

# PASTORAL RESPONSE OR ECUMENICAL DIALOGUE? AFRICAЕ MUNUS AND AFRICAN INDEPENDENT CHURCHES

Dr. Emmanuel-Mary Mbam, MSP

## Abstract

The papal post-synodal exhortation, *Africae Munus*, calls on the Church in Africa to engage in ecumenical dialogue as a path to reconciliation and peace. One of the Christian communities specifically underlined for dialogue is a group of African Christian communities, with a motley blend of histories, traditions, and practices, which come under the designation "African Independent Churches" (AIC). To dialogue with these communities, there is a need for the dispelling of the mutual mistrust and psychological indisposition that exist between them and the Catholic Church. This should be followed by theological and spiritual dialogues. The present union of convenience manifested in some Christian bodies like the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) will be nothing but a hypocritical amalgamation unless there is a genuine understanding and friendship between the Christian bodies. This dialogue is urgent given the threat that the Christian people face in many African countries. In addition to this existential exigency, both dialogical partners also stand to be enriched by each other's specialities. But in the end, this dialogue can be possible and fruitful only if the Church in Africa has its own interior motivation and conviction and not just engages in dialogue simply because of papal directives.

Key Words: *Africae Munus*, African Independent Churches, Inter-religious Dialogue; ecumenism.

## Introduction

Synodal documents are like summit agreements. Their details, meaning, sum and substance have to be parsed by experts. The second Special Assembly of Bishops for Africa, popularly known as the Second African Synod,<sup>1</sup> has come and gone. The synodal fathers have finished their tasks of deliberations and formulations of propositions that formed the basis of Pope Benedict's post-synodal exhortation, *Africae Munus* (which henceforth will also be called "document", or otherwise AM). It is now the mission of theologians and experts in the different fields covered by both the Propositions and the consequential document to commence the hermeneutical tasks of interpretation, critique, and application. This article is part of that hermeneutical endeavour. It focuses on *Africae Munus*' exhortation of the Catholic Church in Africa to engage in ecumenical dialogue with the Christian communities that are autochthonous to Africa. This article will, first of all, undertake a general review of the document's teaching on principle of ecumenism before focusing on its instruction on ecumenical dialogue with the AIC. This will involve

<sup>1</sup> The Second Special Synod of Bishops for Africa was convoked by Pope Benedict to deal with the issues of reconciliation, justice and peace in Africa. The synod took place in Rome from October 4<sup>th</sup> - 25<sup>th</sup>, 2009. The Synod Fathers at the end of their deliberations came up with 57 Propositions which formed one of the basis of the papal Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, *Africae Munus* (henceforth abbreviated, AM), which was officially published in the Republic of Benin, West Africa, on November 19<sup>th</sup>, 2011. The title of the Exhortation comprises the first two Latin words in the opening sentence of the document: "Africa's commitment to the Lord Jesus Christ is a precious treasure..."



a critical analysis of the doctrinal language and structural division of the document's text on ecumenism. The document's statements on ecumenism will be compared to the propositions made by the synod fathers on the same topic in order to highlight the differences in perception and approach between the synod fathers and the Pope. The article will then attempt to delineate the Christian communities banded together as African Independent Churches. Extrapolating from the document, the synod fathers' propositions, *The Directory for the Application of Principles and Norms on Ecumenism* (henceforth, *Directory*), and other relevant documents, the article will conclude by suggesting possible approaches to executing this ecumenical rapprochement with our separated brethren.

As a matter of critical analysis, it should be noted that, even though *Africae Munus'* text on the African Independent Churches (AIC) comes under the section on ecumenism, it does not simply and unequivocally call for dialogue with the AIC. Instead, it notes that the AIC "have recently made an appearance in the ecumenical field," and consequently calls on the "pastors of the Catholic Church... to take into account this new phenomenon affecting the promotion of Christian unity in Africa, and... find a response suited to the context, for the sake of deeper evangelisation as a way of effectively communicating Christ's truth to the people of Africa."<sup>2</sup> There is no emphasis on the urgency, need, and envisioned benefits of engaging in serious and fraternal dialogue with the AIC. Of course, ecumenical dialogue could be one of the pastoral responses to the recent appearance of AIC "in the ecumenical field." But the Church in Africa can as well, if they adjudge it suitable, adopt a monological approach in which they simply talk about, and at, the AIC without a meaningful dialogical encounter. Nevertheless, this article presumes that the "response suited to the context" as called for by the encyclical is an unprejudiced, egalitarian ecumenical dialogue.

