Book Review

Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation Querida Amazonia Of The Holy Father Francis

Author: ***Pope Francis***

Publisher: Vatican Press

Year: 2020 / Pages: 88

Reviewer: ***Gesila Nneka Uzukwu***

The post-synodal apostolic exhortation '*Querida Amazonia*' ("Beloved Amazon") was released by the Supreme Pontiff – Pope Francis on February 12, 2020. It concludes the synodal process of the Synod of Bishops for the Pan-Amazon region, which was celebrated in October 2019. *Querida Amazonia* (QA) is a 111-paragraph text that outlines the problems facing the Amazon region. In this light, *QA* presents us with some schemes, in the form of dreams, from which we can draw lines of action.

The social dream decries the ecological and human injustices melted on Amazonian people and calls for a genuine social motivation to "build networks of solidarity" and promote "a globalization without marginalization" [QA no. 17]. Any form of activity within the region, either environmental or business (local or international) must be established based on dialogue among the various stakeholders, a dialogue where the victims take the lead. In the cultural dream, the document notes how the growing industrialisation and development has led to the overcoming of indigenous cultural identities and values so considered uncivilised, in exchange for a culture that isolates the people from cultural roots that gave them a sense of dignity and identity, and the loss of the values that had previously sustained them. Pope Francis dreams of an Amazon region that can preserve, harness, and foster the richness of the 'different cultures and other forms of civilization' that mark the Amazon rather than destroying them [no. 28].

The ecological dream invites the Amazonians to jealously preserve its overwhelming natural beauty and the superabundant life

teeming in its rivers and forests [no. 7]. The care of the people and the care of the ecosystems are inseparable, he argues. Putting the environment at risk by "the conquest and exploitation of its resources" is tantamount to putting human life at risk [no. 48]. In the same way, treating the environment with much respect and care will reduce human suffering, and restore the good of the Amazon and humanity at large [no. 48]. Thus, the Pontiff dreams of protecting the whole ecosystem in a combination of ancestral wisdom with contemporary technology and a legal framework to fight environmental injustice [nos. 49-52].

The ecclesial dream calls the Church to "journey alongside the people of the Amazon region" in faith and love, spreading the Good News of Jesus Christ and God's love for every man and woman [no. 61]. The Pontiff advocates for the inculturation of the Christian message in the Amazonian culture, such that, the message of Christ not only becomes a part of the culture but also refines and purifies the goodness that already exists in Amazonian cultures, bringing it to fulfilment in the light of the Gospel [no. 66].

The social, cultural and ecological dreams raised issues that exposed the institutional destruction and endangerment of the life and environment of the Amazonians and challenged the political and religious powers to address the social realities of the people, from justice in debates on the use of the environment to justice in the demand for good living. The ecclesial dream, however, triggered some questions about the method and means of evangelisation in the Amazon. On the one hand, it was praised as an exhortation for a Church with an Amazonian face, since it dedicated a substantial part of the text to the question of inculturation at all levels, including in the liturgy, church ministries, and governance. It also advocates for "the growth of a specific ecclesial culture that is distinctively lay" [no. 94]. In context, it praises the values present in the indigenous communities, of the laities assuming important responsibilities, and of women sustaining the communities with their strong presence and generosity.

On the other hand, the document raises a lot of controversy bordering on the reason why the exhortation did not address the existing *viri probati* debate (that is, the priestly ordination of

morally proven married men), and the proposal about female diaconate as a solution to the insufficiency of priests to serve the sacramental needs of the people. Shortly before *QA*'s publication, the book, *From the Depths of Our Hearts: Priesthood, Celibacy and the Crisis of the Catholic Church* by Cardinal Robert Sarah was released. Some believed that the content of the book was the rationale behind the silence of the Pope on those priestly and sacramental issues. Others thought that the book was a reaction to the endorsed method of liturgical inculturation, especially of the plurality of liturgical traditions that directly and indirectly undermined orthodox faith. For those who have tried to interpret the exhortation in light of the book written by Cardinal Robert Sarah, it is good to bear in mind that an Apostolic Exhortation is not of the same authority with a *theologoumenon* (a theological statement which is of individual opinion and not doctrine). More so, the Pope mentions at the beginning of the exhortation that he is selecting the issues to address. Thus, by not addressing the *viri probati* debate or the proposal about the female diaconate, the Pope addressed only issues that "can apply concretely to the life of the Amazon region as a synthesis of some of the larger concerns" [no. 2].

On another note, the exhortation acknowledges the role of the Episcopal Conferences in making use of the document in a way that can suit their needs. In the ecclesial dream, the Pontiff left the action plan for the episcopal conference to dissect the important things and address them according to their peculiar needs. This is an admirable move to motivating the bishops to involve various portions of the People of God, especially theological institutions, to come up with more contextually suitable approaches to the works of evangelisation and evangelical witnessing. However, what are the processes that could be set in place to realise the dreams? What does a genuine collaboration in the context of the ministry involve? More importantly, where every believer is allowed to collaborate in the mission, will the Church and its activities still be priest-centered?
On a final note, what is the relevance of this text to the African condition and the 'dreams' of the Church in Africa? We must bear in mind that *QA*, just as *Ecclesia in Africa* or *Africae Munus*, is an exhortation written to a specific people with a specific need. The issues addressed in *QA* are challenges to the Amazonians. Yet, the

points raised about inculturation and collaboration, which have also been addressed over time, might still be of interest to the Church in Africa. The question is, how does the Church in Africa continue to strengthen the laity's participation in the Church? What can the Zaire liturgy teach us further about inculturation? How best can we explain the fact that the church is more than mere sacramental?

