the rights of the other to practise their faith freely. It is a human interaction and relationship that can be formal or informal and a part of the daily lives of the people of different cultures and religions in which tensions between them are the most evident. This includes Christians, Muslims and traditionalists among others. Interreligious dialogue is also defined as all positive and constructive interreligious relations with individual and communities of faith which are directed at mutual understanding and enrichment in obedience to truth and respect for freedom (Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue and the Congregation for the Evangelization of People, 1991).

Arinze (1990) describes interreligious dialogue as “a meeting of heart and mind between followers of various religions; their communication at the religious level. It is a walking

together towards truth and projects of common concern; a religious partnership without complexes and without hidden agenda or motives” (p. 162). He further explains that dialogue and proclamation as two indispensable aspects of the complex reality of the Church’s mission includes lives of witness to Christ, social service, human promotion and liberation, conversion, liturgical life, prayer, contemplation, active apostolate and ecumenism. For the Church therefore, dialogue is not a mere academic exercise; philosophical or theological. Dialogue and proclamation are also complementary because in all dialogue, Christ must be proclaimed by his faithful in obedience to the missionary mandate contained in all the versions of the Gospel (cf. Mtt. 28: 18- 20; Mk. 16: 13- 16; Lk.24:26-48; Jn.20:21; 1 Cor. 9: 16).

The Catholic Church recognizes the importance of fostering mutual understanding and cooperation among different faith traditions. This commitment is deeply rooted in Catholic teaching and has been reinforced by key Church documents and papal initiatives. At local level in the Catholic Archdiocese of Onitsha, the Church has been effective in fostering interreligious dialogue. Hence the purpose of this study is to explore both the Catholic Church efforts in interreligious dialogue particularly in Onitsha Archdiocese. The study will analyze some of the documents of Vatican Council II as well as recent papal encyclicals on interreligious dialogue. Areas for further effective interreligious dialogue in Onitsha Archdiocese will also be explored.

Kinds of Dialogue

1. **Theological Dialogue:** Theological Dialogue or Discourse which takes place on academic or official levels between experts, theologians and religious leaders aims at clarifying issues, creating understanding and removing prejudices. It also aims at clarifying what each partner believes in order to understand their spiritual values and differences better.
2. **Dialogue of Religious Experience:** This involves inter-faith prayers (Arinze, 1990) and occasions for studying the spirituality and religious texts of each other faiths. This also requires a level of expertise that would help to represent the religious sensibility of each group.
3. **Dialogue of Common Action:** This is a kind of dialogue in which people of different faiths work together to promote and preserve the virtues of peace, liberty, social justice and moral value.
4. **Dialogue of Life:** in which people thrive to live in an open, neighbourly spirit. Admittedly, this can be difficult in a common background and worst in diverse backgrounds. It therefore requires perseverance, patience, the willingness to listen to and understand people’s world views.

The Dialogues of Life and Common Action evidently do not require any special expertise but an openness to interact with the other in a spirit of respect and cooperation. They are therefore witnessed through actions in human attitudes and dispositions towards each other.

Interreligious dialogue aims at achieving increased mutual understanding and good relations, identifying causes of tensions in religious settings, building understanding and confidence to overcome further tensions, breaking down the barriers and stereotypes that lead to distrust, suspicion, and bigotry. By interreligious dialogue, the Church puts herself as an instrument into the hands of Divine Providence and in God’s working out of his own mystery of salvation. In such a dialogue, the Church discovers the working of God in the other religions, elements of truth and grace, seed of the word, seeds of contemplation, elements which are true and good, precious things both religious and human, ways of truth which illumine all mankind and

preparation for the Gospel (Arinze, 1990).

Interreligious dialogue therefore is challenged by breakdown in communication, suspicion, lack of interest, resistance to dialogue by some Christians and other believers, hidden agenda, religious extremism, divided Christianity, lack of trained personnel, time and finance, among others.

Church's Documents on Interreligious Dialogue

Here we will explore both the Conciliar and Post-conciliar documents of Vatican Council II as well as recent papal encyclicals on interreligious dialogue.

