

Fifty Years after the Second Vatican Council: A Critical Review of the Roman Catholic Church's Approach to Interreligious Dialogue and Seeking a Way Forward Through Interreligious Friendship

By: SimonMary A. Ahiokhai, PhD (Cand.)
Duquesne University

Abstract

Interreligious dialogue ought to lead to transformation of hearts and the theological traditions of the religions engaged in dialogue. This cannot happen when the dialogical model adopted by any of the religions is shaped by an exclusivist theology that refuses to consider the dialogical partners as possessing salvific truths, legitimate in themselves, without reference to another religion for its legitimacy. Though the Second Vatican Council encouraged dialogue among religions, the question remains, can the Catholic Church accept the view that its dialogue partners are legitimate media for God's salvific truths in themselves? After fifty years since the Council, it is important that a critical review of the dialogical model adopted by the Catholic Church be done and a more transformative method of dialogue be embraced that affirms God's freedom to engage human society through the many religions.

Introduction

The conciliar declaration on the relation of the Catholic Church to non-Christian religions, otherwise known as *Nostra Aetate*, has been celebrated by many since the Second Vatican Council as a forward looking and ground-breaking document that helped to shape the church's future dealings with other religions. There is some truth to this claim and there are also vestiges of the *ancien régime* on how the Catholic Church views itself and its mission in relation to other religions and what is not Roman Catholic. To foster authentic dialogue among

religions, these paradoxes present in the desires of the Roman Catholic Church and its actual teachings on other religions are worth exploring and critiquing.

The beginning words of *Nostra Aetate* reflect an awareness of the dynamics operative in the world the Second Vatican Council was faced with and had to address. The examination of the Roman Catholic Church's relations with non-Christian religions is addressed within the context of growing bonds of friendship among peoples from different lands and cultures. This is a strategic approach that legitimizes the claim that the Catholic Church is on the right path in its desire to engage non-Christian religions in friendship.

It is of great importance, theologically, to use friendship to describe the type of relationship the Council aims to have with other religions. Friendship, as understood in many western epistemological discourses, entails the respect of otherness, openness, trust, and a transformation both of perceptions of the other and of self-awareness. While affirming the positive path the Council called for Catholics to follow in their interactions with members of other religions, it is of utmost importance to evaluate how faithful the Catholic Church has been to this project for the past fifty years since the pastoral council called for a healthier way of engaging other religions.¹ This evaluation is necessary because the document, *Nostra Aetate*, spelt out the relevance of those things that bind human community together – the reality of their common humanity; their desire to serve God; their common origin; and their common destiny.²

¹ Declaration: *On the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions – Nostra Aetate* (October 28, 1965), #5, http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decl_19651028_nostra-aetate_en.html (accessed January 25, 2013).

² Ibid, #1.

Limitations of the Hermeneutics on Interreligious Dialogue Proceeding from *Nostra Aetate*

Though this section addresses the limitations of the conciliar document, *Nostra Aetate*, the strength of the position adopted by the Council lies in the revolutionary break from the ideology of separation that characterized the Catholic Church's relational engagement with non-members to a conscious effort to engage them and a willingness to consider non-Catholic religious traditions as possessing elements of salvific truths.³ Prior to the Second Vatican Council, isolation from other Christian and non-Christian religions was the rule of law within the Catholic Church.⁴ This approach by the Catholic Church gained support through the decisions of the Council of Trent that declared anathemas on the teachings of the Protestant churches.⁵ Emperor Charles V of the Holy Roman Empire was enjoined by the Council to suppress the Protestant churches in his dominion.⁶ Pope Pius IX, in his Apostolic Letter, *Iam Vos Omnes* enjoined Protestants to abandon their erroneous beliefs and return to the Catholic faith.⁷ This view was pushed forward by many popes in their attempt to combat Modernism and resist the restructuring of Christendom by the nationalistic forces that gripped Europe during the Modern Era.⁸

³ *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church: Lumen Gentium* (November 21, 1964) ##15 – 16, http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html (accessed May 10, 2012).

⁴ See Pius XI, *Encyclical Letter: Mortalium Animos* (January 6, 1928), ##10 – 11, http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/pius_xi/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-xi_enc_19280106_mortalium-animos_en.html (accessed January 25, 2013).

⁵ See Carlton J. H. Hayes, Marshall Withed Baldwin, and Charles Woolsey Cole, *History of Europe* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1949), p. 502.

