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A MAJOR ECUMENICAL CHALLENGE IN AFRICA: THE MUSHROOMING OF INDEPENDENT CHURCHES

A b s t r a c t. This article focuses on Ecumenism as an essential missionary activity and its manifestation in a bid to attain the unity of all Christians. On the other hand, the article underscores the fact that the mushroom escalation of African Independent (Instituted) Churches is a major challenge to ecumenical endeavour in Africa. Africa is a land of promise and yet illusive dreams and illogicalities abound too. Ethnically, religiously and economically, Africa is greatly fragmented. The redemption of Africa in the line of thought this article explores lies in the formation of an ethos and culture of unity, ecumenical dialogue and the praxis of mutual respect. The article cogently argues that ecumenical interests cover a wide range of activities which have inbuilt unifying mechanisms. Therefore ecumenical collaboration is urgently needed in the areas and issues of common interests like social service, prayer, search for peace and justice in the midst of tribalism, unfairness, building self confidence of marginalized groups in a bid to amend brokenness and fragmentation.

Key words: ecumenism, a Church in Africa, ecumenical challenges in Africa.

INTRODUCTION

The prayer of Jesus that they (his disciples) may be one (cf. Jn. 17:21) is a suitable point of departure to the attentive fostering of ecumenical sensitivity amidst the historic divisions of Christendom. The prayer should help Christians today to pave way for them and the Christians of tomorrow to behold the dawning of a new Pentecost when Church leadership from the Christian

divide will not only speak to all people in their various tongues (cf. Acts 2:4-12), but also will practice respectful mutuality in listening so that all may know and accept that there is only one ordinary way¹ in the variety of other religions and religious customs as extraordinary ways of salvation². It is urgent to avoid what John Paul II has termed as a widespread indifferentism which is based on a wrong theological perspective and is typical of religious relativism, that is, all religions are the same³. My reflection on ecumenical dialogue with some nuances of inter religious dialogue departs from these insights of John Paul II. To achieve this, I will proceed tactfully by first giving a working definition of ecumenism. The Challenges of Ecumenism and Independent Churches in Africa, The Theology of Vatican II and recent magisterium on Ecumenism are among the themes of my paper.

Indeed in today's age whereby humanity painstakingly seeks its unity economically, politically, socially and even culturally; in a world more completely explored and brought into subjection, the Church must affirm by her ecumenical commitment, that is, by her reconciling activity, her universality and her cosmic outlook. Christianity, by its transcendence and catholicity must show its repudiation of all partisan exclusivism. In this regard, the Church of Christ in choosing the path of ecumenism is responding not only to her discernment of the signs of the times, but above all, the command of her founder (Christ) of love of all. The Holy Spirit gives different gifts but above all love. Therefore, I will also argue in this paper that the contents of ecumenism are as well Christological and pneumatological.

1. NOTIONS OF ECUMENISM AND INTER RELIGIOUS DIALOGUE

Vatican II defines ecumenical movement as "the initiatives and activities [...], to promote Christian unity"⁴. This leads to the conclusion that ecumenism is the commitment to work for the union of all Christians. In fact a remarkable progress has been made by the Church in ecumenical dialogue,

¹ Cf. V a t i c a n II, *Council Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, Lumen Gentium*, n. 14.

² Cf. *Ibid.*, n. 16.

³ Cf. J o h n P a u l II, Encyclical Letter, *Redemptoris Missio, On the Mission of the Church*, Rome (1990), n., 36.

⁴ V a t i c a n II, *Council Unitatis redintegratio, Decree on Ecumenism*, n. 4.

especially after the impetus provided by Vatican II. Nonetheless the journey is still a difficult and seemingly an illusive one.