1. *Nostra Aetate*

This is one of the documents widely discussed after the Vatican Council and received wide applause around the world because it deviated from the tradition of comparing Christianity with other religions to discuss what unites all religions namely, the fact that all human beings belong to the same race and have the same origin - God, whose providence and salvific plan embraces all men (NA 1). The document therefore recognizes the salvific value of other religions. Here the church does not reject anything found as holy and true in these religions even when their practices, lifestyles, laws and theories are different from what the church believes and teaches. She looks at them with sincere respect because she sees in all of them the reflection of the rays of that truth that enlightens all. Since all are children of the same God, illumined by the rays of the same truth, Christians are asked to keep good relationships with people of other religions. So the church encourages her children to engage in dialogue and cooperation with other religions, with prudence and love, while witnessing to the Christian faith and life. The Church also encourages all the faithful to recognize, protect and promote the spiritual and moral goodness, social and cultural values found in these religions (NA 2).

Being created in the image of God; we are to regard any other human being as our brother or sister or we will not be able to address God as the Father of all. Scripture testifies that the relationship man has towards God and fellow human beings is inseparable (1 Jn 4:8) and so the Council condemns showing discrimination on the basis of caste, religion, colour, and the standard of life. She asks Christians to establish friendly relationships with people of other religions (1 Pet 2:22) and try to live in peace with every person. It is only then will the Christians really become the children of the heavenly father (NA 5). The church also invites all especially the Jews and Muslims to return back from the way of past crises, enmity and crusade to the way of peace and brotherliness of tomorrow. This is an invitation by the council to the three biblical religions to work together for the good of the world based on mutual trust and collaboration.

2. *Lumen Gentium*

This document on the Church and her duties in this world reminds us that as an earthly reality Church is relative, affirming that it is in the Church instituted by Christ that his presence is spiritually found and becoming a member of the Church is imperative. The document however states that becoming a member of the body of Christ alone cannot save one. As affirmed by the Holy Scriptures and tradition, the pilgrim church is necessary for eternal salvation because there is only one mediator and one way to salvation - Christ. Christ is present amidst us through his body, the church. Those who do not exist in love and those who are present in the church externally alone will not be saved just because they are members of the church but will be liable to severe judgment.

In this document the openness of the Church to other religions is expressed in its description as the People of God. Those who have not accepted the good news are related to the People of God in various ways; because they proclaim God the creator, they are also included in his plan of salvation. God is not far from those who search him in his shadows and images because it is God who gives life and energy and everything that they require. God simply wants all men to be saved. Therefore those who have not known the gospel of Christ and his Church by no fault of theirs but searches for God with a sincere heart and tries to fulfill the will of God revealed through their conscience by the Grace of God, can certainly attain salvation. By including those who do good and fear God among the People of God (besides those who become members of the Church through baptism), the criterion of salvation goes beyond the external boundaries of the religion. Furthermore, including those who live submissive to the will of God according to the prompting of one's conscience, and those who seek the Lord through image and symbols among the People of God, opens up the possibility of the Church working together for the salvation of mankind, not only with all people of other religions but also with all people of goodwill.

3. *Gaudium et Spes*

In this document, the Council takes the approach of including in the salvific plan, not only those who do religious research, but those who through the material branches of knowledge become the seekers of truth. The reason for it is the realization that God is the source of both science and faith and the conviction that it is same spirit of God that is reflected in created things is in the human beings who also are his creation.

Anybody who enters into the depth of truth with courage and humility, even if he not aware of it, is being led by God, who has given existence to all. Hence the attitude of some that science and faith are contradicting is a deplorable approach. Even when many reasons are beings pointed out for the good and just person and communities working in material and spiritual areas besides the visible Church, would be saved. Even though it is still not clear for the council how those who have not received baptism would be saved, this does not lead them to take a negative stance. The Council Fathers preferred to take a positive and imaginative approach for the way God and the work of His Spirit is not always conceivable to the human reason. Christ died for all. The inner call of every human person is one and divine. Hence we have to believe that the possibility of everybody participating in the paschal mystery is given by the Holy Spirit in a way that is conceivable only to God (GS 22).