⁶ See the mandate condemning and outlawing Protestantism issued by Emperor Charles V of the Holy Roman Empire in Hans Hillerbrand, ed., *The Reformation: A Narrative History Related by Contemporary Observers and Participants* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1972), pp. 469 – 472.

⁷ Pius IX, *Apostolic Letter: Iam Vos Omnes – To Protestants and Other Non-Catholics*, in *The Christian Faith in the Doctrinal Documents of the Catholic Church*, ed. Jacques Dupuis (New York: Alba House, 2001), p. 373.

⁸ See Pius IX, *Encyclical Letter: Qui Pluribus – On Faith and Religion*, (November 9, 1846), #15, <http://www.papalencyclicals.net/Pius09/p9quiplu.htm> (accessed January 25, 2013). While condemning the

While the Reformation was seen as mainly a Christian event concerning heretics who later became legitimate Christian Churches breaking away from the Roman Catholic Church (as the church became known after Trent), historical data justifies the argument that the dynamics of the Roman Catholic Church's relation with other religions changed after the Council of Trent.⁹ The ideology of 'error can never be right' was used to address both the Protestant reality and everything that was not Roman Catholic. The suppression of Jews intensified in territories that were controlled by Protestant and Catholic princes, including the Papal States.¹⁰

One may wonder why this paper begins the discussion on the limitations of *Nostra Aetate* with a discussion on the non-tolerant attitude of the Catholic Church as an institution during the post Trent era. The simple answer is that the anti-Semitic attitude that has shaped the Roman Catholic and Christian attitude toward Jews originates from the mentality of religious superiority. This has found itself in the theological defense of the relevance of Roman Catholic theological hermeneutics on the salvific universality of Jesus Christ in relation to the legitimate revelation found in other religions. The Curial documents, *Dominus Iesus* and *Dialogue and Proclamation*, both emphasize the claim of Roman Catholicism to the plenitude of

nationalistic forces in the Papal States, Pius IX condemned the attempt to introduce Protestantism into the papal territories and describes Protestantism as erroneous in its teachings. See *Encyclical Letter: Nostis et Nobiscum – On the Church in the Pontifical States*, (December 8, 1849), #6 <http://www.papalencyclicals.net/Pius09/p9nostis.htm> (accessed January 25, 2013). Pius X vehemently condemned Modernist teachings including those that defended other religions as legitimate ways of engaging the divine. See *Encyclical Letter: Pascendi Dominici Gregis*, (September 8, 1907), #14, http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/pius_x/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-x_enc_19070908_pascendi-dominici-gregis_en.html (accessed January 25, 2013).

⁹ See "Cum Nimis Absurdum (Bull establishing the Roman Ghetto in 1555)" in Kenneth Stow, *Catholic Thought and Papal Jewry Policy 1555 – 1593* (New York: JTS, 1977), pp. 294 – 298.

¹⁰ Many post-Tridentine popes enacted laws and published papal bulls that restricted movement of Jews in the Papal States. The "Edict concerning the Jews" by Pope Pius VI even reserved capital punishment for Jews who spent the night outside the ghettos erected to curtail their movement and separation from Catholics in the Papal States. For a detailed treatment of this edict by Pope Pius VI in the late eighteenth century see Nancy Nowakowski Robinson, *Institutional Anti-Judaism: Pope Pius VI and the "Edict concerning the Jews" in the Context of the Inquisition and the Enlightenment* (Bloomington, Indiana: Xlibris, 2004).

truth and this plenitude lies in the definitive and final revelation in Jesus Christ. Thus, for example, the claim of Islam to divine revelation is negated and only appreciated if it reconciles with what the Catholic Church teaches on Jesus Christ. Also, proclamation is seen to take precedence over dialogue.¹¹ This point is buttressed by Pope John Paul II in the encyclicals; *Redemptoris Missio* and *Fides et Ratio*. In these documents, the relationship between freedom and truth is found in Jesus Christ.¹² Consequently, any theological reflection on the salvific role of other religions essentially must proceed through a Christ-centered hermeneutics. Even though *Nostra Aetate* admits the possibility of the veracity of the truth claims found in other religions, such truth claims derive their validity only through the hermeneutic criteria propounded by the Roman Catholic tradition.

