



## **INTER-RELIGIOUS DIALOGUE, VATICAN CITY AND BISHOP DENIS ISIZOH**

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### **NIGERIA -**

Experience has shown that religion has suffered distortion from many of its adherents, making it appear as a merchant of hate, harbinger of division and source of discord. In response to suffering, persecution and injustice on account of faith, many adherents express their frustration by hating the faithful of the culprits' religion. Such people interpret dialoguing with their persecutors as a betrayal of faith. Often, Christians, who arguably suffer the most of this ill-treatment, succumb to the temptation to revenge and ill-disposition towards dialogue. Justifiably, self-defence seems the only adequate gospel, though some go to the extreme of employing a pre-emptive attack or retaliation as its best expression. Of course, the profound instinct for self-preservation is an innate acknowledgement that the fifth commandment, 'do not kill' entails as well; do not allow yourself to be killed.

Amidst frustrations as humans with bodies and biographies facing those who corrupt religion by killing and persecuting others in the name of God, Christians have only one unique weapon, love. Utopian as it may sound, love of one's enemy is the exceptional contribution of Christianity to human existential mores. Its fundament is the recognition that only love conforms to God's identity and providence, and spells the invitation to grow into the humanity of Christ. In consequence, proclaiming the good news is a loving and generous act of celebrating something of extraordinary promise, salvation in Christ, so that all peoples will benefit from this treasure. As it is natural to invite friends to experience the greatness of being part of the Chelsea family (the Blues), it is even of greater joy to let humanity encounter Jesus Christ. This proclamation is, therefore, a function of words and works: preaching and encounter. It is a dialogue, which does not seek its gratification, rather it is an eloquent expression of the sovereignty of grace.

Clearly so, Christianity is God's inauguration of dialogue with humanity, through which the Word of God eternally spoken resounds across times and climes in our proclamation and dialogue. Through dialogue, the Logos of God encounters the 'gentiles'. Indeed, dialogue is not mutually exclusive of and incompatible with proclamation but rather forms part of its context. In dialogue, the 'I' engages the 'you', however the 'I' that

engages with the 'you' is not a solitary 'I' of an expert but a corporate 'I' of the Church, the whole Christ. It is the whole Christ, 'Totus Christus', Christ and members, (cf. Eph 1:21-23; Col. 1:18; 1 Cor. 12: 12-13) who encounters a non-Christian so that the event can begin a progressive journey to God in Christ. Without aiming at proselytisation, dialogue, a form of proclamation, does lead to the truth, Jesus Christ.

In that case, proclamation and dialogue are not just text and context, since dialogue is the urtext of the intext that is the Christian message in the context of proclamation. From the beginning, God has always maintained communication with the sinful world. However, in the fullness of time, He gave this dialogue a finality through the Logos made man, who is the definitive and ultimate self-expenditure of God. He inaugurated this dialogue to bring humanity to the knowledge of the truth and as such, know his salvation. The Church, sent to preach to all humankind, is entrusted with the task of engaging every human person, creed and culture in order to understand them so as to live peacefully with them. As a result, they can cultivate a mutual understanding that disposes people to appreciate gifts they are and have, and thus are able to exchange these gifts. It is an encounter that makes it easy to encounter the hope of our Christian existence.

This God-man dialogue through which the human person gains salvation serves as the urtext, the original text which throws meaning to the text of the proclamation. Through that, the Church understands that the imperative of proclamation of Jesus Christ, the Saviour and salvation of all humankind is expressed not only with words, but also with gestures and actions. The deeper the hostility, the greater there is the need for dialogue, and that has nothing to do with the new world order conspiracy theories being peddled in response to the Church's dialogue with other religions.

Christianity, as the counter-narrative to the worldliness of human context, defies world's wilfulness by the logic of love and humility. When the world glamorises force, violence and revenge, the Church raises tributes to Christ by her counter-current adherence to the power of love, forgiveness and encounter. Thus, she raises memorials of Jesus Christ in people's lives so that they will be enthused to surrender to him and as such, find fulfilment. It is far from passivity or yielding to fear. Instead, it is a recognition that greater power lies in love, a currency which runs contrary to the expectation of many. While you are not to kill, you have the right to all legitimate form of self-defence. It places a responsibility also on Christians to work with relevant authorities to rein in the

persecutors, hence isolating fundamentalists from bona fide faithful. Violence is a perversion of religion no matter who promotes it. It cannot be permissible to kill and maim in the name of God of love and peace for hatred and violence are antithetical to Him. Because God is eternal dialogue, Christianity lives her true meaning in dialogue. She proclaims through her life that violence, forced conversions and divisiveness are not in God's name.

To promote the atmosphere of shalom in the world, the Papacy created a dicastery for the Inter-Religious Dialogue expressing the Church's confidence in the possibility of peace. This department promotes peace, understanding and cooperation among people of various faiths, namely Islam, Shintoism, African Traditional Religion, Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, etc. While peace is a gift from the Prince of Peace, Jesus Christ, it is also a responsibility and an artisan's work, which is constructed daily by our decisions and choices, actions and inactions. This Pontifical Council for Inter-Religious Dialogue has numerous staff, members and consultants who carry out this task on behalf of the Holy Father and the universal Church.

In that vein, the Holy Father, Pope Francis reached out to Africa and appointed His Excellency, Most Rev'd Chidi Denis Isizoh, the Auxiliary Bishop of Onitsha as one of the Consultants to the Pontifical Council for the Inter-Religious Dialogue, Vatican City, Europe. With a wide range of experience and academic explorations, Bishop Isizoh, an alumnus of both Pontifical Biblical Institute (Biblicum) and Pontifical Gregorian University, Rome where he studied Scriptural Sciences and Biblical Theology respectively, brings a lot to the new assignment. With over two decades of working with experts and professionals to promote understanding and cooperation among religions, Bishop Isizoh, a former staff of the Office will certainly deploy his rich knowledge, expertise and experiences at the service of the universal Church.

Known for his discipline, thorough-going dedication to duty and professionalism, His Excellency will undoubtedly give his best to this new assignment with his singular devotion to God, entirely for God. His deep scholarship, abundant spiritual resources and pastoral skills will be deployed to cultivate and promote harmony among peoples. Once again, Congratulations Bishop Denis Chidi Isizoh on your new appointment.