Spiritans Interreligious Dialogue, Nigeria North-West

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The author of the universe, as revealed in our sacred scriptures created the world with incredible diversity of possibilities. Diversity has become a common heritage to be cherished, but unfortunately, it is neither appreciated nor cherished. Made so recognizably different in nature from one another, humans are destined to coexist within the same universe, with their diversity influencing positively or negatively, their interactions and relationships. The Spiritan missionary caught in this diversity, witnesses to the good news of the Kingdom, amongst people of diverse backgrounds.

In spite of the diversity, the world is fast becoming a global village. People are more closely connected today than ever. As one moves from one society to another, one observes an impressive display of difference at a scale never before recorded in history. However, there is an exaggerated attention and prominence given to what makes us different and not to what unites us, therefore making diversity a danger. A direct and natural result to the aforesaid is the sprouting of ghettos within the global village, with a divisive-exclusive mindset and language introduced in pronouns such as: “we-they” and “ours-theirs.” This divisive-exclusive mind-set, negatively influences interaction between peoples of diverse backgrounds, giving rise to the global village being assailed by unrest and violent conflicts. Nigeria is not immune from this obvious situation.
As a nation, Nigeria is multi-ethnic and multi-religious. It is beset by all forms of ills that have inflicted great damage on its citizens, impoverished millions, caused untold grief and suffering to many, deprived them of their human dignity, peace, security; in fact, without exaggeration, it is on the verge of depriving them of life itself. To cap it all, religion and factors such as ethnicity and politics, which could have been exploited as great opportunities for peace building, are being used as instruments of exploitation of the masses and as agents of disintegration, thereby destabilizing the nation.

Nigerian citizens are highly religious, apparently God-fearing people, but their ordinary daily encounters are often implicated in the concerns over tension, conflicts, and violence. As a result of mutual misunderstanding, some form of cold war is being fought between adherents of the different religions (Christianity, Islam, and African Traditional Religion) that are practiced in the country. Due to the volatile nature of religion, it is being employed as an instrument of division and exploitation of the masses by politicians to serve their convenience. In such unpleasant and dangerous contexts, interreligious dialogue becomes imperative, as the most human, rational, and peaceful means of achieving peace and stability.

The Spiritan and Dialogue

In the context of dialogue for peace building, the Spiritan missionary on the sideline cannot just be an on-looker. He is destined to engage in dialogue by virtue of his vocation. In the light of the gospel, following in the footsteps of Jesus and in keeping with his charism and experience, he dialogues because he is called to be a sign of communion and an instrument of dialogue. He cannot remain insensitive and indifferent. He must roll up his sleeves and get involved. This is inevitable.

The States encapsulated within the North-West Spiritan provincial landscape span Sokoto, Zamfara, and Katsina States in the North and Kwara and Kogi States in the South. They are heterogenous in composition, characterized by distinctive historical backgrounds and mosaic of ethnic groups, cultures and religions. This diversity is wealth. This wealth, very unfortunately, is being exploited negatively for destruction and not for construction. In spite of the peculiar multi-ethnic and multi-faith nature of this population, the people live and struggle side by side, because they are faced with the same challenges of life in trying to build a united, peaceful, vibrant and indivisible society. This is the context in which the Spiritan missionary has to work. In spite of difficulties, he must endeavor, under the impetus of the Holy Spirit, to reach across the divide, so that the Kingdom of God, a kingdom of peace, love, truth, and justice may become a reality and flourish.

Although, not well versed in the theory and practice of dialogue, confreres live day by day in this context, cognizant of the difficulty and hardship involved, practicing dialogue implicitly. It is important to note that the background and context of the North-West Spiritan Province are, to some reasonable extent, similar to those of her North-East sister province. Different scenarios could be observed in the South (East and also West), but each is equally
faced with the challenges of dialogue. The story in this presentation seeks to convey our little practical experience in response to our commitment to Spiritan mission in this context of dialogue.

What is our Mission?

It is barely a year since we were saddled with the noble and onerous responsibility of a chaplaincy ministry at one of the Nigeria’s federal universities, the University of Ilorin, Kwara State. It is located within the North-West Province. This university gives a good mirror image of Nigeria’s religiously and ethnically polarized and divided society. Within the precinct of the university is a Catholic chapel, St. Thomas Aquinas Catholic Chaplaincy (STACC), with a presbytery for the chaplains. We are neighbors with a chaplaincy for other Christian denominations and a mosque.

In a nutshell, being at the helm of the stewardship of the Catholic family of the university, with a young vibrant Spiritan confrere to form a community (and at intervals, Spiritan seminarians in formation) our role is the continuation and improvement of the Spiritan Catholic identity and presence. The chaplaincy has been functional for more than thirty-three years. Our pastoral insertion is for the accompaniment of individual members and shared spiritual awareness, growth, and moral formation of the Catholic family.

Our activities include worship and liturgy in which we strive to maintain an environment of love, reverence, praise, and thanksgiving to God. We endeavor to encourage the development of a desirable ambiance, which indicates to all members of the STACC family, their Christian responsibility of service to others, within and beyond the university milieu. They achieve this through their availability at work, presence, and sharing in the different movements and faith groups of the chaplaincy. Academic and intellectual excellence is not underplayed. We endeavor to strike a balance.