### The Synod VS The Pope On Ecumenism

The Synod Fathers' stance on ecumenism is expressed in their Proposition 10 in a two-paragraph statement. According to them, the efforts of the Church in Africa at achieving reconciliation, justice and peace on the continent impels it to commit itself anew "to the task of ecumenical dialogue and cooperation." The necessity of this is anchored on the common realisation that division among Christians is a scandal. According to the synod fathers, "a divided Christianity remains a scandal, because it runs contrary to the *wishes* of the Divine Master" (emphasis mine).<sup>3</sup> But in restating the same conviction, the document states that "a divided Christianity remains a scandal, since it *de facto* contradicts the *will* of the Divine Master (cf. *Jn 17:21*)."<sup>4</sup> Without indulging in unnecessary technical, hair-splitting differentiation between *optatio* (wish) and *voluntas* (will, testament),<sup>5</sup> it

<sup>2</sup> *AM*, 90.

<sup>3</sup> Proposition, 10.

<sup>4</sup> *AM*, 89.

<sup>5</sup> Although the Latin *Voluntas* has many connotations which include wish and desire, it principally means will, last will, and testament. On the other hand, the noun *optatio* connotes an expression of desires or inclinations. Judging from the fact that the entire chapter, *In*



appears that the synod fathers' choice of term was emended by *Africae Munus* from "wish" to "will" to emphasis the enormity of the divisions among Christians and the requisite nature of the Church's ecumenical task.

The document's choice of term corresponds more to Vatican II's teaching which states that division among Christians "is clearly contrary to Christ's will" (*voluntati Christi contradicit*).<sup>6</sup> The division does not go against mere wishes of Christ; it contradicts his will, his last testament. Consequently, according to Can. 755, the Church is bound by this will of Christ to promote unity among all Christians. In other words, ecumenism is an essential and obligatory mission of the Church, and not merely a labour of love.<sup>7</sup>

Apart from the above statement that ecumenical dialogue is necessary because the current division among Christians is a scandal and enjoining particular Churches to take seriously spiritual ecumenism which is expressed in common prayer (like the week of prayer for Christian unity), the synod fathers did not pay much attention to the principles and practice of ecumenism; that is, they did not lay out the theological and doctrinal bases and the practical formulae for ecumenical dialogue. To complement this lacuna, *Africae Munus* states that ecumenical dialogue should be carried out "on the basis of the guidelines given in the *Directory*."<sup>8</sup>

In regard to the goals of ecumenical dialogue, the synod fathers state: "The goal of ecumenical dialogue is, therefore, both to bear witness to Christian fellowship in Christ and to move towards Christian unity with those with whom we share the same faith, through listening to the Word of God and collaborating in the service of their brothers and sisters "in one Lord...one Baptism, one God and Father of all..." (1ph 4:5, 6)."<sup>9</sup> From the foregoing, one can surmise that, according to the fathers, the goals of ecumenical dialogue include bearing witness to the fellowship already existing among Christians despite the divisions; reaching Christian unity (which does not necessarily mean unity of Churches); creating an auspicious environment for common Christian social witness in the form of cooperation for social work and works of justice and peace; and safeguarding the interests of Christians in a pluralistic and, perhaps, hostile society.

For the document, the goals of ecumenical dialogue apparently vary according to the dialogical partner involved. For instance, in dialoguing with the Orthodox and Coptic

17, is regarded as Jesus' farewell speech, Jn. 17:20-23 where Jesus prayed for Christian unity (just as Moses in his Farewell Speech or Last Discourse also prayed for the Israelites; Deut. 32-33) can be regarded as Jesus' last testament. Therefore, *voluntas* would be the more appropriate word to use.

<sup>6</sup> UR, I.

<sup>7</sup> CIC, 755, §1; cf. DE, 39.

<sup>8</sup> AM, 89. The *Directory* is a corpus of principles and practical norms and guidelines issued by the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity and approved by Pope John Paul II on March 25, 1993, meant to guide Catholics in their involvement in ecumenical dialogue.

<sup>9</sup> Proposition, 10.



Churches, and the mainline Christian communities, the goals include seeking Christian unity, undertaking works of charity, and protecting our common religious patrimonies.<sup>10</sup> Dialoguing with the AIC is to be the Catholic Church's response to the appearance of the former in the field of ecumenism; and the goal seems to be a deeper and more efficient evangelisation of the African people.<sup>11</sup> The goal of "dialoguing"<sup>12</sup> with the sects and syncretistic movements are to determine the causes of their emergence, discover why they are attractive to the Catholic faithful, and stanch, through "a profound evangelisation," the haemorrhaging of the faithful to these sects.<sup>13</sup>