Nostra Aetate betrays differing theological opinions; while trying to maintain the ecclesial identity constructed during the era when the Catholic Church saw itself as the only legitimate religion in relation to Judaism, after Christians were expelled from the Temple and Synagogue liturgies, and the other religions found in the Roman Empire,¹³ there is the noticeable desire to “acknowledge, preserve and encourage the spiritual and moral truths found among non-Christians, together with their social life and culture.”¹⁴ Such tensions can be helpful when allowed to play out in the spirit of openness. It is worth noting that the tension is

¹¹ Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Declaration: "Dominus Iesus" – On the Unicity and Salvific Universality of Jesus Christ and the Church*. (August 6, 2000), #2, http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20000806_dominus-iesus_en.html (accessed May 10, 2012).

¹² Pope John Paul II, *Encyclical Letter: Fides et Ratio* (September 14, 1998), #34 http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_15101998_fides-et-ratio_en.html (accessed May 10, 2012). See also *Encyclical Letter: Redemptoris Missio* (December 7, 1990), #5, http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_07121990_redemptoris-missio_en.html (accessed May 10, 2012).

¹³ *Nostra Aetate*, #4.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, #2.

not resolved in the document. Perhaps, the council fathers intended it to be unresolved. The desire to engage other religions was relatively new considering the centuries-old position that recommended isolation from the separated churches. Caution seems to have prevailed as the council fathers deliberate on how and what type of engagement was needed in relation to non-Catholic religions.

The fundamental question arises; how is evangelization going to play out in the Roman Catholic Church if one is to take seriously the recommendations put forward by the Council in this document? The council fathers called upon Catholics to engage in “dialogue and collaborate with non-Christians in the spirit of prudence and love and while always witnessing to the Christian faith and life.”¹⁵ Unfortunately, the Catholic Church has spent centuries building a theological identity that legitimizes its own relevance in the religious context while trying to delegitimize Judaism and other religions. The usage of the term “the new people of God’, though it cannot be found in the entire Christian Scripture, to describe the identity of the members of the Roman Catholic Church, preserves the relevance of Roman Catholicism at the expense of Judaism that has always rightly understood itself as a way of relating with God who has chosen them to be His people. Ironically, *Nostra Aetate* uses this phrase to define the Catholic Church while rejecting anti-Semitic attitudes and ideologies.¹⁶ Even though the context in which this phrase is used in the document buttresses the rejection of anti-Semitic attitudes, the term itself does not justify an embrace of Judaism in its entirety. The problem with the phrase lies with the adjective “new.” One wonders why the relationship between Christ and his followers will be phrased in similar terms to that between God and Israel.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid, #4.

The use of the term “the new people of God” is tied to the understanding of the Early Church being the “New Covenant”.¹⁷ Just as Israel’s covenant with God made them the “People of God,” the Catholic Church sees itself, as did the early Christians, as entering into a covenantal relationship with God through Jesus Christ, thus making members of the Catholic Church the ‘new people of God.’¹⁸ This term smacks of the centuries old anti-Semitic attitudes beginning with the early Christians that have shaped Christian-Jewish relations.

The term, “the new people of God,” reflects the arrogance of the early Christians and the ignorance of the knowledge of the enduring legitimacy of the covenant between God and Israel by many members of the Roman Catholic Church over the centuries. Even though Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, in 2001, helped to clarify the usage of this term by the Council, it still does not remove the contradiction that helps to give legitimacy and finality to the orthodoxy of the Catholic Church in relation to other religions.¹⁹ Rather than argue for the legitimacy of the Roman Catholic Church within the boundaries of Judaism, since it is a religion that first understood itself as the people of God, Roman Catholic magisterium, as reflected in the conciliar documents, grants legitimacy to Judaism only within the context of Christ’s salvific role in human history.²⁰ By using the adjective “new” to qualify the Roman Catholic Church and its members, Judaism, like the other non-Christian religions simply becomes *preparatio evangelica*.

¹⁷ The Letter to the Hebrews (Heb. 8:8) gives a Christological meaning to the passage in Jer. 31:34. However, though Jeremiah talks of a new covenant to be made between God and Israel, the enduring word of God, first proclaimed at Sinai, remains: Israel will always be God’s people and Yahweh will be Israel’s God.

¹⁸ More study is needed to understand why the Council decided to add the adjective “new” to qualify the people of God in describing the identity of Catholics.

¹⁹ Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, “The Ecclesiology of Vatican II,” *Conference of Cardinal Ratzinger at the Opening of the Pastoral Congress of the Diocese of Aversa (Italy)* September 15, 2001, <http://www.ewtn.com/library/curia/cdfecv2.htm> (accessed May 10, 2012).