John Paul II understands inter religious dialogue as “part of the Church’s evangelizing mission. Understood as a method and means of mutual knowledge and enrichment, dialogue is not in opposition to the mission *ad gentes*”⁵. For John Paul II there is no conflict between proclamation of Christ and engaging in inter religious dialogue. The two have an inner connection but at the same time they are distinct. Therefore, “dialogue should be conducted and implemented with the conviction that the Church is the ordinary means of salvation and that she alone possesses the fullness of the means of salvation”⁶. Ecumenism implies forging a united Christian front or dialogue among Christians of different churches whereas inter religious dialogue implies inter faiths dialogue or dialogue between believers of different religions. Nonetheless the two have a lot of similarities.

The commitment of the Church to dialogue is rooted in the fact that dialogue is anthropological and theological⁷ since the Church has to engage into saving dialogue with all men and women out of unflinching faithfulness to God. Moreover, this dialogue is Christological and pneumatological⁸ for Christians and others are called to cooperate with the Holy Spirit who is actively working in the world to bring about transformation. Jesus is the exemplar of the Church’s commitment to dialogue and proclamation.

1.1. CHRISTOLOGICAL STARTING POINT OF ECUMENISM

The priestly prayer of Jesus for unity reported by John’s Gospel that may they all be one (cf. John 17:21) is, as it were, a Christological starting point of ecumenical commitment. Unity, far from being a cosmetic appendix, is an essential sign and effect of genuine Christian community. Its nature is Trinitarian in that it is a gift of God the Father through God the Son in their mutual love as bonding (the Holy Spirit). On the other hand, unity is also a task since it needs to be received actively and in humility so that the faithful may engage in ecumenical endeavour.

⁵ J o h n P a u l II, Encyclical Letter *Redemptoris Missio*, n. 55.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Cf. Pontifical Council for Inter Religious Dialogue and Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples, *Dialogue and Proclamation: Reflections and Orientations on Inter Religious Dialogue and the Proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ*, Rome 1990, n. 38.

⁸ Ibid., n. 40.

Jesus Christ was crucified and risen for all people. He desires to gather together all those whom he redeemed in the objective sense into one flock. Jesus Christ's death and resurrection, the summation of his salvific activity is reconciliatory. He died *and resurrected* to reunite all God's children who had been scattered (cf. John 11:52). In Christ, God has reconciled the world to himself (cf. 2 Cor. 5:19).

1.2. MUSHROOMING OF INDEPENDENT CHURCHES:
A MAJOR CHALLENGE TO ECUMENISM

1.2.1 Preliminary Considerations

African Independent Churches are various. They are also known as African Indigenous Churches, African Initiated Churches, African Instituted Churches or just AICs. They represent well over 10,000 independent Christian denominations in Africa. AICs are found in every region or county and country in Africa⁹.

It is important to realize that the African Independent Churches (AICs) as indigenous expression of Christian faith "has been around since 1819"¹⁰. There is still the mushrooming of the AICs. Many of these mushrooming AICs attract people from various walks of life. I will now paraphrase the incentives offered by these new movements as given in a progress report based on the replies (about 75) and documentation received by October 1985 from the regional and national Episcopal Conferences here below.

Among others, they offer a sense of family. The structure of many communities has broken down. These African Independent Churches (AICs) seem to offer human warmth in small communities. Moreover, the AICs promise easy solutions to complicated socio-economic and spiritual problems. They employ their pragmatic and syncretistic theology in the quest to satisfy peoples' search for answers and solutions to complex problems-both material and spiritual. The AICs appear to offer wholeness to people who are broken. They seem to offer cultural identity, recognition, the need of participation and involvement. However, the recruitment and training skills of the AICs are not

⁹ African Independent Churches Overview, <http://www.patheos.com/Library/African-Independent-Churches.html>, accessed on: 08-02-2011.

¹⁰ O.J. K o m b o, *The Story of the African Independent Churches: And Its Implications for Theology*, in: *Africa Journal of Evangelical Theology* 20.2.2001, p. 157.

without a lace of poison since they use a combination of affection and deception¹¹.