Book Review

Building Bridges of Peaceful Coexistence between Christians and Muslims in Nigeria
Author: ***Theodore Tochukwu Nnorom***
Publisher: not stated
Year: 2018 / Pages: viii+, 142
Reviewer: ***Emmanuel Ojeifo***

Theodore Tochukwu Nnorom's *Building Bridges of Peaceful Coexistence between Christians and Muslims in Nigeria* is a welcome addition to the growing library of serious critical analysis of Christian-Muslim dialogue in Nigeria. In four chapters, with the introduction and conclusion, he persuasively makes a case for a constructive approach to interreligious dialogue between Christians and Muslims in Nigeria. He proposes inclusivism; one of Alan Race's threefold typology of Christian responses to other religions, as the best paradigm in this bridge-building initiative. The dominance of Race's threefold paradigm (exclusivism, pluralism, and inclusivism) in the field of the theology of religions and its suitability in explicating the trend in the Nigerian context is what accounts for the author's choice.

Thus, the book "appropriates inclusivism as a suitable paradigm for laying the theological foundation for building the bridges of peaceful coexistence between Christians and Muslims in Nigeria" (3). The suitability and relevance of this paradigm are anchored on the assumption that it has the best capacity, amongst all others, for "openness to other religions and firm commitment to one's religion" (4). The author's objective is "to provide Christians with a better understanding of Islam and its tenets in a way that supports peaceful coexistence between Christians and Muslims in Nigeria." This understanding "will help lay the foundation for mutual respect between Christians and Muslims in communities and enhance collaborative efforts towards development, justice, and peace projects in Nigeria" (5).

The assumption behind the book is that intra-religious and inter-religious conflicts between and among Christians and Muslims in Nigeria are one of the major obstacles hindering peaceful coexistence and stability in the country. According to the author, these conflicts are rooted in "the rigid conservative approach to religion arising from doctrinal differences" (19). The result is that "religious violence in Nigeria has claimed millions of human lives, and properties worth billions of dollars" (20). To forestall violence and promote peace and stability in the country, the author argues that a better theological model of dialogue needs to be adopted. Hence, the proposal of inclusivism.

Although the book is largely shaped by the thought of Alan Race, the ideas and contributions of other Christian and Islamic scholars in the field such as Gavin D'Costa, Jacques Dupuis, Amir Hussein, and Reza Shah-Kazemi are also evident in the work. Sufficient attention is also given to the thoughts of Nigerian scholars in the field of religions, particularly in the fourth chapter which explores "the application of theological inclusivism as a dialogical praxis in building lasting peaceful coexistence between Christians and Muslims in Nigeria" (102). This is understandable since the work is situated within the Nigerian context. There are also copious references to documents of the Roman Catholic Church on the theology of religions, especially the declaration of Vatican II, *Nostra Aetate*, which inaugurated a revolution in the Catholic understanding and approach to other religions. This is commendable, not just because it is the author's religious tradition, but also because there is hardly any other religious tradition that has a well-developed theological basis for interreligious dialogue as the Catholic Church. Yet there is a sense of creativity in the way the author appropriates the rich inclusivist theological resources of his faith tradition as a basis for dialogue and peacebuilding.

Significantly, the author brings an open, critical, and questioning spirit of intellectual inquiry to his engagement with the thoughts of a wide range of thinkers in the book. This critical engagement is evident in his ability to draw the strengths and weaknesses of the views of the thinkers in his appraisal of their works. For instance, even though he supports and adopts Race's inclusivist paradigm, he does not overlook the criticisms of imperialism and triumphalism

levelled against it. As a Christian paradigm, the adoption of inclusivism runs the risk of being branded as the imposition of a Christian category on other religions. Nnorom rightly observes that such an interpretation of other religions with Christian categories "poses a significant obstacle for effective dialogue." However, he mentions that his choice of inclusivism rests on its capacity to overcome two extremes: "of excluding other religions from salvation and the unification of religions under a philosophical or ethical ground that neglects the irreducible particularity of individual religions." Besides, it "embraces openness, commitment to dialogue, respect and love for other religions... [and] open to join initiatives and working together to overcome common human problems" (128).

In terms of research methodology, the book is grounded in qualitative analysis of existing literature in the field, and the author's commitment to the rules of scholarly academic writing is evident in his acknowledgement and use of sources. The language of the text is simple and accessible to the sophisticated academician and the simple believer alike. What the author has done is to provide a solid theological basis for dialogue between the two major religions in Nigeria. It is noteworthy that some religious leaders in Nigeria who are committed to interreligious dialogue employ this model of inclusivism which upholds the values of respect and openness to other religions while remaining firmly committed to one's religious tradition. However, there has not been much engagement at an academic level with the theological basis for such an approach to dialogue. It is in this regard that *Building Bridges* breaks new grounds in the field.

Summarily, the book puts forth the idea that religions need each other to communicate the full truth about God to humanity. While not diminishing their non-negligible areas of difference, they need to harness their areas of common ground in working together to promote peace, justice, and development in Nigeria. Based on its innovative approach to the dialogue of religions, the book deserves to be required reading for students of theology, scholars of religion, religious teachers, interreligious dialogists, political actors, experts in mediation and peacebuilding across Christian and Muslim communities in Nigeria.