Concerning the Catholic agents of ecumenical dialogue, the document designates all the Catholic faithful as responsible for the ecumenical project: particular Churches (dioceses), institutes of consecrated life (religious), lay movements, and associations. In other words, every Christian should be involved in the Church's ecumenical efforts; with the caveat that these endeavours must be carried out communally (with reference to the Church leaders). This echoes Vatican II's call on all the Catholic faithful to participate fully in the Church's work of ecumenism as a matter of necessity.<sup>14</sup> The above inclusive approach of the document contrasts with that of the synod fathers who seem to rely more on ecumenical associations like Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN), to carry out the ecumenical dialogue. Though, in addition, they invite the particular Churches in the dioceses and regions "to ensure that the week devoted to prayer for Christian unity be marked by prayer and common activities that promote the unity of Christians, "that they may all be one" (Jn 17:21)."<sup>15</sup>

The synod fathers also appear not to have clarified the status of the Church's dialogical partners. They probably indicate this, albeit obliquely, while stating the goals of ecumenical dialogue as we have seen above: "The goal of ecumenical dialogue is, therefore, both to bear witness to Christian fellowship in Christ and to move towards Christian unity with those with whom we share the same faith.... (1:ph 4:5, 6)."<sup>16</sup> The above statement seems to postulate that our dialogical partners are those Christians with whom Christian fellowship already exists despite the present division among Christians. This fellowship is located in our common faith in Jesus Christ and in the Father, in one baptism, and in our common heritage, scripture, which all Christians hold as a rule of faith and morals. But the above text raises more questions than it provides answers. Who are those with "whom we share the same faith"? And what precisely is that "same faith" which we share?

<sup>10</sup> *AM*, 89.

<sup>11</sup> *AM*, 90.

<sup>12</sup> The document does not seem to recommend dialoguing with this group as much as finding immediate and effective solutions to their delinquencies.

<sup>13</sup> *AM*, 91.

<sup>14</sup> UR, 4 & 5.

<sup>15</sup> Proposition, 10.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid*



It is possible that the synod fathers do not think it necessary to distinguish between the different dialogical partners. They simply merge all the partners into a motley crew as if they have the same level of relationship with the Catholic Church. The fact that they mention the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) as a manifestation of ecumenical efforts buttresses my point. CAN consists of most Christian communions in Nigeria irrespective of their credal and doctrinal traditions. This indiscriminate grouping of partners for dialogue obscures the need to distinguish between ecumenical dialogue with the Churches who already have a lot in common with the Catholic Church on one hand, and dialogue with Christian communities who have very little in common with the Church on the other. According to the *Directory*, this differentiation is important because our strategies for ecumenical dialogue depend on the identity of our dialogical partner. "The ecumenical task will greatly vary depending on whether our Christian partners belong mostly to one or more of the Eastern Churches rather than to the Communities of the Reformation. Each has its own dynamic and its own particular possibilities."<sup>17</sup>

Concerning the second question, the statement, "sharing the same faith," considered from an ecclesiological perspective, is ambiguous. First, the way we share the faith with the Orthodox Churches, those who in the first place, according to Catholic ecclesiology, qualify to be called Churches,<sup>18</sup> is not exactly the same way and level we share the faith with the Christian communities that emerged from the Reformation and its consequential splits.<sup>19</sup> The same goes for the Christian communities that emerged from the ecclesial divisions in the African continent. With the Orthodox and Coptic Orthodox Churches, we share not only the same faith in Jesus Christ and the scriptures, but also the same belief in the major dogmatic teachings of the Church and in the same means of grace, especially the seven sacraments. We also share with them reverence for the Mother of God.<sup>20</sup> So, even though we do not profess the same faith in its fullness with the Orthodox and the Coptic Churches, we can say that we share the same faith with them. Thus, according to the Catechism, "with the Orthodox Churches, this communion is so profound that it lacks little to attain the fullness that would permit a common celebration of the Lord's Eucharist"<sup>21</sup>

The same, however, cannot be said of the ecclesial communities with whom we have very little in common beyond our common faith in Jesus Christ through baptism and reverence for the scripture as the norm of faith and morals. The level of sharing with the smaller Christian communities that originated from the ecclesial divisions in Africa,

<sup>17</sup> The Directory for the Application of Principles and Norms on Ecumenism, 33, [http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/pontifical\\_councils/chrstuni/documents/rc\\_pc\\_chrstuni\\_doc\\_25031993\\_principles-and-norms-on-ecumenism\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/chrstuni/documents/rc_pc_chrstuni_doc_25031993_principles-and-norms-on-ecumenism_en.html). Accessed on April 16, 2012.

<sup>18</sup> LG 15.

<sup>19</sup> Vatican II warns that, while we should not overlook the bond of unity that continues to exist despite the division, no attempt should be made to minimise the differences that exist between the different Christian bodies. UR., 13.

<sup>20</sup> UR, 14-15.