4. *Ad Gentes*

In this document, while the Council considers evangelization as the fundamental obligation of the Church, she also acknowledges that in other religions and cultures there is the presence of God, his touch of grace and rays of lights. The universal plan of God for salvation of mankind is not carried out solely in a secret manner but in the minds of men, nor by their efforts even religious, through which they in many ways seek God in an attempt to touch him and find him. Though God is not far from any of us, their efforts need to be enlightened and corrected. Although in the loving providence of God, they lead one to the true God and can be a preparation for the gospel. The Council expects Christians to deal with others in mutual respect and love to give effective witness to Christ. They have to consider themselves as genuine members of the society in which they live. They have to know closely their national, cultural and religious traditions and search with respect and joy, the hidden seeds of God inherent in them. Differing from the old concept that there is no salvation outside the Church, Vatican II reiterates that in other religions there is the salvific presence of God, and that they are the pointers to the true God. The Council has put an end to the thinking that the church has the

exclusive right over the salvific grace of God by making it clear that God according to his will makes the salvific grace available to the people living in different cultures, traditions and religions. While maintaining this broad attitude, the Church does not teach that the other religions and their cultures and traditions are full in themselves and self-salvific. Neither does the Council say that Christ and his Church are not necessary any longer. She rather sees salvific values in other religions. For those who listen to their conscience and live according to the good and just values in their religions, they without their knowledge receive grace which is given through the Church in a way known to God alone. Thus the uniqueness of Christ and the oneness of the Church together with the openness to other religions are in a balanced way blended in the teaching of the Council.

5. Ecclesiam Suam

This is the first encyclical written by Pope Paul VI and deals with the basic attitude that church should have towards other religions. The Pope encourages an approach based on friendly dialogue with other religions. The Pope presents it not as a need for diplomatic relationship but as an expression of the broad and all-embracing heart to God inviting all mankind to salvation. The Pope speaks here of different levels of dialogues. The first level of dialogue is a broad one that includes the whole mankind. Here the subject of dialogue could be anything that touches man and we can have dialogue with anyone including rationalists, atheists and scientists. Hence the dialogue need not be Theo-centric but aims at the progress and development of the world. The second level includes every person that believes in God. Here dialogue is done with people of different religious traditions; a sharing of the spiritual richness of people of different religions leads them to work together in search of God and spiritual fulfillment. In the third level, the Pope speaks of an exchange of ideas between different church groups. The aim of this dialogue is that Christians, who believe in the message of salvation through Jesus Christ and who is united in him, be able to examine the depth of their faith and become ardent witnesses to their faith via unity. The Church besides acknowledging the moral and spiritual values inherent in other religions therefore, desires to work in collaboration with them in various fields such as nation-building, protection of human rights, religions freedom and education.

6. Evangelii Nuntiandi

This apostolic letter was published in 1975 by Pope Paul VI. Here he deals with the theology of other religions from the background of the apostolic works (evangelization) of the Church. The Pope while depicting evangelization as an innate duty of the Church, also exhorts Christians to respect the religious traditions of the people of the place where the Church reaches with the apostolic duty and right. The Church greatly respects and values non-Christian religions and their traditions, life style and faith because the vibrancies of the search of God that is continued since millions of years can be echoed in those religions. This document upholds a proclamation of faith that is rooted in respect and tolerance (No. 53). The Pope observes the salvific values found in the scriptures of other religions and points out that they are preparation for the Gospel and that seeds of the word of God can be found in them (No. 53). This idea is the continuation of the theology of Vatican II council on other religions.

7. Redemptor Hominis

This is the first encyclical of Pope John Paul II. Here the Pope aims at presenting Christ as the universal savior of the humankind. While firmly upholding Christ as the Savior of the world, there is a strong appeal to continue the friendly approach to the people of other religions. The Pope points out the advantages Christians will have by engaging in interreligious dialogue. He exhorts Christians to be open to recognize and accept the spiritual richness found in other religions through interaction. The Pope advises Christians that the universal savior hood of

Christ is to be proclaimed with due respect to other religions. It is the Holy Spirit working in the depths of human hearts and blowing where it pleases. Evangelization is not eradication but perfecting and building up in a new way.

8. Dialogue and Mission

It was on the Pentecost day of 1984 that the Pontifical Council for Non-Christian Religions, known since 1988 as Pontifical Council for Inter-Religions Dialogue (PCID), brought out the document called Dialogue and Mission. The aim of this document was to place interreligious dialogue within the sphere of evangelization. It emphasizes that life witness, prayerful and contemplative life, works aimed at the development and progress of humankind, fight against poverty and injustice, dialogue with other religions, proclamation and catechesis are some of the elements of evangelization (No. 13).

The document presents another important thought that the church is a community, together with other religions, journeying towards the perfection of the kingdom of God. It is therefore the duty of the Church to bring unity of human kind, in the journey toward the kingdom of God. Though many of these religions are different from Christian values, they deserve respect from every Christian, with dialogue as a way of reaching them (No. 26).