²⁰ *Lumen Gentium*, #9.

The fullness of Christianity as understood by the Roman Catholic magisterium is the finality and totality of God's revelation.

Nostra Aetate fails to resolve this dilemma and simply repeats it while trying to change the dynamics of the relationship between the Catholic Church and Judaism. The prayer of the Council is reflected in the Dogmatic Constitution, *Lumen Gentium*, which states: "...the fullness of the whole world may move into the people of God, the body of the Lord and the temple of the holy Spirit, and that in Christ, the head of all things, all honor and glory may be rendered to the Creator, the Father of the universe."²¹ This prayer simply reflects a Roman Catholic hope where human society will possess a Christian identity. It is not an interfaith prayer that reflects the glory of God manifested in many and yet valid revelations of encounter between God and humanity. There is no scriptural basis describing the covenant between God and Israel as old, imperfect, and incomplete except in some New Testament writings, noticeably the Letter to the Hebrews, which uses these terms in the context of the brewing tensions between the Jewish religious authorities and the new Christian sect within Judaism that was threatened of expulsion from Temple worship and eventually expelled. The theological significance of such terms must never be devoid of their origin within such historical events.

The early Christians, faced with the reality of defining themselves outside of their mother religion, Judaism, felt the need to approach such a task by defining themselves in relation to Judaism; first, when the majority of the followers were Jewish converts. A positive view of Judaism was accepted and the Jewish Christians adopted the Jewish dietary regulations and insisted on the Jewish ritual of circumcision as necessary requirements for membership in

²¹ Ibid, #17.

the Christian community.²² It took the courage of the Apostles Paul and Peter to argue for a broader approach to defining the requirements for membership in the community.²³ Eventually, at the Council of Jerusalem, a compromised position was adopted.²⁴ Second, as the demography of Gentile Christians increased, the negative rhetoric against Judaism and other religions became very apparent. As early as 130 C.E., writings on Christian apologetics justifying the legitimacy of Christianity at the expense of Judaism and other religions were already in circulation. Using the pseudonym Mathetes, a Christian writer wrote the *Epistle to Diognetus*. Diognetus was the tutor of the emperor, Marcus Aurelius. In the epistle, the author trivializes and makes fun of and trivializes Jewish ritual practices and the Jewish people. The purpose of this was to show that Christianity transcends such superstitious and idolatrous practices found in Judaism.²⁵

Another noticeable limitation found in *Nostra Aetate* is the total absence of the need to engage thousands of indigenous religions found in the emerging independent countries in the colonized territories in Africa, Asia, North and South America, and Oceania. Even *Lumen Gentium's* attempt to address the relation of non-Christian religions to the Church of Christ is found lacking in this area. Emphasis is given only to Jews, Muslims, and humanists.²⁶ It is particularly telling because the resilience of these indigenous religions in refusing to convert to

²² Acts 15:1

²³ Ibid, 15:2 -4, 7 – 11.

²⁴ Ibid, 15:13 – 29.

²⁵ Mathetes, "Superstitions of Jews," and "The Other Observance of the Jews," Chapters III and IV, *Epistle to Diognetus*, <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/anf01.iii.html> (accessed January 25, 2013).

²⁶ I should point out that the only place the Indigenous Religions of Africa and Asia are mentioned is in the first encyclical letter of Paul VI, written during the Council. He had visited some countries in Africa while he was Cardinal Archbishop of Milan. His observations of the way of life of the indigenous people must have shaped his views on the people and their religions. See Encyclical Letter: *Ecclesiam Suam*, (August 6, 1964), #107, http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/paul_vi/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-vi_enc_06081964_ecclesiam_en.html (accessed January 25, 2013).

Christianity and abandon their religious or secular stance seems to have made the Council to reflect further on how God might be working within the context of these people. While many of the council fathers were ministering in places considered mission territories in Africa, Asia, the Americas, and Oceania, the noticeable absence of treatment of the indigenous religions in these areas reveals a prevailing attitude that justified the common interests of colonialism and Christian evangelization. The former couched colonial interests under the guise of bringing civilization to the people in these continents and Christian missionaries were driven by the agenda of making Christians of the pagan worshippers of these lands whom they reduced to the status of devil worshippers.