<sup>21</sup> CCC, 838.



sometimes referred to as sects, is even more diminutive. Because of the eclectic doctrines and religious rituals of these sects, which sometimes are a blend of Christianity and African Traditional Religion (ATR), it is difficult to say whether and how far we share the same faith. It appears that the ambiguity inherent in the phrase "the same faith" in *Africae Munus* to eliminate it completely in a similar statement. Instead, it talks about a common journey: "Ecumenical dialogue therefore seeks to direct our common journey towards Christian unity, as we listen assiduously to the word of God, faithful to fraternal communion, the breaking of bread and the prayers (cf. *Acts* 2:42)."<sup>22</sup>

In contrast to the synod fathers, *Africae Munus* classifies the dialogical partners in its classification, it follows the pattern of Vatican II's *Unitatis Redintegratio* which presents the Church's dialogical partners in their order of proximity to the Catholic Church in the areas of doctrine, sacraments, and apostolicity.<sup>23</sup> This is also the pattern of the *Directory* in its differentiation of the dialogical partners.<sup>24</sup> Nevertheless it is difficult to ascertain precisely how the document classifies them. In its first group of dialogical partners, the document seems to band together the Orthodox and Coptic Orthodox Churches (which it does not explicitly call "Churches") with the Christian communities that emerged from the Western Reformations<sup>25</sup> like the Lutheran, Anglican, and Methodist Communities. This presents some sort of problem because the Orthodox and Coptic Churches belong to the Eastern Orthodox Churches which Vatican II recognises as "Churches."<sup>26</sup> Secondly, it appears that the document also considers the Tewahedo Orthodox Church of Ethiopia to be a "Christian community" instead of a "Church" which describes the Ethiopian Church as "one of the most ancient Christian communities of the African continent."<sup>27</sup> I will not explore further this apparent lack of clarity in the classification of the dialogical partners since it does not have an immediate effect on the direction of this work.

In addition to the above Churches and ecclesial communities, the document also names the "non-Catholic communities sometimes known as African Independent Churches" as one of those the Catholic Church in Africa has to deal with in the area of ecumenical dialogue.<sup>28</sup> By prefixing their name with the phrase "sometimes known as"

<sup>22</sup> *AM*, 89.

<sup>23</sup> UR, 14-19. For instance, the Catholic Church and the Orthodox Churches both possess sacramental worship; that is, they share a mutual belief in the sacraments. Consequently, Can. 844 of the Latin rite allows for *Communicatio in sacris* (communion in the sacraments) in certain circumstances. Thus, Catholics can receive the sacraments of Penance, the Eucharist, and Anointing of the Sick from the Orthodox Churches when it is "morally or physically" impossible to receive them from their own ministers. Catholic ministers are also allowed to administer the above sacraments to members of the Orthodox Churches who ask for it freely and are properly disposed (CIC, 844 #2-3). But with Christian communities that emerged from the Western Reformation, like the Lutherans and the Anglicans, Catholic ministers can only share a common prayer.

<sup>24</sup> *Directory*, 31-36.

<sup>25</sup> I use "reformations" in plural to highlight that the Anglicans have a different history from that of the Protestant ecclesial communities.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. UR, 14-18.

<sup>27</sup> *AM*, 89. I don't know whether the document equates the Ethiopian Orthodox Church with the Ethiopian Churches that emerged in the later part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, circa 1892.

<sup>28</sup> *AM*, 90.



document could be pointing to the imprecision of this appellation<sup>29</sup> or to the heterogeneity of the group. Conversely, the document could be emphasising that, attributing to AIC the name "Churches" is simply a question of nomenclature and not recognition of their status as a Church in a real sense.

The last dialogical group comprises the Christian communities which the document simply refers to as "syncretistic movements and sects."<sup>30</sup> The document is stringent in its criticism of these sects and expresses doubts whether their emergence was due to "authentic Christian inspiration" or they were simply a "fruit of sudden infatuation with a leader claiming to have exceptional gifts."<sup>31</sup> These sects and movements are accused of a gamut of iniquities. According to the document, they exploit the people's socio-economic destitution and the breakdown of the family structure; and they take advantage of the inadequate catechesis of the Catholic faithful to spread heterodox teachings and exploit the People's credulity. More heinously, "they shatter the peace of couples and families through false prophecies and visions. They even seduce political leaders."<sup>32</sup> As a solution, the document recommends:

The Church's theology and pastoral care must determine the causes of this phenomenon, not only in order to stem the haemorrhage of the faithful from the parishes to the sects, but also in order to lay the foundations of a suitable pastoral response to the attraction that these movements and sects exert. Once again, this points to the need for a profound evangelisation of the African soul.<sup>33</sup>

This intense denunciation of the Christian communities labelled as sects and syncretistic movements echoes a similar denunciation contained in the *Instrumentum Laboris* (II.) of the synod which laments the proliferation of sects in Africa and warns young people to refuse to be enticed by these sects.<sup>34</sup> It accuses the sects of proposing "easy paths to holiness," of harsh aggression against the Catholic Church, and of being tools in the hands of politicians to undermine the Catholic Church and its values.<sup>35</sup>

On one hand, it must be noted that the document is right in its catena of misdeeds attributed to the sects and the syncretistic movements. But on the other, it is justifiable to say that the document is generally negative and tendentious in its assessment of both AIC, the sects, and the syncretistic movements native to Africa. This contrasts with both the

<sup>29</sup> With regard to nomenclature, several names have been advanced in a bid to encapsulate the nature of this group. They include: African Indigenous Churches, African Instituted Churches, and African Initiated Churches. Because of recent developments in the group, for instance, their spreading to Europe and America and ministering not only to Africans but to diverse ethnicities and races, the only unchanging and unique feature of the group is that they are autochthonous to Africa.