9. *Dominum et Vivificantem*

This encyclical was published by Pope John Paul II, on May 18, 1986. Here he deals with the various and broad spheres of the works of the Holy Spirit. He opines that we cannot limit our spiritual quest and search within the history of 2000 years from the birth of Christ. We have to travel to the agile and active presence of the spirit from the beginning of the world especially from the time of the old covenant. In the spirit of Vatican II, he talks about the workings of the Holy Spirit beyond the external and visible boundaries of the Church. Since Christ died for all (Rom 8:32) and because the final end of every man is God, the Holy Spirit, in a way conceivable to God alone, enables every person to participate in the paschal mystery of Christ (No. 53).

10. Pope John Paul II's Talk to the Roman Curia

Pope John Paul II gave a significant talk on 22nd December, 1986 to the Roman Curia on interreligious dialogue. This was given immediately after the prayer meeting held at Assisi by the representatives of all religions on 27th October, 1986. After this meeting there were some doubts in the minds of some members of the Curia whether Christians could pray together with people of other religions. Then the Pope replies by stating the fundamental unity of mankind as evident from creation: The Triune God; Father, Son and Holy Spirit created humans as man and woman, in his own image and likeness. Since the origin of mankind is from God, the entire mankind is a large family. All are called to the same goal. Above and beyond all differences and divisions, all men are united together in Christ. All these realities lead to the great mystery of the basic unity of all mankind. So the children of the Church should be ready to react positively and deal creatively with the people of other religions. In this talk, the Pope above all upholds the universal presence of the Holy Spirit; His presence in every man and his quest for God. All genuine prayers prompt all people to awaken the presence of the Holy Spirit indwelling in them. So when people of different religions pray together, all are awakened into the same spiritual awareness and divine experience.

11. *Redemptoris Missio*

This encyclical was produced by Pope John Paul II on 7th December, 1990. This document aims at removing the doubts that arose in the area of evangelization due to the interreligious dialogue with a positive mission of the Church. The dialogue between different religions is a part of the

duty of evangelization. The intimate relations between dialogue and evangelization and the uniqueness of each of these functions are to be undoubtedly maintained. The false thinking that one is to be replaced with the other and the wrong interpretations of them are to be avoided. Besides, through the ordinary way instituted by Christ for salvation i.e. the Church, the people of other religions can also receive grace and salvation brought by Christ through other means. However, the invitation of God to faith and baptism prepared for all cannot be neglected. Even while portraying dialogue and proclamation as two mutually connected forms of evangelization, the encyclical presents the salvific nature of other religions. God wants to share the fullness of his love and revelation with people of other religions. God does not hesitate to reveal himself in different ways. He can reveal himself not only to individuals but to people as a whole. He does this through their spiritual richness. The essential means of revelation of the spiritual richness is their religions, though there may be many imperfections and gaps in them (No. 55).

Diplomacy or selfish motives are not the aim of dialogue. The work of the Holy Spirit who blows where it likes is what gives relevance and direction. The Church through dialogue tries to unfold the seeds of the word. It is aimed at enlightening all with the rays of truth. The Pope encourages the missionaries who had to live being misunderstood in the path of dialogue. He tells them to hold on with faith and courage, for dialogue is the way to the kingdom of God. It will certainly bring results, though its time and season is known to God alone (no. 57).

12. Dialogue and Proclamation

The document Dialogue and Mission produced by the Secretariat for Non-Christian Religions in 1984 gave rise to many doubts and discomforts. So in 1991, the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue and the Congregation for the Evangelization of People jointly produced this document which states that the reign of God and his kingdom can be seen throughout the history, which fulfillment is in eternity. The Church is the seed and growth of this kingdom of God. Even outside the church there is the kingdom of God and its reign. All those who submit themselves to the workings of the Spirit partake in the kingdom. So we have to view other religions and faith with respect (35). The document sees other religions as the part of the universal salvific plan of God. It also affirms that those who follow the right guidelines given by them and those who obey their conscience will certainly be saved. It is by following the good traditions and guidelines of their religion and voice of one's own conscience that they receive the invitation of God to salvation.

It is important to note that even while accepting the salvific values of other religions, the document warns that we are to be able to discern the source of grace in them with prudence and wisdom. When we say that there are elements of grace in them, it does not mean that every element in them is the fruit of grace. Since the entire world is under the grip of sin, there will be element of sin in the traditions and cultures of religions. So the right attitude to other religions also includes understanding the difference between them and Christianity, and recognizing the good in them (31). The document also insists that while interreligious dialogue is to be encouraged, such a dialogue should be open to evangelization because dialogue should open the ways to evangelization.