Again, in the spirit of the Council, the recognition of the dynamics operative in the world today calls for an urgent desire to foster healthy ways of interreligious engagement that reflect the characteristics of friendship.²⁷ The Council attests to this fact through the beautiful introductory words of the Pastoral Constitution, *Gaudium et Spes*, which states: "The joys and hopes, the grief and anguish of the poor of our time, especially of those who are poor or afflicted, are the joys and hopes, the grief and anguish of the followers of Christ as well."²⁸ This is possible because the Council saw the possibility of authentic friendship existing between the Catholic Church and humanity in general.²⁹ It is important to explore the nature of such friendship in the context of interreligious dialogue.

²⁷ See *Nostra Aetate*, #1.

²⁸ *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World: Gaudium et Spes*, (December 7, 1965), #1, http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_cons_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html (accessed January 25, 2013).

²⁹ *Nostra Aetate*, #1

Conditions for Interreligious Friendship

Friendship, since it entails a deliberate process between two or more persons, involves a movement toward the other. One cannot be a friend of another without making a move toward the object of the friendship. In other words, friendship involves moving from one's comfort zone into the realm of expectation. Just as one engages the other with an attempt to establish the bonds of friendship, the other, if such friendship is to be authentic, must always have the freedom to respond as she sees fit to the gestures from the initiator. Friendship involves reciprocity. Though the measure of friendship is not to be determined simply by visible exchange of goods, it involves openness of one to the other in a reciprocal manner.

Martin Buber highlights the relevance of reciprocity in *relationality*. This contribution of his has helped contemporary scholars to appreciate two aspects of friendship; first is the relevance of mutual commitment to the bonds of friendship that unites two distinct persons or groups, and second is the possibility for mutual transformation.³⁰ Buber's discourse is relevant if one is to understand what genuine friendship really means especially when contemporary society seems to be held captive by the false elevation of the self at the expense of the other (the self can be the individual, an institution, or a construction of identity that denies the legitimate presence and relevance of alterity).

By stressing mutuality in friendship, the encounter becomes truly open to possibilities. This openness, for it to be truly transformative, must be entered into without preconditions. In the context of interreligious engagements, preconditions can be couched under the guise of

³⁰ Martin Buber, *Between Man and Man* (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1965), p. 22

upholding theological views or claims that deny the religious other her autonomy to define how God continues to reveal himself/herself/itself within their own tradition. However, though friendship preserves the respective autonomies of the friends, there is a fine line between autonomy and relationality. Relationality does not mean the disappearance of differences; rather, it hinges the possibility for encounter within the differences between the participants. Devoid of differences, the encounter stands the risk of being a narcissistic affirmation of sameness.

Post-Conciliar papal documents have stressed the relevance of interreligious dialogue as proceeding from the Holy Spirit.³¹ Emphasis has also been given to the need to be open to the encounter.³² However, there have been arguments on the part of the Roman Catholic Church that limit how the workings of the Spirit will play out in such encounters among religions. Rather than allow the Spirit of God to define the outcome of dialogue with other religions, the view of the magisterium is to defend the claim that the Church is the sole source of complete salvific truths. In the words of Pope John Paul II; “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.”³³ The general understanding, as articulated by Francis Cardinal Arinze, is that interreligious dialogue, while leading to friendship, can become a source of conversion to the Catholic faith. However, when the opposite occurs, there is an ideological hesitation that calls to question the authentic discernment of the Spirit

³¹ John Paul II, *Encyclical Letter: Redemptoris Hominis*, (March 4, 1979), ##11 -12, http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_04031979_redemptor-hominis_en.html (accessed January 25, 2013). See also *Redemptoris Missio*, ##29, 55 – 57.

³² Paul VI, *Ecclesiam Suam*, ## 93, 107, and 117. See also *Nostra Aetate*, #5.

³³ John Paul II, *Redemptoris Missio*, #55.

leading the Catholic participant to embrace the other religion.³⁴ In my humble view, such a double standard approach reveals the attempt on the part of some members of the Roman Catholic magisterium to deny the complete freedom of God to shape the dialogical encounter among religions.

Paul VI, in his first encyclical, called for the Catholic Church to engage in serious critical self-reflection as a way of its understanding itself.³⁵ However refreshing this call may be, it lacks a notable ingredient – letting the Spirit have complete freedom in defining who and what the Catholic Church is in relation to other religions. Authentic self-reflection is never in isolation of external factors; rather, it is always within the dirty and rugged plains of encounters with the religious other or the secular world. The Catholic Church must trust the Spirit of God in its deliberations and encounters with the other religions; while believing that the will of God will definitely prevail. Emphasis ought to be on the revelation of the will of God and not on the preservation of the ecclesial structures within the Roman Catholic Church.