<sup>30</sup> AM 91. The description of "movements and sects" in the document echoes a similar division in the *Directory* (*Directory*, 35-36).

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>34</sup> II, 10, 63.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 78, 95, 100. The *Directory* also has a very negative view of the "sects and new religious movements" (*Directory*, 35-36).



Document's<sup>36</sup> and Vatican II's overt appreciation of the Churches and ecclesial communities which emerged from the Eastern separations<sup>37</sup> and Western Reformations respectively. The document should have highlighted the fundamental Christian treasures Catholics share in common with them. It should also have shown how these sects and movements, despite their heterodoxy and acrimony against Catholics, have been able to respond to the religious quests of many African Christians, hence their enduring attraction to the faithful.

Moreover, the document's tripartite classification of the Christian communities that emerged from divisions in Africa into AIC, sects, and syncretistic movements, and the consequential distribution of misconducts betray a lack of in-depth knowledge of these communities. For instance, the vice of aggressive hostility against the Catholic Church is shared not only by the sects but also by a good number of AIC despite the latter's ecumenical posturing. In fact, one can say that the charges of exploiting people's credulity, wrecking of families through false prophecies, seduction of political leaders or conversely, becoming a willing tool of conscienceless politicians, superstitious syncretism especially in the areas of healing and heterodoxy, can be found not only in the AIC and the sects but also in the mainline ecclesial communities like the Anglican, Methodist, and other Protestant communities (and, at times, even in some Catholic communities). Moreover, the haemorrhaging of Catholics is not only to the sects but also to the AIC. So one can say that the vices characteristic of the sects and syncretistic movements are a phenomenon observable in most if not all the Churches and ecclesial communities operating in Africa. It is from this perspective that I think that in our dialogical overture to the AIC, the latter should not be sharply distinguished from the sects and the syncretistic movements.

Having presented an overview of the document's teaching (compared to the propositions of the synod fathers) on ecumenism, the Catholic agents of ecumenical dialogue, and the status of our dialogical partners, I would now like to focus on AIC as a specific dialogical partner. The document acknowledges AIC's involvement in the ecumenical movement and exhorts the pastors of the Catholic Church, as already mentioned, "to find a response suited to the context, for the sake of deeper evangelisation as a way of effectively communicating Christ's truth to the people of Africa."<sup>39</sup>

### **Dialoguing with the African Independent Churches (AIC)**

The name, African Independent Churches, as already stated, refers to the Churches founded in Africa by Africans to address African realities neglected by Eurocentric

<sup>36</sup> The Pope invited observers from the Churches and ecclesial communities that broke off from both the East and the West, which was a positive gesture. But I am not sure whether any observer was invited from the AIC.

<sup>37</sup> UR, 14-16.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 19-22.

<sup>39</sup> *AM*, 90.



mainline Churches and ecclesial communities.<sup>40</sup> "The establishment of AIC was the result of African Christians' quest for freedom to express their Christian faith in a manner that is consistent with African culture, especially in the areas of healing, prophesy, and interpretation of dreams."<sup>41</sup> Consequently, the entire ecclesial life of AIC, which lacks depth systematic theology and doctrine, centres on prophesy, divination, healing, and interpretation of dreams.<sup>42</sup>

Most of them practise healing and ~~exorcism~~ with speaking in tongues and prophecy having an important place in their church life. The prophet or healer took the place of the old tribal witch-doctors or medicine men. The fact that Western missionaries often did not believe in divine healing and prophesying, or gave a minor role to them, meant that Africans were encouraged to join the new independent churches which catered for these needs.<sup>43</sup>