13. Ecclesia in Africa

In this Post-Synodal Exhortation on the Church in Africa and its evangelising mission towards the year 2000, John Paul II talks among other things, about the urgent need for inculturation as a process by which catechesis takes flesh in the various cultures and has two dimensions: the intimate transformation of authentic cultural values through their integration in Christianity and the insertion of Christianity in the various human cultures (86, 87). He recognizes that this is a

difficult and delicate task but one that seeks to dispose people to receive Jesus Christ in an integral manner - on the personal, cultural, economic and political levels so that they can live a holy life in total union with God the father, through the action of the Holy Spirit (97). Considering the rapid changes in the cultural, social, economic and political domains our local churches should be involved in this process. Similarly, openness to dialogue should be the Christian's attitude inside the community as well as with other believers and with men and women of good will. Commitment to dialogue must also embrace love, trying to imitate the faith of Abraham and to live the demands of the Decalogue. In this regard the message of the synod emphasizes that the living God, creator of heaven and earth and the Lord of history, is the father of the one great human family to which all belong. As such, all should bear witness to him through our respect for the values and religious traditions of each person, working together for human progress and development at all levels (112).

14. Ecclesia in Asia

After the Asian Synod, Pope John Paul II produced this apostolic exhortation called "Ecclesia in Asia". Its special feature is that while upholding the uniqueness of Jesus Christ, it recognizes the various religious traditions and cultures. It affirms the universal salvation obtained by Christ and the all-embracing presence of the Holy Spirit. The duty of Christ is to bring about a new relationship between men who were estranged due to sin. Christ gave to the humanity, to live like brothers and sisters, above all divisions while accepting the heavenly father (no. 13).

15. *Dominus Jesus*

This was published on August 6, 2000 by the Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith. Many theologians think this document has many statements that have brought a shadow on the open broadminded attitude of Vatican II and the subsequent developments. They point out as example the words used to differentiate between Christian faith and non-Christian faith by placing them in two levels. The document says that theologically faith is the acceptance of the revealed truths in grace. It enables us to enter in the mystery and to grasp it integrally. The deposit of faith, of other religions is the totality of the experience and reflection. It is still searching the simple truth. It does not have the acceptance of God reveals himself (no. 7).

At the same time there are other important teachings of Vatican II on the need for having friendly relationship with other religions. God desires to call all people to himself and to give the fullness of his revelation and love to them. Therefore, he is present not only in different persons, but also in different communities. It is through their spiritual richness that is present in them. Their religion, in spite of the inadequacies and failures, is the important and essential manifestation of this spiritual richness (no. 8).

The document emphasizes that those who are not the members of the Church officially and visibly can also approach the salvation in Christ. This is the work of grace that mystically joins them with Christ without officially making them members of the Church. This saving grace is given from Christ by the effect of his sacrifice on the cross through the Holy Spirit (no. 20). Christ died for the entire human race. The spiritual invitation that man has received is one and holy. So we must believe that the Holy Spirit gives to all humans the possibility to share in the paschal mystery, in a way that is known to God alone (no. 12).

Some theologians think that it may be due to the eagerness to be the continuation of the Vatican II teaching and at the same the desire to control the new theological developments of Asian, Latin-American and African churches that some anomalies are found in this document. For examples first it states in the beginning that "in reality various religious traditions have the

religious elements coming from God”. But further it states that “yet we cannot say that they have their origin from God.

In all, we can see the broad approach of Pope John Paul II to other religions in all his writings starting from *Redemptor Hominis* to *Dominus Jesus* and he is one of the modern Popes who were very open to diversity. He indeed developed the “culture of dialogue” and following the dramatic events of 11 September, 2001 and their tragic results/consequences in the Middle and Near East, proposed a Decalogue for peace to the Heads of State and representatives of the governments throughout the world.

Earlier John Paul I, in spite of the brevity of his thirty three (33) days pontificate, followed the same path as his predecessor, “calling all to collaborate in creating a bulwark and to promote improvements in the conditions of less fortunate population”.