Hypothetically, interreligious friendship can lead a Catholic to engage in an open and vulnerable discernment process that leads to conversion to the religion of her dialogical partner. In that case, the glory of God has been made manifest for that person and it does not mean in any way that the Roman Catholic Church lacks the ability to provide the means of salvation as a denomination of the Christian religion. The same can be said of the other religions should their followers embrace the Catholic faith.

³⁴ Cardinal Francis Arinze, *The Risks and Rewards of Interreligious Dialogue: Meeting Other Believers* (Huntington, Indiana: Our Sunday Visitor, Inc., 1997), p. 72.

³⁵ Paul VI, *Ecclesiam Suam*, #18.

The basis for openness in interreligious friendship, from the Christian perspective, which is shared by the Catholic Church, is the Holy Spirit. If, as followers of Christ, Catholics trust the Spirit as guiding them in their engagement with other religions, it follows then that there must be the willingness to embrace totally the unfolding of the encounter. The type of openness being called for includes the intellectual, emotional, cultural, psychological, and the religious. The religious other must be seen as the concrete invitation of God to live out the life of faith that transcends the realm of human control and manipulations. It includes being confident enough to challenge one's religious and social history and speaking truth to those aspects that fall short of the charity of Christ in the Christian context or the ideals of the other religions.

Another aspect of interreligious friendship which can be deduced from the contributions of Buber on his discourse on relationality is trust.³⁶ This virtue does not merely refer to the individuals involved in the friendship. It extends to the ability of the friends from the different religions to trust that God has willed that they become friends. This has some notable implications. It is not enough to trust the representatives of the respective religions who are engaged in mutual dialogical encounters. What Buber envisages is trust in the respective religions as agents of God's saving grace. To engage another religion with the bias that that religion is inferior to one's own is to move from friendship to the realm of religious arrogance. Unfortunately, this is the attitude of the Roman Catholic Church today even after fifty years

³⁶ Martin Buber, *Between Man and Man*, pp. 7 – 8.

since the pastoral council made attempts to broaden its understanding of God's working outside the boundaries of the Catholic Church.³⁷

Though attempts have been made to engage other religions, the internal documents that shape the attitude of Roman Catholics in relation to other religions show a lingering bias for viewing the other religions as inferior to the Christian religion as understood by the Catholic magisterium.³⁸ Rather than focus on expounding arguments showing why Christ is the finality of divine revelation as has been the approach adopted by the Catholic Church's magisterium, more attention needs to be given to how God continues to work in human history. God's work in human history goes beyond our human comprehension and sometimes contradicts all that human knowledge has attained. For a change of attitude to occur in the way the Catholic magisterium sees other religions, there must be intellectual conversion on the part of the leaders. They ought to also have total trust in God's goodness that continues to invite humanity to a deeper relationship. Through this approach, the Catholic magisterium may begin to contextualize the role and place of Christ in the revelation of God to humanity.

For Christians, Christ is God. However, the incarnate Christ cannot exhaust the totality of God's salvific economy without depriving his humanity of its identity as human or depriving God of God's infiniteness. This does not mean that the revelation of God in Christ is in anyway insufficient for enacting human salvation. God always engages humanity on the level of human capacity. Not even the totality of human knowledge can exhaust the totality of God's revelation. The focus should shift from totality to sufficiency. The Christological discourse that

³⁷ See *Dominus Iesus*, #7. A distinction is made between Catholic belief and those of other religions. The former is referred to as theological faith and presented as more authentic. The latter is simply referred to as belief.

³⁸ See the curia document, *Dominus Iesus*.

was summarized in the curial document *Dominus Iesus* focuses on Christ's revelation of divine economy as total, complete, definite, and final.³⁹ This approach makes it difficult for the Catholic Church to authentically engage with other religions. It also makes it difficult for Catholics to recognize their limitations and inability to comprehend the totality of the mystery of the incarnation as part of God's concrete revelatory encounter with humanity.

The shift to understanding the salvific effect of the Paschal Mystery as sufficient for salvation does not relativize the ministry of Jesus Christ. The shift makes concrete the understanding that God always encounters humans within their context. It simply implies also that the truths of salvation are not some form of numerical truths that can be counted and which are found completely only within the Roman Catholic Church; rather, it moves the focus to context.