According to the document, AIC adopt "elements of African culture."<sup>44</sup> The exact meaning of this statement is unclear. This could be referring to the propensity of the AIC for inculturation; on the other hand, it could be an oblique reference to the AIC's incorporation of elements of African Traditional Religion (ATR) in their worship.<sup>45</sup> The latter is likely the case because the establishment of AIC was, as already mentioned, due to the yearning of African Christians to break away from what they considered a Eurocentric Christianity which derogated African worldview and practices like healing, prophecy, interpretation of dreams, belief in witchcraft, etc. Consequently, AIC is characterised by the above elements of ATR.<sup>46</sup> But the statement could also be indicative of the Pope's penchant for equating culture with religion. As Cardinal Ratzinger, Pope Benedict XVI had argued that culture and religion cannot be differentiated. According to him, "the notion of faith stripped of culture capable of being transplanted into a religiously indifferent culture whereby two subjects, formally unknown to each other, meet and fuse, is artificial and unrealistic. For him, there is no such thing as faith devoid of culture or culture devoid of faith."<sup>47</sup> So, one can surmise that by "culture" the document also implies elements of ATR. If the above is true, then it must be argued that the incorporation of elements of African culture or religion is not unique to AIC. Both the Catholic Church and

<sup>40</sup> I disagree with the conception that AIC was founded by Africans for Africans. Cf. Isabel Apawo Phiri, "African Independent Churches", in *Dictionary of Third World Theologies*, ed. Virginia Fabella & R.S. Sugirtharajah (New York: Orbis Books, 2000), 3.

<sup>41</sup> Emmanuel Mbam, *The Foundations of a Theology of Healing for the Roman Catholic Church in Nigeria* (Unpublished Doctoral Thesis, University of Toronto, 2010), 164.

<sup>42</sup> Cf. Matthew A. Ojo, *The End-Time Army: Charismatic Movements in Modern Nigeria* (Trenton, NJ: African World Press, Inc., 2006), 6.

<sup>43</sup> Michael Harper, "An African Way: The African Independent Churches," Jan. 1, 1986. <http://www.clibrary.com/ch/1986/issue9/997.html>. Accessed April 17, 2012.

<sup>44</sup> AM, 90.

<sup>45</sup> It is possible that the above statement is a veiled charge of syncretism against AIC. AIC because of its romance with ATR have been frequently accused of syncretism. But the charge of syncretism depends on a subjective judgement on the rightfulness of the inclusion of elements of African culture and religion in their worship. One can call it inculturation, acculturation, or syncretism. Moreover, the degree of this incorporation or syncretism varies among members of the AIC.

<sup>46</sup> Mbam, *The Foundations*, 164.

<sup>47</sup> Emmanuel Mbam, "Method of Inculturation in Africa" *Mission*, vol. XV (2008) 1&2, 287.



other Christian communities, through the process of inculturation, adopt elements of African culture or religion into their religious practices.

Since neither the synod in its propositions nor the document gives a blueprint for engaging in dialogue with the separated brethren, I will utilise the prescriptions of the *Directory* and *Unitatis Redintegratio* to suggest a few practical steps to be taken in the Catholic Church's dialogical efforts with the AIC.

### **Pre-Dialogical Factual Evaluation of AIC**

Before dialogue actually begins, the preliminary task of the Catholic ecumenical agents is to identify their dialogical partners, their context and distinguishing characteristics, and get factual, unbiased information about them. This is pertinent because the appellation, "African Independent Churches" is unarguably elastic in its application and consequently very ambiguous. The ambiguity inheres in the lack of homogeneity among the AIC. Some members of AIC can hardly be reckoned as Christians as some of them are accused of baptising invalidly; that is, they do not use the proper form of baptism: "I baptise you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." Instead, a candidate for baptism is dunked into the water accompanied by the word: "I baptise you in the name of Jesus." Some are even accused of not baptising at all. A recitation of a creedal or faith formula improvised by the denomination is believed to suffice.<sup>48</sup> Some AIC members do not believe in the Holy Trinity. In addition, the religious practices of some AIC denominations are so suffused with elements of ATR that its Christian elements appear as a mere veneer. One finds this mostly among the Sabbatarians who even though they may call on Jesus Christ, apply more of the OT teachings and practices in addition to a good dosage of elements of ATR. The second group of AIC are quite similar to what we call Pentecostal, Evangelical, Spiritual, or Prophetic Churches. They are bible-based and revolve around a prophet-founder, healer, or a charismatic leader. Great emphasis is laid on the gifts of the Holy Spirit, on prophecy, dreams, healing, and the potency of religious sacramentals like holy water, candle, holy oil, etc.<sup>49</sup> Some AIC fall into what Isabel Phiri describes as "post-Christian" Churches because they divinise their leaders and substitute them for Jesus Christ.<sup>50</sup> In Nigeria, the Church of Olumba Olumba Obu, "Brotherhood of the Cross and Star," would qualify for this.

Another source of ambiguity is that while AIC have some common fundamental features, they exhibit characteristics common to other ecclesial communities like the Evangelical, Pentecostal, Spiritual, and Prophetic Churches. Thus, while one can argue that AIC are distinguished by being autochthonous to Africa, it is also true that they share the obsession with bible-reading, healing, prophecy, and interpretation of dreams with the

<sup>48</sup> Even though there is no scientific or official document to backup these claims, my personal interactions with some of them convince me that these practices are obtainable among some members of the AIC.