The Catholic Diocese of Onitsha and Interreligious Dialogue

The Catholic Church in Onitsha Archdiocese, Nigeria, has been actively engaged in interreligious dialogue, particularly with adherents of African Traditional Religion, Islam and various Christian denominations. This dialogue is rooted in the Church’s broader mission of fostering peace, coexistence, and mutual understanding, as emphasized in *Nostra Aetate* and subsequent papal teachings. The Onitsha Archdiocese, being a religiously diverse region, has developed unique approaches to interfaith engagement. These include formal dialogues between Catholic clergy and leaders of other religious traditions, joint social initiatives addressing issues such as poverty, education, and healthcare, and grassroots efforts that promote religious tolerance at the community level. Archbishop Valerian Okeke has been instrumental in advocating for peaceful coexistence and emphasizing the Church’s role in promoting interfaith harmony.

Reflecting on the missionary environment in the Lower Niger before the advent of Catholicism, Obi (1985) sees all of Divine Providence amidst human weaknesses for “just as Salvation history has to do with the descent of God in human form into human life so also the history of evangelization involves human beings, human events, some noble, some humiliating” (p. 3). Thus Providence was at play in sub-Saharan West Africa through the many decades of slave trade and colonialism, leading to the campaign to liberate and regenerate the continent from the inside in order to amend for many evils inflicted on Africa by the European giants. However, mostly for lack of personnel, the Catholic church was a late comer in the whole exercise trailing behind the Anglican church until the Holy Ghost Fathers came to the Lower Niger “out of generosity and obedience to the Vicar of Christ who assigned them to seek the welfare of the black race” (p. 8).

The journey into Onitsha Archdiocese was started on September 19, 1885 by Frs. Joseph Lutz and Horne in the company of Brs. Hermas and Jean-Gotto. One could immediately recall the initial efforts made by these missionaries to recognize and contact the leading figures of various communities. It is reported that on the day of their arrival; December 5 1885, “accompanied by their guide- a kind, English Protestant factory agent called Charles Townsend (whom they had previously met in Brass), the two missionaries went to meet the Onitsha king, Obi Anazonwu who, in their own words, received Father kindly and promises a plot of ground Father himself could choose” (Nwosu, 1982). Such visits provided the needed inroads into the people’s communities and religious lives especially where these leaders effectively represented their communities. They therefore earned the Church in Onitsha Archdiocese such goodwill and acceptance among the people, and the present site of the Basilica of the Most Holy Trinity

which was exchanged for the initial offer. It is not surprising then that successive missionaries towed the line of their forebears by positively engaging the communities.

All were however not rosy for these missionaries because of the combined efforts of the British colonial power and the Anglican Church. Suffice it that being non-British nationals, the Catholic missionaries were suspected by the British trading company as a threat to their commercial and political interests while the CMS saw them as impostors with harmful influence on the people. In spite of being intimated to declare their missions and to sign agreements not to extend such; among other disadvantages, they continued to impact on the people with their missionary strategies which included redemption of slaves, distribution of charities, care of the sick and outcasts, provision of medications, baptism of people, erection of missionary houses that would also house the new converts, as well as building of schools and support of teachers. The results were also immediate: conversions from other churches to the Catholic faith which was obviously welfare oriented; people were convinced to reject their pagan roots; the medical facilities won many converts from neighbouring towns like Obosi, Nsugbe, Aguleri, Ogidi, Umuoji, Nkwelle, while more converts were made through schools which were aimed at developing the whole person. This also rather endeared the Catholic mission schools to the colonial government unlike others that had a narrow evangelistic approach to education. In all these, interreligious dialogue based on Life and Common Action are most evident.

The weaknesses and biases of some missionary enterprises leading to superficial commitment of some Christians notwithstanding (Ekwunife, 2003), till date the Church in Onitsha Archdiocese through the able leadership of her local ordinaries and priests continues to open up and support new mission areas especially in the most difficult parts of the Archdiocese; here Iyiowa, Aguleri and Igbariam regions (which were in Onitsha Archdiocese then) come to mind. This is in addition to sending out priest missionaries to other parts of the world. In all these areas of their apostolate, Onitsha Archdiocesan priests are known to maintain high standards of pastoral engagements with their host communities; thanks to this missionary spirit inculcated in us by our young pioneer missionaries.