Our Engagement in Dialogue

The University of Ilorin has an established body and structure for interreligious dialogue, the Unilorin Interreligious Council (UIC). Of this council, we are members. This council comprises the Dean of Students Affairs, representatives drawn from amongst the adherents of the different faiths and the religious leaders of the different faiths represent the student body. This structure (UIC) was set up by the university authority to facilitate contacts and encounters, in a relatively conducive atmosphere, for constructive collaboration.

The initiative of having an inter-religious council in the university is a noble one, and the university is a rich environment for engaging in meaningful interreligious dialogue with students from a plethora of religious, racial, ethnic and cultural backgrounds. This arrangement fits in well with the students’ preparation for the future, as principal players in their communities, nations, and in the world’s political events. They have the potential of engaging with
one another in a meaningful exchange, if properly guided and oriented. This ought to be in a way conducive to reaching or developing peaceful co-existence that challenges false images and ideas.

**The Role of the Interreligious Council**

The University of Ilorin Interreligious Council has the following responsibilities:

- forging harmonious and peaceful interreligious co-existence among adherents of different faiths within the university community;
- ensuring a very peaceful co-existence among them;
- fostering deep understanding of the different religious tenets to dissipate ignorance;
- encouraging mutual respect amongst the adherents for the practice of their tenets and modes of worship;
- ensuring that students do not engage in religious activities that will disturb the peace in the university or cause disaffection and distraction from the primary purpose and objective of their studentship in the university;
- ensuring that no individual or group carry out provocative activities to incite one group against another, thereby igniting skirmishes on campus;
- ensuring that all religious activities get approval and are carried out at approved designated venues;
- participating actively at “freshers” orientation programs to acquaint students with approved guidelines for religious activities on campus that are in conformity with acceptable religious doctrines and norms;
- advising the university administration on appropriate measures to maintain and sustain religious peace and harmony and nip in the bud any sign of religious crisis;
- organizing international symposia on interreligious dialogue, which facilitates the coming together of inter-religious councils of tertiary institutions, and liaising with national and international interfaith organizations.

**Challenges**

Interreligious dialogue is a positive way of breaking down the walls of division and building integrated and cohesive communities, but in itself, it is a challenging process. In the case of our university context, the existence of an interreligious council is an advantage to be made full use of, in order to derive its benefits. In spite of the structure in place, one could still truly observe and stumble upon obstacles and challenges. These obstacles and challenges display their ugly heads through utterances and attitudes, which discourage the efforts of the dialogue. Below are some of these obstacles:
• Stereotype, prejudice and bias - all begins here. These are beliefs by groups which engender adversarial attitudes towards people of other groups. These beliefs are fixed and are always present with us when we engage with others in dialogue. They may or not be founded on historical antecedents, unfortunately, they are widely accepted by people in their groups or communities. They are problematic, counter-productive, and pose the greatest challenge to the process of dialogue.

• Dialogue is a fruitless venture: There is a strong feeling sometimes expressed by participants that dialogue is a fruitless venture. They maintain that it is impossible to engage in interreligious dialogue, due to the differences in tenets and world-views. This sentiment is engendered when “dialogue” reaches a cul-de-sac, and there is no way out. This disposition to dialogue could result in an attitude of indifference, not displaying interest in the endeavor. Also, some persons derogatorily refer to the whole process as a “delusion,” thus “interfaith delusion not dialogue.” They believe that dialogue is irrational and is based on impressions held despite being contradicted by reality or rational argument.

• Resistance and exclusion: This is a tendency not manifestly hostile or unfriendly, of impeding and excluding the influence—positive or negative—of others; subtly but decisively reinforcing the distinction of “them” from “us. Negatively put, the attitude smacks of self-love to the exclusion of others. Certainly, this attitude does not resonate with Christian charity.

The curiosity I developed in the Arabic language as an autodidact took me into the domain of Islamic studies and dialogue. I wanted to have a taste of a new foreign language for a change. I wanted to discover another culture and others through language. I did not have any intention of engaging in some form of established formal dialogue. This, in itself, to so many was strange and is still seen as strange. To this adventure of mine, a friend commented: “You like dabbling into things with reckless abandon.” I replied: “Yes.” And we laughed. Some find it incredibly shocking that a priest pronounces Arabic words and uses Arabic expressions. With this outlook, we assign a language to a religion or we assign a religion to a language. We do exactly the same with outfits such as the hijab, and so on. The ordinary understanding is that Arabic is synonymous with Islam, and thereby hangs a tale. Consequent on this understanding, the expectation and common response is expressed in an attitude of “let sleeping dogs lie.”