The shift to sufficiency supports the view that God engages humans always within their context and provides them sufficient salvific grace. For Christians in general, God continues to engage them through the salvific effects of the birth, death, and resurrection of the incarnate Christ. Even among Christians, the different denominations emphasize different aspects of the salvific effects of Christ's ministry. This does not mean that these churches and denominations lack the totality of the salvific truths as the Catholic magisterium would want to opine. Rather, it simply means that God's salvific grace through and in Christ leads the different churches to God by providing them the sufficient graces needed within their particular contexts. For the other religions, it means that God continues to engage them by providing them salvific graces needed within their religious contexts. One implication of this type of reasoning is that it does

³⁹ *Dominus Iesus*, §§ 5 – 6.

not deny the place of evangelization, but changes its aim from trying to present the legitimacy of one religion at the expense of others to the recognition of the particular context of the would-be convert. In other words, evangelization becomes an invitation to discern how God wants a convert to relate with him/her/it within a particular faith community. For example, some people find Roman Catholic expression of Christianity more appealing than other religions. Some find Islam as the community of faith that best expresses their desire to engage the divine. And there are those who spend their entire lives seeking the faith community that best addresses their calling to engage the divine. This does not delegitimize the other religions in anyway. Rather, it supports the argument that God has and continues to engage humans through multiple ways. Again, it does not deny the argument that God's revelation in Jesus Christ is unique and enduring. Also, all that the Catholic Church teaches about Christ's role in divine economy can still be valid if understood within the context of Christianity. Even though the effect of Christ's Paschal Mystery has universal implications, it still does not prevent God from engaging humans through other concrete ways. After all, the enduring covenant between God and Israel did not prevent God from engaging humans through Jesus Christ.

Many instances abound showing how interreligious friendship helps to dispel unfounded prejudices and myths. Among the Ihievbe people of Edo State, Nigeria, a strong sense of interreligious friendship exists. From my interactions with the people of the town as I attempted to study the reason for their peaceful co-existence in relation to other religiously pluralistic areas in Nigeria that have experienced constant tensions and violence, I came to understand the importance the town gives to establishing and sustaining bonds of friendship and hospitality that cut across, gender, religion, and social status. The town is inhabited by

Muslims, Catholics, and members of Ihievbe Traditional Religion. These three groups have been able to create an atmosphere of interreligious appreciation for each other. During the time I spent interviewing the members of these religions and administering survey questionnaires, I realized that, though the members of these religions adhere to their faiths, they have refused to allow religion to become a source of division among them.⁴⁰ One concrete way they have been able to make this possible is by having interreligious meetings on a monthly basis. The members of the three religions meet to discuss their religions and challenge each other when a theological view threatens the common peace. This approach has helped the members of the different religions to have a broader perspective of their own religions as well as those of their neighbors.

When asked why there was no religious violence in the town, many of those interviewed considered religious violence to be a betrayal of the ideals of their religions. All those interviewed opined that God's peace must be celebrated by all religions and the ability to live in harmony demonstrates faithfulness to the will of God made manifest through the presence of the different religions.

⁴⁰ Approval for this research was sought for from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Duquesne University. The researcher sought for an Expedited IRB approval. As part of this request, the researcher had to take a research course and examination under the Human Subject Research Training Certification Program. The course, Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative (CITI) Training Program administered by Duquesne University was completed by the researcher in March of 2011. The IRB approval was granted on May 16, 2011, valid until May 16, 2012 under 45CFR46.101 and 46.111 on an expedited basis under 45CFR46.110. The protocol number for this IRB approval is Protocol #11-61. Letters introducing the researcher were sent to the respective heads of the religious communities present in Ihievbe town on May 17, 2011. These include the Catholic pastor of the Catholic community, the chief Imam of the Muslim community and the High Priest of Akakamiya Shrine (one of the shrines that make the places of worship for members of Ihievbe Traditional Religion). In the letters, the researcher was introduced, his intention was declared, and these leaders were asked to produce the names of the adult members of their communities. The letters were approved by the IRB on May 16, 2011. The researcher chose the participants from the list randomly to preserve their anonymity. Each participant in either the surveys or interviews was given a consent form, which was also approved by the IRB on May 16, 2011. Three hundred persons were surveyed, one hundred from each of the religions present in the town. Forty-five persons were interviewed, fifteen from each of the religions.