There is a danger that most AICs are keen to play to the gallery at the expense of true Christian liberation praxis after the example of Jesus who came primarily to please God his Father and secondarily to please others. The deception tactics used by AICs can neither be liberative nor salvific. It is, as it were, a search for victory without obedience to Christ, power without truth and honour without fear of God.

1.2.2 The Challenges Coming from Mushroom Growth of AICs

In Africa most pastors of AICs are not trained properly. They fail to join the ecumenical commitment for theological and non-theological reasons. They lack funds. Their historical roots are not profound enough. Representatives from these churches suspect that their voices will be drowned by others. They think that these others have the ecclesiastical authority and are more experienced in the ecumenical commitment. Some of these AICs are simply struggling to survive financially. They have more pressing issues like quelling internal leadership wrangles than engaging in formal ecumenism.

Distrust among the Christian divide is a factor which militates against remarkable progress in ecumenical endeavours. According to the Document *Dialogue and Proclamation*, "Sincere dialogue implies, on the one hand, mutual acceptance of differences, or even of contradictions, and on the other, respect for the free decision of persons taken according to the dictates of their conscience"¹². Whereas the efforts of great persons of ecumenism like John Paul II¹³ are examples of unflinching ecumenical commitments, some pastors from the Christian divide have even blamed ecumenism for the relativism sometimes found in religious matters.

Ecumenism seeks not for unity in uniformity but unity in diversity. Globalization when understood as "a projection and universal imposition of

¹¹ See, A Progress Report Based on the Replies (about 75) and Documentation received by October 1985 from the Regional and National Episcopal Conferences, *Sects or New Religious Movements: Pastoral Challenge*, St. Paul Publications-Africa, Kampala [no date], n., 8-14.

¹² *Dialogue and Proclamation*, n. 41.

¹³ John Paul II in 1986 initiated the Assisi Spirit whereby he invited leaders of different World Religions, and Leaders of non-Catholic Churches to pray together for peace. John Paul II also wrote an Ecumenical Encyclical of great significance: *Ut Unum Sint (The Call for Christian Unity)*, Rome, May 1995.

a particular model of development, a particular interpretation of the human person”¹⁴ becomes an obstacle to ecumenism. Ecumenism enables us to respect others in humility. Aware that all of us are sinners, we engage others in ecumenical endeavours in humility. At the same time Christians are not to bracket their Christian faith. They must not belittle their partners in dialogue. Inculturation¹⁵ is therefore coextensive with ecumenism. Christianity is expressed through cultures of different peoples. Pope Paul VI spoke about evangelizing the culture itself¹⁶. We have to take from our culture.

Ecumenism looks ahead to what God desires for all humankind. Great steps have been made in ecumenical endeavours. On the other hand, there is lack of significant advance toward actual unity. Authentic progress might take place if Christians focus more on eschatological aspect of ecumenism. Dulles points out that the Church needs to bear witness to catholicity that cuts through ecclesiocentrism, ethnocentrism, romanticism, eurocentricism, racism and anachronism. He writes:

In desperate circumstances it can seem almost obscene for Christians to seek communion with God in ornate, incense-filled sanctuaries. It is widely felt that catholicity cannot be viable in our time unless it includes the entire redemptive plan of God, extending to the whole of humanity and even to the inanimate material world¹⁷.

Therefore, to keep the ecumenical dialogue viable especially in Africa, ecumenical engagements should be open to the world and clarify the mighty deeds of God in order for people to glorify him. The spirit of ecumenical engagement must be doxological. Ecumenical engagement is as well a journeying together in search of solutions to common problems; the union of Christians.

The search for the union of Christians extends to everyone in accordance with his/her talents. Indeed ecumenical activity can be exercised in one’s daily Christian life or in one’s theological and historical search¹⁸. Pope Be-

¹⁴ G. C o l z a n i, *Towards a Church without Borders*, in: *Omnis Terra*, n. 362, Dec. 2005, p. 407.

¹⁵ “Inculturation means the intimate transformation of authentic cultural values through their integration in Christianity and the insertion of Christianity in the various human cultures” – John Paul II, Encyclical Letter, *Redemptoris Missio*, n., 52, Rome 1990.