Here are some of the challenges I encountered:

• Manifest mutual suspicion. Equally observed of participants during forums and encounters is an attitude or sense of reciprocal suspicion. Participants engaged in dialogue watch each other with cautious distrust. In this situation, planning and executing of joint activities or projects become difficult. Common mutual decisions are not easily reached, and if ever decisions are reached, they are not easily implemented.
• **Fear of proselytism.** This fear is engendered by the mutual conception of dialogue as a proselytizing tool; a strategy to make converts of our members. In view of this conception of dialogue, meetings and encounters are avoided or kept at a minimum, just to maintain the status quo - religious co-existence or tolerance. Unfortunately, merely co-existing with others without meeting or interacting cannot help in peace-building. And the absence of conflict does not necessarily mean the existence of peace.

• **Misunderstanding the purpose of interreligious dialogue.** Due to the fact that the concepts, purpose, and objectives are not well defined, one could look at inter-faith dialogue as nothing but a finger-wagging or blame-game forum, in which the adherents of a given faith blame another for something bad or unfortunate, rather than working together for solutions. When the purpose of dialogue is well defined, the obstacles and challenges are better managed.

• **Obstinacy.** This is the unyielding determination to keep to one's opinion and course of action, regardless of others. This poses a great challenge to dialogue. This is intimately and firmly linked to an excessive single-minded zeal for dominance. Sincere encounter could help in relaxing this disposition.

• **Presumption and attempt at interpretation of others’ teachings.** This tendency poses a great challenge to dialogue. In our context, sometimes members come with shocking interpretations of elements of their faith given by adherents of a different faith. These interpretations always come as provocations, not questions seeking answers or explanations.

• **Listening.** This poses a great challenge to dialogue. We honor invitations to meetings, just to assure others of our physical presence, but remain deliberately and intentionally absent-minded. Often participants find it difficult to listen to others. If we don’t listen to others, how can we understand them? During forums, we prefer keeping ourselves busy chatting with our electronic media than listening to others.

• **The ambition to harmonize our teachings or instructions with that of others.** In our venture we bump into certain instructions and teachings, which we find completely different from ours and, therefore, unacceptable. These are not often resolvable issues of difference. These may not even be beliefs easy to harmonize. For instance, Christians faced with the challenge of accepting Mohammed as a prophet, and Muslims, that of accepting Jesus as the son of God or God himself. On a more practical level, there is the question of marriage between Christians and Muslims. While it is allowed for a Muslim male to look for life partners from all quarters, it is disallowed for the Muslim female counterpart to look for or accept partners from all quarters.

• **Lastly, mutual ignorance.** Mutual ignorance of each others’ ways and lives gives rise to mistrust and misunderstanding between participants in dialogue. To accomplish peace, there is need for mutual knowledge of others’ way of being and doing, in order to strengthen and promote mutual understanding. Faced with the challenge of ignorance, dialogue should help adherents in deepening their knowledge and
understanding of their own faith and that of others. This would greatly help in dissipating ignorance.

**Our Approach**

We are in contact daily with peoples of other faiths. We experience the difficulty of living together and the difficulty of interaction. This is normal, just as contact with others is inevitable and normal. So what do we do? Where do we go from here?

Certainly, the doors for healthy dialogue are open to all faiths, but due to fear and suspicion, all are scared stiff of venturing in. We endeavor in our mission to promote and encourage the openness of our students and members to others for a harmonious life together, going beyond mere tolerance of the other. To enter into dialogue, in whatever form, is to be willing to focus on understanding, appreciating and respecting difference. Also, it is our will and effort to acknowledge the rights of the other to exist and to be. In addition, we endeavor to avoid taking decisions that affect all or the other alone, without consulting all concerned. This is to share, to witness to life and the power of Christ Jesus. We witness by living out our faith.

Our Spiritan commitment to being available “where the church finds it difficult to find workers,” reminds us of interreligious dialogue as an important dimension of our apostolic ministry. We are sent “to all peoples, in spite of difficulties.” In accord with the church’s commitment, the Lord calls us to do everything possible to promote dialogue for peace-building.

**Conclusion**

Dialogue with people of other faiths is an integral and indispensable part of our missionary identity and efforts at all levels. The need for dialogue in peace building is not an illusion, it is real. For fruitful dialogue, we ought to cultivate and have an attitude of attentive listening and genuine sharing. In fact, observing a respectful presence, is in itself, witnessing. As we interact with others, we are challenged to retain our own identity and values and at the same time we are inspired to promote unity in the diversity of our contexts.

With respect to future missionary engagement, it would be very helpful to give adequate and formal training and orientation to those embarking on mission and those in formation. With a better understanding of other cultures and religions, their tenets, views, and practices one could navigate and manage dialogue better.

Finally, from our ministry, we have come to discover and we affirm that in dialogue we need and ought to consider the following:

- every human person is created in the image of God and loved by him;
- human dignity ought to be promoted and respected;
- religious and cultural diversity ought to be cherished and preserved;
• mutual knowledge ought to be exploited to improve on relationships;
• sharing of experience and the search for what is common among us is to be encouraged and supported;
• interactions and encounters should be stimulated by love;
• the need to highlight the spirit of service and solidarity for the common good;
• recognize that dialogue, like our mission, is a gift from God to be accepted, appreciated, and cherished.

Dialogue based on the foregoing precepts will go a long way to disperse everything that has the tendency to divide us; it will forge the much desired unity, peace, stability, and consensus for a vibrant and prosperous human society.