Other areas of positive interreligious engagements in the Archdiocese include: fostering and training of indigenous vocations to the priestly and religious life in which the study of Igbo traditional religion has been introduced in the curricula as advised by the Bishops Conferences of Africa and Madagascar on 25 March, 1988 by Francis Cardinal Arinze as the then President of the Council for Interreligious Dialogue; use of vernacular and local musical instruments in liturgy; thematic and phenomenological approaches to the study of Igbo traditional thoughts and culture.

However, while recognizing the contributions of Non-Christian Religions to Christianity, Arinze (1990) rightly states that “these religions bring with them the cultural settings in which they exist. They bring with them language, philosophical categories, ritual expressions and local styles proper to their peoples. They enrich Christianity with these gifts” (ps. 36-7). The Church therefore fosters and imbibes these gifts because they are not tied down to any culture; she feels at home with them only when she purifies, strengthens and ennoble them. Arinze however observes some enduring difficulties with the study of African/ Igbo traditional Religion which include the lack of an authentic representatives that can speak for the religion over a wide area; the fear that dialogue with ATR would give new life to the ‘dying religion’ and further introduce syncretistic attitudes to the practice of Christianity and the blanket condemnation of Christianity by some African Traditional religionists as an imported religion not relevant for the African (Okolo, 1995, Ekwunife, 2003). In all these, he suggests that Catholic stakeholders should keep

alive the importance of dialogue, attain formation in dialogue, adopt and maintain Christian formation in pluralistic societies, collaborate with each other, keep being open, present Christianity to the great world religions, and seek inculturation. These would rather be the focus of the Archdiocese as she marches further into greatness in achieving effective interreligious dialogue.

Despite the challenges of religious tensions, doctrinal differences, and occasional conflicts, the Archdiocese continues to uphold dialogue as a vital tool for fostering social cohesion. Through education, pastoral outreach, and collaborative projects, the Catholic Church in Onitsha remains committed to strengthening interreligious relationships and contributing to a more united and peaceful society.

Suggested Areas for Further Dialogue in Onitsha Archdiocese

In a theological seminar to mark the 130years of the arrival of the Missionaries to Onitsha Archdiocese on November 11, 2015, Fr. B. A. C. Obiefuna reflected deeply on 'Faith and Culture: The Gospel Encounter with African Traditional Values'. Here he strongly argues that the faith of a people should not be different from their culture because "it is the faith of a people, in the people and for the people that is their culture. The same faith sustains that culture" (p. 1). While subtly accusing the missionaries to Onitsha and Africa in general of the ills of their European superiority complexes that saw to the expulsion of most African/Igbo cultural values in the practice of Christianity and its attendant consequences, he rightly appears to lay a heavy burden on the present hierarchy and lay faithful of Onitsha Archdiocese, of seeing to the resolution of the current faith crises. He therefore proposes some areas of consideration for the necessary synergy between Christianity and Igbo culture. These include; Language, Clarity of concepts/ categories, openness to both cultures, respect for traditional shrines and effigies, the role of music, mode of prayer, planned study of aspects of both religion, and the urgent need for Igbo Bible.

The underlying word here is Inculturation or Theology of Incarnation as the best form of African Theology which started in August, 1974: The Vatican Secretariat for Non- Christian Religions first organized a consultation with local experts in African Religion and local specialists at the Gaba Pastoral Institute in Kampala with 7 African countries representatives in attendance. From the contributions of the participants, the Secretariat affirmed its belief in the real possibility of religious dialogue between Christians and the religious traditions of Africa and saw this dialogue as both desirable and necessary. The participants felt too that there was a danger of pragmatism in fostering African adaptation in the Church, without at the same time encouraging serious and systematic study of African religion and culture, through participation, observation and genuine dialogue" (Shorter, 1975). In a Roman Synod that same year therefore the Bishops of Africa rejected the notion of Adaptation while opting for Incarnation as the right attitude towards Theology in the African context. This was later accepted by the Pope after due considerations and clarifications.

Incarnation theology is therefore more than a first encounter of the Gospel to the African culture as represented by the theology of adaption but refers to the process in which the Gospel takes flesh in the African culture. Hence there is mutual respect that allows for the growth of the cultures. According to Ezech (2003), it:

... has to do with the mystery of the eternal Word of God and with God who in freedom became a human being like us in everything except sin. This means his solidarity with humanity and everything human. The incarnation-event is both particular and universal, historical and transcendental. (p. 127).