¹⁶ Cf. Paul VI, Apostolic Exhortation, *Evangelii Nuntiandi (Evangelization in the Modern World)*, n., 20, Rome, 1975.

¹⁷ A. D u l l e s, *The Catholicity of the Church*, Clarendon Press: Oxford 1985, p. 20.

¹⁸ V a t i c a n I I C o u n c i l, *Unitatis Redintegratio*, n. 5.

nedict XVI insists that praying together for a common cause is the first task. "By praying, and praying together, Christians acquire a greater awareness of their condition of brothers, even if they are still divided; and by praying we learn better to listen to the Lord, as we can only find the path to unity by listening to the Lord and following his voice"¹⁹. Christian solidarity is by nature geared toward overcoming various disparities, differences, misconceptions and prejudices. This is a consequence of encountering Jesus Christ, the risen Lord in prayer.

Ecumenical openness is not a supplement to one's faith commitments. It involves listening and not only hearing. It involves proclaiming the truth. Ecumenism is realized at different levels and life situations: in parishes, hospitals, schools, market places, and other places of work, social gatherings, funeral ceremonies and in areas where a shared commitment to action require a purification of the memory.

In his Intervention during the II Special Assembly of Africa, Bishop Michael Patrick Olatungi Fagun's remark concerning ecumenism and its challenges in Africa resounds with vigour. His words remind the Christians and Christian communities not to become complacent but to engage in inculturation as an ongoing quest for unity. His words are: "An area of concern is that the vast majority of the non-Catholic but Christian Churches do take their separation stance as a mark of self assertion and independence, and further still they mistakenly see our ecumenical approach as a sign of the recognition and approval of the status quo as normal"²⁰. The first historical divisions in Christendom, of course did not take place in Africa. The ecumenical approach in Africa should be thoroughly inculturational, apostolic, doxological and embracing all human existential dimensions-thus-catholic.

1.3. ECUMENISM IN MAGISTERIAL TEACHINGS

In promoting the ecumenical agenda we have to listen to what Jesus tells us and follow it under the guidance of the Spirit of truth (cf. Jn. 16:13). Discipleship makes us partners of Christ and introduces us into service for the promotion of the Kingdom. Thus ecumenism is Christological, apostolic and pneumatological.

¹⁹ B e n e d i c t XVI, *Moments of Great Significance in This Slow Ascent to Unity*, in: <http://www.catholic.org/featured/headline.php?ID=3995>, accessed on: 25-1-2007.

²⁰ *African Synod: Interventions*, <http://www.afrikaworld.net/synod/fagun.htm>, accessed on: 08-02-2011.

The task of ecumenical engagement calls us to reconsider our attitude towards Christians not of our ecclesial communions or those of other religions. So, Vatican Council II teaches that the Church of Christ subsists in the Catholic Church²¹. On the other hand, Vatican II acknowledges that the other Christians also belong to the people of God, though not as complete as in the case of practicing Catholics²². The Catholic Church is connected with other baptized non-Catholic persons, because, they share the word of God and have faith in the triune God; they are baptized and hence incorporated into Christ; they recognize and receive in their own churches and ecclesial communions other sacraments; they form fellowship in prayer and other spiritual benefits and communion in the Holy Spirit – indeed it is the Holy Spirit who moves the baptized to seek unity and embrace it.²³

Trinitarian faith and baptism are the hallmarks in the union with Christ and the Spirit, though the union is not yet perfect. “For men who believe in Christ and have been properly baptized are put in some, though imperfect, communion with the Catholic Church”²⁴. It is to be noted that even those Catholics who are separated from full communion with the Catholic Church make it difficult for the Catholic Church to express her full catholicity, unicity, sanctity and apostolicity.