While recognizing the effort the Catholic Church and many religions continue to make to engage each other on the magisterial or local levels, there seem to be an absence of engagement on the basic parochial level at least as a policy by the different religions. As a Catholic, I would suggest that the Catholic Church take up the example of the Ihievbe people and advocate for interreligious engagement within the parish setting.⁴¹ This is of utmost importance because most of the religious violence that occurs today takes place within the grassroots level. They are spearheaded by fundamentalists who try to make real the negative apologetics coming from the administrative/magisterial levels of their religions. When interreligious engagement becomes truly part of the identity of the different religions and is emphasized intensely on the parochial level, it will rob religious anarchists of their reasoning for religious violence. By interacting and mutually educating themselves, members of the different religions can begin to appreciate the sense of the sacred, the respective spiritualities, and the religiosities of the members of the different religions and understand that commitment to one's own faith is not the prerogative of members of only one religion. It is a commonly shared reality among religions.

Another concrete step that can help to demonstrate the importance the Catholic Church gives to interreligious friendship is to celebrate the presence of other religions as a gift from God within its liturgical worship. What I am suggesting here goes beyond the occasional interreligious liturgies celebrated during the Week of Prayer, started by the late Pope John Paul II at Assisi. Rather, I am advocating for the recognition of the presence of other religions as a

⁴¹ As noted by Cardinal Cassidy, the plan of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue at its founding was to encourage the establishment of dialogue commissions in every Roman Catholic diocese. Unfortunately, this has not been the reality. See Edward Cassidy, *Rediscovering Vatican II: Ecumenism and Interreligious Dialogue* (New York: Paulist Press, 2005), p. 135.

gift from God and worth giving thanks to God. When, during every Eucharistic celebration, the Catholic community gives thanks to God for the presence of the religious other in its midst, it will create in the minds and hearts of Catholics a sense that God's gift transcends their own religion. I do know that this may be difficult due to the current theological position held by the Catholic magisterium, but on the parochial level, individual faith communities can begin to explore this possibility and make it part of their parochial identity. This can become the practice also of the different religions within the parochial level. Among the Ihievbe people, though they do not have this as part of their liturgical celebrations, a noticeable practice among them is for members of the different religions in the town to celebrate with their friends their different religious rituals. Friends of Catholics usually participate in the Catholic liturgies; Friends of Muslims find time to participate in the Islamic prayers at the Mosque; and Friends of members of Ihievbe Traditional Religion participate in the rituals of the religion. They are motivated by their strong sense of religious hospitality and friendship. The gesture of worshipping with a friend demonstrates a sense of complete trust not just on the emotional level, but also on the religious and psychological level. By worshipping with the friends these people do not abandon their faith traditions. Catholics continue to be Catholics; Muslims continue to be Muslims; and Traditionalists continue to be Traditionalists.

Conclusion

Interreligious dialogue can only lead to conversion of hearts and respect for each religion when it is bound to fraternity among religions and seen by every religious tradition as part of their identity as valid media for relating with the divine. Religious violence continues to

plague many societies today even when human society boasts of being bound to the ideals of communal living. These acts of violence must be addressed along with their root causes with all candidness. It cannot be enough to articulate reasons for dialogue among religions without also reflecting on the dialogical goals within the religions of the agents to the dialogue. For Catholics, the desire to engage in dialogue must be reflected in the entire life of the denomination. It must go beyond theology and be incarnated in the prayers and worship of the faith communities within the Catholic Church. Furthermore, it should become an essential part of Catholic spirituality. By so doing, the desire to embrace exclusivist doctrinal positions that have often led to violent discriminations against non-Catholics will be denied all legitimacy.

Friendship is a concrete way of fostering peace among people. The viability of interreligious friendship lies in the possibility of transferring the benign rapport among persons to the theological sphere; where each religion presents others in positive terms. When people of faith are actively engaged in entering into bonds of friendship, they are more likely to develop a sense of respect and acceptance of differing religious views.

SimonMary A. Ahiokhai Ph.D. (Candidate) is studying Catholic Systematic Theology in Duquesne University. His areas of interest include religion and economic development in developing countries; religion and ecology; religion and identity; and theology, phenomenology, and culture. He has an extensive background in first evangelization in Nigeria and he is involved in Muslim-Christian dialogue. Email: ahiokh9160@duq.edu