



## Features: LONG TERM BRIDGES IN DIALOGUE

Jul 22, 2018

### ABUJA, NIGERIA -

With the rate of killings in Nigeria, many people are confused about the place of dialogue in restoring peace to the nation. It appears that Christians and Muslims who are involved in dialogue are worried because of the political narratives given to the killings in the different parts of Nigeria. The ruling and opposition parties appear to be playing games with human life. The report that “Presidency releases ‘checklist’ on killings under PDP between 1999-2015” is unfortunate. Was it not this same checklist that provoked some Christians and Muslims irrespective of religious affinity to vote massively for APC who promised to change the ugly situation? While Femi Adesina reported that the killings have been turned to opportunity to play irresponsible politics, particularly by the PDP (<https://www.naija.ng/1177671>); some people are wondering if Nigerians are to wait for another “Political Messiah” (Matthew 11:3).

However, the persistent flow of blood in Nigeria challenges the efforts of Christians and Muslims who through different dialogue commissions have tried to build bridges to promote peaceful co-existence. The last meeting of the Nigeria Inter-Religious Executive Council (NIREC) deliberated seriously on the security challenges in Nigeria and decided to send a delegation to the President. The contributions of the different dialogue partners appear to be in vain but it could have been worst without dialogue. Could the government please tell us on what terms they are negotiating with the terrorists? Are these terms religious or political? These questions are serious concerns to

partners in dialogue especially when religious narratives are given the genocide. That priests and worshippers are killed in a Church could indicate that the criminals deliberately want to provoke religious war. On the other hand, these killings in the Church could debunk the narrative of the Herdsmen and Farmers clash by spokesmen of the Federal Government. More worrisome is that the killings have affected both Christians and Muslims. This also could negate the jihad and ethnic cleansing narratives.

In the midst of these conflicts and killings some Christians and Muslims are still seeking ways to build bridges through dialogue. Every year, the Pontifical Council for Inter-Religious Dialogue (PCID) sends Ramadan message to all Muslims in the world. In Nigeria, this is made public and every diocesan director of dialogue takes the message to the various Mosques. To prove that dialogue has not failed, let us look at some reports in the department of mission and Dialogue of the Catholic Secretariat of Nigeria. From the diocesan and Archdiocesan reports, let me appreciate the efforts of the Catholic Bishops for the way and manner they have promoted and supported peaceful co-existence in their different Dioceses and Archdioceses.

I would like to use the reports from Kaduna and Jos as case studies with special thanks to Archbishop Matthew Ndagoso and Archbishop Ignatius Kaigama. From the report of Rev. Fr. Bulus Karis Lukas, the Kaduna Archdiocesan Director of Inter-Religious Dialogue, titled: "Muslims and Christians: From Competition to Collaboration," it is observed that the Archdiocese of Kaduna lives with people of other Faiths majority of whom are Muslims. The Church in Kaduna through the Inter-Religious Dialogue Commission (IRDC) mobilized all parishes to present the Ramadan and 'Id el- Fitri message of the Holy Father, Pope Francis to the Muslims within their jurisdictions. All the priests and the members of the Parish Pastoral Council (PPC) were directed by Archbishop Ndagosoto personally pay a solidarity visit and extend hands of fellowship to the Muslims.

Many parishes adopted different strategies in carrying out this assignment. Rev. Fr Gabriel Agbo, some PPC officers and members of IRDC of St John's Parish, Kachia in the Southern Part of Kaduna State, visited the Imam of the Juma'ah Mosque in Kachia and presented the Holy Father's message to him and other Muslims in the Mosque and

share in the Sallah food with the Muslims who were evidently overwhelmed by the visit and expressed their joy and happiness at this turn of events which according to them was the first time in the history of Kachia. The Imam sent delegates to the parish priests to further appreciate the visit.

In the same vein Interreligious Dialogue Commission of Holy family Catholic Church Barnawa, in the metropolis, Hosted the Sheilks, Imams, Hakim in, some Muslims leaders, and some Christian leaders from other Christian denominations in the evening of 13th June, 2018 to breakfast as the Ramadan came to a close. The message of the Pope to Muslims during Ramadan and 'id el-fitri was given to the Muslims in Barnawa and its surroundings. The Director of IRDC in the Archdiocese, Fr Karis emphasized the need for unity as people of Faith and move ahead from competition to Collaboration for the good of our country. He said if there is any need to compete it must be in doing good works for humanity. The Muslims in their turn appreciated the gesture and promised also to reciprocate. The Imam of Barnawa Low Cost Housing Estate, presented two books to the Church: "Relations with non-Muslims" and "Protection of Churches, Synagogues and Mosques in Islam."

From the report of Rev. Fr. Blaise Agwom, the Jos Archdiocesan Director of Inter-religious dialogue who also is in charge of Dialogue, Reconciliation and Peace (DREP), it is observed that the centre which is a Non-profit and Non-governmental Organization established to proactively respond to the incessant destruction of lives and property, the polarization of Christian and Muslim settlements in Jos and environs, the "revenge" mentality among youths, and the gap created by prejudice and ignorance of religions. DREP Centre, which was founded since 2011 by Most Rev. Ignatius A. Kaigama, the Catholic Archbishop of Jos, addresses the segregation created by Christians, Muslims and Ethnic groups in Jos and environs as a result of persistent ethno-religious crises. DREP Centre had intervened in the warring groups especially in the conflicts between the communities of the Fulani and Berom. On Christmas day, December 25, 2017, over fifty Muslim families celebrated with Christians in Our Lady of Fatima Catholic Cathedral, Jos. The Muslims presented a goodwill message on the need for peaceful co-existence. This was accompanied by

common meals.

In other places, Christians in solidarity with Muslims have celebrated in each other's festivals. The UFUK Dialogue Foundation invites Christians for Iftar dinner every year in Abuja. Similar gestures were made in other places in Nigeria. Fr. Stephen Ojapah MSP, the Sokoto Diocesan Director of Ecumenism and inter-religious Dialogue through the encouragement of Bishop Matthew Hassan Kukah have also carried along Anglicans and other Christian denominations to promote inter-religious relations with Muslims. The efforts in Maiduguri diocese and other dioceses in the North are remarkable. The reports from the dioceses in the West, East and South will be used in the next publication.

What is needed urgently now is a good relationship between the Christians and Muslims by way of visiting each other in the same community. With this familiarity, strangers and bad elements can easily be identified and exposed. This could inspire the government to treat criminals as criminals. The traditional rulers and community members should endeavour to stop hiding the criminals in their villages and communities. Exposing criminals to justice will go a long way to avert communal clashes and reprisals. Now is the time to deliver religion from the hands of criminals! Now is the time to expose the sponsors of political thugs. Let us build long term bridges through dialogue to make Nigeria a peaceful abode. We can for nothing is difficult for a willing heart. May God restore peace to Nigeria!

Fr. Cornelius Omonokhua is the Director of Mission and Dialogue of the Catholic Secretariat of Nigeria, Abuja  
(omonokhuac@gmail.com)