John Paul II in his ecumenical encyclical, *Ut Unum Sint* (The Call For Christian Unity) states that the basis of commitment to ecumenism is Jesus’ prayer on the eve of his death that they *might be one*, a living body in which the plenary of reconciliation and communion must be actualized²⁵. Ontologically and temporally, one’s conversion to Christ has implications for Christian unity. There is one body and one Spirit, just as there is one baptism (cf. Eph.4:4-5). “It is the Holy Spirit, dwelling in those who believe and pervading and ruling over the entire Church, who brings about that wonderful communion of the faithful”²⁶.

²¹ Cf. *Lumen Gentium*, n. 8.

²² *Ibid.*, n. 14.

²³ *Ibid.*, n. 15.

²⁴ *Unitatis Redintegratio* (U.R.), n. 3.

²⁵ Cf. J o h n P a u l II, Encyclical Letter *Ut Unum Sint*, n. 6.

²⁶ U.R., n. 2.

1.3.1. The Holy Spirit as the Basis of Ecumenical Dialogue

In contemporary discussion, the Pentecostal outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon all is seen as ushering in a turning point between God-world relationship and consequently relationship between human persons²⁷. On Pentecost Day, the outpouring of the Holy Spirit released pneumatic charismatic gifts that empowered peoples to engage with one another authentically as “other” rather than as mere projections of selves. In Acts 2:1-13, the encounter should be seen as transcending linguistic boundaries towards an “ecumenical engagement.”

The presence of the Spirit manifests itself externally especially in the phenomenon of unity in diversity. The fervour and holiness of the first disciples, and the joyful union and charity between them are all effects of the gift of the Holy Spirit (cf. Acts 2:42). The ministries including ecumenical ministry through which the Church takes shape as a social body, are oriented to spiritual edification (cf. 1Cor.12:27).

It is not the aim of authority to stifle the Spirit. Creative, loving, liberty, the Holy Spirit also is fidelity- fidelity to the Gospel which is extended to the promises of Christ in the hierarchical Church (cf. Jn. 20:22-23) at the service of, not lordship over the charismatic. Ecumenical action is indeed an uncompromising and unequivocal commitment to discipleship, that is, fidelity to Christ and the radical implications that such fidelity demands. Thanks to the Holy Spirit who guides the people of God to the full truth.

The contextual implications of ecumenical action need be systematically worked out in Africa. We need to move away from ecumenical conviction (vision) to ecumenical action (strategy). The Christian faith and praxis entail for everyone, unity in necessities, liberty in non-essentials and charity in and for all²⁸.

A Christian is called upon to work for the harmony even in creation. Ecumenical commitment and Christian engagement are two sides of the same coin. Therefore, ecumenical commitment calls for concerted efforts to alleviate the burdens of deprivation and oppression imposed by one’s fellow human beings. This liberative aspect of ecumenism becomes the framework for the

²⁷ See V.-M. K ä r k k ä i n e n, *Pneumatology: The Holy Spirit in Ecumenical, International and Contextual Perspective*, Grand Rapids, Baker Academic (2002).

²⁸ See *U.R.*, n. 4.

Church's priestly identification with the oppressed, prophetic denunciation of the oppressor and leadership role to uphold human dignity.

1.4. FURTHER ECUMENICAL REFLECTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

A key dimension in the turn towards unity is conversion. Vatican II, *Decree on Ecumenism*, reminds us that there is no ecumenism without conversion and reform²⁹. Therefore, every Christian church is to commit itself to conversion *ad intra*, that is, the conversion of the churches in a strengthening of Christian identity. A change from within for the sake of the whole should be effected. The *ad intra* conversion is bound to *ad extra* conversion, that is, the churches are to arrive at common policies.

With the help of experts, theologians, those who apply the policies should give appropriate weight to the different hierarchy of values. Values that are involved might not be of the same weight but of a hierarchical order. For example, the canon law of the Roman rite allows that a priest may celebrate the Eucharist in a place of worship in any Church provided there is no room for scandal and with the permission of the bishop³⁰.

