

Reflections on inter-religious dialogue: an African pastoral perspective

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Recent social cultural factors and magisterial documents especially after the Second Vatican Council indicate that issues of inter-religious dialogue and mission are practical burning concerns in Africa and worldwide. This discourse will focus on inter-religious dialogue from an African-Pastoral theological perspective.

Factors that Warrant Dialogue

The following factors warrant an urgent dialogue and a collaborative solidarity from all faith based organisations, communities and cultural groups. For churches especially the Catholic Church dialogue is a mission, an imperative and a mandate after the Second Vatican Council and post Vatican Council several documents, as we shall later indicate in this paper. Some of the factors are the following:

- The perceived dechristianisation of some nations which were for centuries considered to be the origin and hub of Christianity, its inspiration, human and material resources for missionary activities in Africa and worldwide.
- The general decreasing religious sense in society for several reasons, such as: absolute or extreme materialism, socialism, egoistic individualism and hedonistic tendencies.⁷⁶ The alarming share of ignorance of Judeo Christian principles and values in African local Christian communities whose population is demographically increasing but lacking in deep Christian conviction and commitment, judging from the recent conflicts in Rwanda, Democratic Republic of Congo, Northern Uganda, Kenya, etc.

⁷⁶ Benedict XVI, *Verbum Domini*, nos. 10, 35, 100, 122; *Pastores Dobo Vobis*, no. 30; G. Phillips, *The Role of the Laity in the Church*, The Mercies Press, Cork, 1955, 104.

- The ideology of absolute human freedom that divinises a created human being to the extent that those who embrace it ignore and devalue the rights of the community, senselessly exploit nature including fellow human beings; or the conviction that God does not intervene in human history.⁷⁷

Some of these factors can be described as century old issues. However, they are compounded by modern ones which the current world is characterised, to point out a few.

- The profound rapid changes of every type, such as the growth of the world population; the phenomenal means of transport on land, sea and air; and communication facilities, the technological and scientific knowledge and inventions that keep on expanding and growing even here in Africa; the material abundance or increase in some countries and continents; the expansion and multiplication of educational institutions that are visible all over the globe; the religious pluralism and multiplication of denominations sects religious movements propagating their convictions on radio, TV stations, internet, etc.

Genuine Concerns and Opportunities

While some of these changes do cause genuine concerns and apprehension, in so far as, they can bring about the destruction of positive achievements of the human race, such as, cherished cultural and social products: the sanctity of the family and human person, the Africa ethical principles and value of extended family and its assistance in the crucial stages of human growth and development, etc. Some of these seemingly negative factors can be changed into opportunities for society and the Church's mission. Examples are radio stations, TV channels, internet, mobile phones, even positive globalisation which can be described as another name for catholicity and solidarity of the entire human race, regardless of colour, race and ethnicity. Dialogue is one of the means to promote the Gospel of human brotherliness and love.

⁷⁷ Benedict XVI, *Verbum Domini*. no. 35.

Meaning of Dialogue

In this paper, the concept of dialogue implies a conversation or an attempt to construct a bridge between two people or two communities with the aim of coming to mutual understanding, respect, reconciliation, peaceful co-existence, and collaborative action for mutual growth in all aspects of human life.

Dialogue connotes an exchange of opinions, assumptions, convictions, experiences, principles, beliefs between two representatives of different cultures, customs, traditions academic disciplines religious beliefs, etc.

“Diversity constitutes (enrichment) and not a reason for struggle and in addition we are aware of the fact that the breath and plurality epistemologies impede any claim to dominance or exclusivity or absoluteness by any kind of research”⁷⁸ or search for co-existence among different communities and nations.

Combining Mission and Purpose for Dialogue

Mission is the purpose for which an organisation or a community was created, chosen, elected such as the Church to do or the reason why it exists. The church for example has a mission from Jesus Christ to bring the light of the gospel to all humanity without exception.⁷⁹

This mission is carried out through the tripartite ministry of Jesus Christ and His Church, that is, the prophetic, liturgical or sacramental and shepherding or deaconia or witnessing to Gospel values and law of love of God and neighbour.