<sup>49</sup> Phiri, "African Independent Churches," 4.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid*



Pentecostal and Evangelical communities, and the sects and charismatic movements operating on the African soil.<sup>51</sup> This is why the apparent fine demarcation made by *Africae Munus* between AIC and the sects and syncretistic movements appear tenuous and unsustainable.

Therefore, in dialoguing with the AIC, it should be born in mind that the group is varied and harbours (not uniquely though) elements found in the sects and syncretistic movements which I have already mentioned above. This implies that unlike the mainline Christian communities like the Anglican and Protestant communions, with a more structured leadership, we may not have a single leader or group of leaders representing what we have lumped together as AIC. In addition, what works with one member of AIC in one context, might not be effective with another member in another context. So, the first task for the Catholic Church is to identify the representatives and the peculiar characteristics and contexts of the different strands of AIC especially those who are open to dialogue.

### Ecclesial Renewal – Psychological Ecumenism

Taking a cue from *Unitatis Redintegratio*, our ecumenical dialogue with AIC should begin with efforts at self-renewal by both partners. As we have noted, the relationship between the Catholic Church and the AIC has not always been cordial. There have been acrimony, mistrust, and outright hostility. The self-renewal required here is a sincere effort by both the Catholic Church and the AIC to, first, take responsibility for this state of unfriendliness. As both the post synodal exhortation and the *Instrumentum Laboris* observe, the Catholic Church has sometimes been a victim of vicious attacks by the AIC and the sects. But I would like to observe that the guilt for this state of acrimony must be shared. While it is obvious that many African Independent Churches (and even mainline Protestant, Evangelical, and Pentecostal communities) do gang up on the Catholic Church and cast vituperations on her practices and doctrines,<sup>52</sup> it must be admitted that sometimes Catholics have, perhaps in reaction, displayed condescending attitudes that derogate AIC and its practices. They have been labelled with epithets like “mushroom churches,” “hand-clapping churches,” etc. Even *Africae Munus* maintains some kind of supercilious attitude towards the AIC; it wasn’t even sure what their name was.<sup>53</sup> Unlike *Unitatis Redintegratio* that is overtly positive and conciliatory towards our separated brethren,<sup>54</sup> *Africae Munus* was silent about any positive contributions AIC have made or could make. Instead, their emergence was seen as some kind of an indictment on the

<sup>51</sup> “African Independent Churches.” <http://www.patheos.com/Library/African-Independent-Churches.html>. Accessed April 16, 2012.

<sup>52</sup> A friend told me that the Pentecostal parents of the lady he was courting told her that she could marry anybody except a Catholic!!!

<sup>53</sup> AM, 90. I find the statement “sometimes known as African Independent Churches” a bit condescending. Moreover, even though the issue of AIC was treated on the section on ecumenism, the AM’s intention for such dialogue is not clear. Is it an effort towards Christian unity or simply the Catholic Church’s response to a religious phenomenon “affecting the promotion of Christian unity in Africa ... for the sake of deeper evangelisation as a way of effectively communicating Christ’s truth to the people of Africa”? AM, 90.

<sup>54</sup> UR, 3, 14-23.



Church in Africa which should lead to soul-searching and self-examination as it asks "itself a great many questions."<sup>55</sup> The document's perception of what it calls sects and syncretistic movement, as I have already shown, is even more damning as it charges them with many wrongdoings.<sup>56</sup> This patronising posturing against the ecclesial communities that emerged from divisions in the African Christian family contrasts with the document's positive approach towards the ecclesial communities that were an offshoot of Western divisions.<sup>57</sup> So, no meaningful dialogue will be possible with such an apparent contemptuous attitude towards our dialogical partners. Real dialogue can only begin with self-evaluation especially in regard to our attitude, perception, and judgment of the separated brethren.

There can be no ecumenism worthy of the name without a change of heart. For it is from newness of attitudes (cf. Eph. 4:23), from self-denial and unstinted love, that yearning for unity take their rise and grow toward maturity. We should therefore pray to the divine Spirit for the grace to be genuinely self-denying, humble, gentle in the service of others and to have an attitude of brotherly generosity toward them.<sup>58</sup>

Both *Unitatis Redintegratio*<sup>59</sup> and the *Directory*<sup>60</sup> recognise that responsibility for the continuous disunity among Christians must be shared. Therefore, there is a need for repentance on all sides and asking for forgiveness for the continuation of disunity. We have had decades of mutual prejudices, mistrust, polemics, negative apologetics, misrepresentations, and parodying of the other. Sometimes, the negative psychological dispositions more than doctrinal differences can be the greatest obstacles to dialogue, reconciliation, and unity. These dispositions that are products of polemics, monologue, and spiritual bellicosity, should be substituted with a conciliatory, dialogical, and irenic approach. This is what I call the "*psychological perspective*" of ecumenism; that is, the uprooting of negative and derogatory feelings which regard the other as an inferior to be subjugated, an opponent to be combated, and a heretic to be refuted. If this renewal is successful we will now see them as brethren to be respectfully heard and partners in progress despite our deep differences. There is no guarantee that this renewal will be bilateral; but even a unilateral change of attitude on the side of the Catholic Church can send a positive signal and can begin to sanitise the fouled relationship that now prevails.