Through the bishops and bishops' conferences, parishes and dioceses across the continent could intensify collaborative work on a number of pivotal issues pertinent to ecumenism. This leads not only to the issuance of guidelines for ecumenical commitment but also to the response to Christians' search for unity.

The strivings towards unity must not be taken cheaply as a nice getting together of friends. The unity Christians seek is based on God's will. Hence, ecumenism must demand death to all that is opposed to God's will and resurrection to reconciliation with God and one another as the price of unity. The key concept here is repentance. In Mat. 28:19-20 Jesus commissions his disciples to teach and baptize. Moreover, on the eve of his redemptive death, he initiated the Eucharist (cf. Mat. 26: 26-30). The unity Christ envisages is the one whose foci are the word and sacraments.

Desecularization³¹ must become one of our priorities in the ecumenical endeavour. The attempt to deliberately separate the sacral world from the

²⁹ Ibid., nn. 6-9.

³⁰ See *Code of Canon Law*, London: Collins Liturgical Publications 1983, n. 933.

³¹ The author uses the term desecularization to denote the reverse of secularization understood as the separation between the sacred and profane.

profane should be thwarted by commitment to creation. Gospel values must permeate the public sphere as well. Ecumenical commitment in Africa should be scientific as well as existential. Ecumenical dialogue involves practicing love of neighbour as Jesus demands from his followers, not only a love of the family members, but also those not of the household too. To do this, participation and common work for a better world are encouraged.

CONCLUSION

Ecumenical commitment sharpens and fosters sensitivity in our different ministries to the recognition of the activity of the Holy Spirit in the experience of our separated brethren. It reciprocally helps to respect others in humility. Genuine ecumenical dialogue requires that we deepen our Christian commitment. Those who are not rooted in their own identity cannot engage in ecumenical dialogue seriously with Christians of other churches. Therefore, there is need for agents of evangelization to acquire ecumenical formation and ongoing formation. Most importantly, the union of all Christians is a gift of the Holy Spirit. Unity, therefore, must be implored by prayer. The gift needs to be accepted more and more. Christians must truly be convinced that by their own efforts only, they cannot bring full and visible unity. Their confident hope to reach this unity lies on the divine will. They are to carry out ecumenical dialogue as an essential condition along the route to the unity willed by Christ.

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GLÓWNE WYZWANIA EKUMENICZNE W AFRYCE: DYNAMICZNY WZROST KOŚCIOŁÓW NIEZALEŻNYCH

S t r e s z c z e n i e

Niniejszy artykuł poświęcony jest ekumenizmowi jako podstawowej formie działalności misyjnej, mającej na celu zjednoczenie wszystkich chrześcijan. Artykuł omawia dynamiczny wzrost liczby Kościołów niezależnych (AIC), który jest głównym wyzwaniem dla wysiłków ekumenicznych podejmowanych we współczesnej Afryce. Afryka to kontynent wielu możliwości, ale i ulotnych marzeń, pełen wielu sprzeczności i nielogiczności. Pod względami narodowościowymi, religijnymi i ekonomicznymi Afryka jest mocno podzielona. Odbudowa Afryki w zgodzie z argumentacją omawianą w niniejszym artykule będzie możliwa, jeśli powstanie etos i kultura jedności, dialogu ekumenicznego oraz praktyki wzajemnego poszanowania. Artykuł ukazuje, że ekumenizm obejmuje szerokie pole działań opartych na mechanizmach jednoczenia ludzi. Dlatego współpraca wokół idei ekumenizmu stanowi pilną potrzebę w takich dziedzinach, jak pomoc społeczna, modlitwa, poszukiwanie dróg do pokoju i sprawiedliwości, pomimo podziałów plemiennych i nieuczciwości, budowanie wiary we własne siły przedstawicieli zmarginalizowanych grup społecznych, by naprawić zło rozbicia i fragmentacji więzi międzyludzkich.

Słowa kluczowe: ekumenizm, Kościół w Afryce, wyzwania ekumeniczne w Afryce.