It is through the last ministry of love that dialogue comes into play; loving not only brothers, sisters and neighbours but strangers, opponents, true enemies or those we merely perceive to be against our cherished interests. In this context; Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, animists, members of Christian sects, extreme secularists, materialists, people with hedonistic tendencies, all are co-partners with us in the

⁷⁸ Zimowski, Z., “Science and Faith: A Life Choice” in *Dolentium Hominum*, no. 75 year XXV, 2010, 10; Kato Bitole, J., *Interfaith Dialogue: A Catholic Pastoral Perspective* in *Interfaith Dialogue: Towards a Culture of Working Together* CUEA, Nairobi, 2009, 58-65.

⁷⁹ Benedict XVI, *Verbum Domini*, nos. 92-95; Mt. 16:16-17, Mt. 28:18-20; Lk. 24:47.

dialogical journey and process. The reason for dialogue is that there are several people who are born, grow up and educated in cultural contexts that completely disregard or ignore the idea or reality of God, the transcendental dimension, to mention a few:

The old classic absolute secularists who find it difficult to imagine the existence of God.

The agnostics who purposely or intentionally refuse to decide whether to believe or not in God.

The *positivists* who take pride in rejecting any reality that cannot be scientifically tested, measured and verified through laboratory gadgetry or bodily senses.

The extreme humanists who divinise the human being as having absolute capacity to control and know every reality through scientific and technical know how; thus giving him or her, the unlimited power and freedom to do anything in his or her favour and pleasure. The process of dialogue does not exclude any person in these categories.

Reason for Dialogue

We have already mentioned the theological reasons why Christians have a mandate and an imperative to dialogue. In this section I intend to indicate that dialogue gives a bonus to the well being of the subjects of dialogue:

We dialogue because there is a natural desire, propensity or inclination in all human beings to seek and search for the truth, harmony and companionship in order to grow and develop as humans. For Christians, truth harmony and unity are biblical imperatives; they are closely linked with the law of love – *caritas*.⁸⁰

This law of love must be expressed and lived in concrete actions, in sharing with others not only material resources but also social, cultural, intellectual, religious, psychological products and aspirations.⁸¹

We need dialogue because we all inhabit the same planet and we are

⁸⁰ Jn. 13:35; Thess. 4:9.

⁸¹ Lk. 4:16-19; Mt. 25:35-46; James 2:14-16; *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 44; *Populorum Progressio*, nos. 13, 16, 26.

travelling almost the same life stages of conception, birth, childhood, youth, adulthood, old age and death. Birth and death are equalisers for all human beings, regardless of race, country, religious convictions, economic and educational standards.

We dialogue because this earthly globe and its environment is our common habitat.

This implies in my view, joint exploration of our different religious beliefs, ideologies, assumptions on life, prejudices – old and new ones. The process of dialogue helps and challenges those involved in it to grow in several ways: Dialogue helps to discover how we can better express our real ideas, assumptions, convictions, mission, vision, feelings.

It assists us to outgrow and overcome our negative narrow thinking and bigotry leading us to peaceful co-existence with others different from our way of thinking, living, behaving.

For Christians, we have to dialogue because our Jewish Christian heritage is defined not only by our dogmatic beliefs and magisterial pronouncements, but by the way we relate to people around our neighbourhood including those we consider to be our enemies.⁸²

Dialogue has a mysterious ways of mitigating misunderstanding, quarrelling and divisions arising from all type of contexts.

Divisions to Overcome in Africa

Africans are divided by a multitude of factors which cannot be enlisted in a paper of this size. We can only point out the following:

The African continent was repeatedly invaded by colonial powers from other continents; North and East. This resulted in senseless demarcation and splitting of African nations, kingdoms, tribes and families. People were mingled with groups or communities of other cultural, religious, beliefs and customs. Today this is clearly noticeable in Sudan, Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania, Rwanda, the Democratic Republic of Congo, etc.

In the first glance one can argue that the colonial invasions were, in so far as they brought to Africa positive cultural, religious pluralism

⁸² *Ecclesia in Africa* (1995). No. 49; Tarton Tins, "Why Should church have Dialogue," in: *United Methods New service*, June 2, 2009. http://umnssumc.org/02/june_271.htm

outside the continent; and that this was the beginning of a liberating globalisation. It was the breaking up of narrow and ghetto cultures typical of racism, tribalism and clannish communities in Africa.