For the Catholic Bishops Conference of Nigeria (1988), incarnation is the term for inculturation in Nigeria. They therefore describe it as a rather complex reality in which the Christian message and cultures enter into a living relationship with the fundamental aim of evangelizing the culture, perfecting its ethical values and cultural patterns and defending the rights of individuals and groups. To do this, she has to:

- i. Adopt the suggestions of Pope Paul VI in Uganda (1969) as guidelines for inculturation in the continent: Fidelity to the essential heritage deriving from the Church of Christ - the Gospel, and an African expression of that heritage so that a truly African Christianity could develop.
- ii. Maintain the Missionary Impulse in which Pope Paul VI in *Africae Terrarum* (1967) retrospected on the work of the missionaries in Africa in order to praise their heroic undertakings while recognizing their shortcomings. He advocated for an internal growth of the Gospel from then, urging them to collaborate with each other while recognizing the missionary works of other Christian denominations.
- iii. Be fully Christian and fully African which was a furtherance of the message of Paul VI by his successor; John Paul II. He says that inculturation in Africa should penetrate all areas of private and social life of the African. Addressing the bishops of Zaire and other Africa in Kinshasa 1980 he therefore mentions language, catechesis, theological reflection, adaptations of the liturgy and sacred arts as well as communitarian forms of the Christian Life as areas needing serious considerations. In August 1985 he further encourages an unrelenting efforts at inculturation describing it strongly as “the concrete form of the covenant between God and human beings in this time and place; the welcome acceptance of the universal truth by a human community endowed with its own specific sensibility and shaped by its own long quest for the meaning of life” (p. 20) which should explore the millennial experiences of traditional religions and customs in order to distinguish the noble from the ignoble. Linking inculturation to religious dialogue and proclamation, he affirms their indispensable roles in the evangelizing mission of the Church. Neither adulterating the word of God nor emptying the cross of its power, Christ is to be brought to the center of the African life by lifting her to Christ.

The following are therefore proposed for further considerations in the dialogue between Onitsha Archdiocese and Igbo culture:

1. What are the major similarities and differences between the Christian and Igbo traditional worldviews?
2. Is there any fundamental differences between Igbo Traditional Religion and Christianity considering the fact that they have belief in one God?
3. How can one be a true Christian within an Igbo traditional setting?
4. Why is it that Igbo Christians tend to fear their (local) deities more than they fear God and the angels?
5. Which kills more: taking a false oath in the name of God or a deity and why?
6. What are the similarities and differences between the Christian and Igbo notions of after life?
7. What are the religious implications of burying the dead within a day/days of death?
8. Is there any relationship between the Igbo practice of second burial and Christian death anniversary or burial?
9. What is witchcraft?
10. Is it right to consult a native doctor for any reason whatever?
11. Are the magical forces real? Or, how real are the magical forces (*ogwu, amansi, amosu* etc)?
12. Who is the most important religious functionary in Igbo religious life and why?

13. Why do most Christians prefer priest miracle workers to other priests?
14. What is *Ogwu* and what are the types?
15. What are the relationships between *ogwu*, *amosu*, and *amansi*?
16. More churches, more miracles, more cults, more societal vices; are there likely relationships?
17. How real is *Agwu*? Can a Christian be tormented by *Agwu*?
18. What is *mmuo mmiri*? Can a Christian be tormented by *mmuo mmiri*?
19. Have the problems of *Ogbanje* been fully resolved?
20. Is there any similarity or difference between *ogbanje* and *mmuo mmiri*?
21. How real is spirit husband/wife? Can spirits really be invoked and how?
22. What phenomenon is spirit mediumship and how real is it?

Conclusion

This study has established that Catholic Church has long been engaged in interreligious dialogue as part of its mission to promote peace, mutual understanding, and cooperation among different faith traditions. Rooted in the teachings of the Second Vatican Council, the Church recognizes the value of other religions and seeks to foster respectful exchanges while upholding its own doctrinal integrity. While interreligious dialogue presents challenges, such as theological differences and historical tensions, it remains a crucial aspect of the Church's commitment to ecumenism and global harmony. By embracing dialogue, the Catholic Church continues to work towards building bridges of understanding in an increasingly pluralistic world. Despite the challenges of religious tensions, doctrinal differences, and occasional conflicts, the Catholic Archdiocese of Onitsha continues to uphold dialogue as a vital tool for fostering social cohesion. Through education, pastoral outreach, and collaborative projects, the Catholic Church in Onitsha remains committed to strengthening interreligious relationships and contributing to a more united and peaceful society.

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