However, and in the second instance, the legacy of old and new colonial activities are clearly the root causes of present day refugees, killings, fighting, gun trafficking, exploitation of natural resources in and around the Great Lakes region and beyond.⁸³ Dialogue challenges communities in Africa to change the above situation described above and to transform negative actions and relationships into mutual ethnic and tribal respect, concern, tolerance, assistance, co-existence and practical charity.⁸⁴

The Way Forward

We should be committed to the promotion of genuine dialogue in accordance to the teaching of the Second Vatican Council and recent magisterial policies after the same Council.⁸⁵

“The Church stands forth as a sign of brotherliness which allows dialogue and invigorates it. Such a mission requires in the first place that we foster within the Church herself mutual esteem, reverence and harmony through the lawful recognition of lawful diversity.”⁸⁶

With this magisterial teaching we can confidently engage in a dialogue taken as a conversation in which there is an exchange of human, intellectual, cultural and spiritual values, convictions and insights with the aim of mutual sharing of things we happen to treasure, and without arrogance or superiority complex.

We believe that dialogue is prompted within the Church by God’s desire who created humanity to enter into brotherly/sisterly and natural relationships within the Church and beyond.⁸⁷

⁸³ Bitole Kato, J., “A Pastoral approach to the Plight of Refugees and Internally Displaced Persons: Special Focus on the Great Lakes Region” in: *Theological Response to the Tragedy of Refugees and Internally Displaced persons in Africa*, 124-147.

⁸⁴ Jn. 13:35, Eph. 2:16; *Ecclesia in Africa*, nos. 79, 109, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* in: AAS 5 no. 80 (1988) 556.

⁸⁵ *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 92; *Humanae Personae Dignitatem* in: AA 60 (1968), 692-704.

⁸⁶ *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 92.

⁸⁷ *Ecclesia in Africa*, no. 70.

In theological terms Jesus Christ, the Incarnate Word of God through whom God the Father entered into dialogue with the whole of humanity is the original basic model of dialogue.

Dialogue is consequently conditioned by our willingness to enter into conversation with the other person because he/she is simply a human being; and we do this on an horizontal level because all of us, we believe that we are God's creatures. It is thus incumbent on all human beings, regardless of diversity of faith affiliation to initiate positive relationships with others who happen to be different from us, have contrary belief positions, convictions, and cultural value systems from ours.⁸⁸

Christian dialogue is based on the firm Catholic conviction that every person created in God's image is worthy of care, respect, attention, concern, love even when we fundamentally disagree, for some reason with that person.⁸⁹ This is our Christian mission, imperative and mandate from Christ, the Scriptures and the teaching of the Church.

We have to admit as indicated earlier in this paper that there are multiple obstacles to dialogue, we in Africa face. Some of these are human made road blocks that we place in our path as we mature in Christian discipleship.

Difference of culture, language, race, tribe, social and economic status, educational standards. Geographical origins, political ideologies; philosophical training customary up-bringing shaped by religious, tribal ethos.

All these and many others tend to drive us in self-absorption, self-centredness and bigotry. When this happens we see other people's convictions and behaviour as strange, wrong, bad and unrealistic even dangerous; we become judgemental. Our mission is to change this within Africa and beyond.

Our mission is to discourage all cultural signs or manifestations of divisions, hatred and positively: to create a new way of living as a single global human family in the service of the common good of

⁸⁸ *Ecclesium Suam*, nos. 26, 72.

⁸⁹ *Ut Unum Sint*, no. 28.

our nations and continents.⁹⁰ And finally, we suggest that the practical thing to do to promote dialogue are:

Find schools and institutions with a vision and mandate to promote dialogue, tolerance, and inter-religious collaborative development projects.⁹¹

Combat customs and attitudes of contention, unnecessary dissent, and negative controversy by exchanging visits, gifts between peoples and groups known to be enemies to each other.

Be committed and courageous to remain talking in situations of fighting, misunderstandings, ridicule, and fear of failure.

Be convinced that dialogue is often a difficult process that takes time and energy from the subjects or its promoters; and that its positive results may not be immediately achieved. However, we should maintain, as experience shows, that those with a mission to dialogue grow and develop clarity of ideas. It leads them to achieve well considered compromises on the non-essentials of faith-beliefs and customs. Dialogue brings peace, reconciliation in society and to religions, diverse communities and churches togetherness.⁹²

⁹⁰ Gen. 1:26-27; *Ecclesia in Africa*, no. 94.

⁹¹ *Ecclesia in Africa*, nos. 102-103.

⁹² Mahony, R., "The Spirit of Dialogue in the church Today" Archdiocese of Colorado, Springs Colorado, 16/10/1998.

MISSION AND DIALOGUE

Approaches to a Communicative Understanding of Mission



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