<sup>55</sup> AM, 90.

<sup>56</sup> I think that this negative stance is consistent with the document's picture of Africa. Even though the document states that there is "no need to dwell at length on the various socio-political, ethnic, economic or ecological situations that Africans face daily and that cannot be ignored" (AM, 4), it generally presented a grim view of Africa, comparing it to the cripple at the pool of Bethzatha (Jn. 5:3-8. AM, 147) and the blind Bartimeus (Mk. 10:49. AM, 172). Even though these narratives have a positive ending, the images are not dignifying.

<sup>57</sup> AM, 89.

<sup>58</sup> UR, 7.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.* In recognising the mutual guilt for the separation, the decree, quoting I Jn. 1:10, states: "If we say we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.... Thus, in humble prayer, we beg pardon of God and of our separated brethren, just as we forgive those who trespass against us" (IJR, 7).

<sup>60</sup> Directory, 19.



This ecclesial self-renewal should be accompanied by individual self-renewal. Sometimes, the scandals present in a Church or an ecclesial community can be the reason for the hostility and disunity that exist among Christians. This can also be one of the major reasons for religious migration that we see often. And these religious migrants are heavily prejudiced against their original community especially if the reason for their leaving was a traumatic scandal. If the Church and its members are seen to be faithful to Christ and his gospel, dialogue and reconciliation will be enhanced. "Let all Christ's faithful remember that the more purely they strive to live according to the gospel, the more they are fostering and even practicing Christian unity."<sup>61</sup>

### Spiritual Ecumenism<sup>62</sup>

Another area of ecumenical dialogue with the AIC is through common Christian prayer for unity. This dimension of ecumenism coupled with the ecclesial and individual renewal in the form of change of heart and holiness discussed above constitute what Vatican II calls spiritual ecumenism: "This change of heart and holiness of life, along with public and private prayer for the unity of Christians, should be regarded as the soul of the whole ecumenical movement, and can rightly be called „spiritual ecumenism.”<sup>63</sup> I deliberately separated the psychological dimension from the aspect of common prayer in order to make a point that Christian common prayer without change of heart or rather, a positive psychological disposition towards one another amounts to hypocrisy. Christians from different denominations gather to pray for peace and unity while at the same time harbouring deep-seated animosity against one another. Our common prayer will be more effective if it is said in an atmosphere of genuine love and camaraderie.

In Nigeria, apart from the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) regularly organises interdenominational prayers. According to Vatican II, this prayer service for unity which is in the tradition of Jesus' prayer for unity (Jn.17:21), is not only an important expression of unity, it can actually be a source of unity because unity cannot be achieved except by the grace of God. "Such prayers in common are certainly a very effective means of petitioning for the grace of unity, and they are genuine expression of the ties which even now binds Catholics to their separated brethren."<sup>64</sup> Through this common prayer Christians invoke the Holy Spirit, the principle of Christian unity. "The unity of the Church is a mystery of grace, which in the first instance is effected by the Holy Spirit, and can only come to perfection in its visible form in those who believe in this mystery accept God's offer of grace."<sup>65</sup>

UR, 7.  
Directory, 25; UR, 8.  
UR, 8.

*Ibid.*

Werner Becker, "Decree on Ecumenism," in Herbert Vorgrimler, et al., ed. *Commentary on the Documents of Vatican II*, V. II, Montreal: Palm Publishers, 1968), 102.



Here it is important to note that common Christian prayer, *communicatio spiritualibus* (sharing in spiritual things) is not synonymous with common worship, *communicatio in sacris* (sharing in the means of grace/sacraments). Worship, which is the official public prayer of the Church celebrated through its liturgy, can only be fully shared by those who are already in communion with the Church. Common prayer which can take the form of scripture reading, sermon, spontaneous prayers, etc., does not involve common celebration of the sacraments, for instance, the Eucharist. The Eucharist is rather an expression of an already existing Church unity. According to *Lumen Gentium*, the Eucharist both signifies and causes the unity of the people of God.<sup>66</sup> Thus, there must be ecclesial communion before one can have Eucharistic communion. The latter is a witness to, and a manifestation of, the former. "Those who go to Communion together are bearing witness to the fact that they are one in faith... A sacramental communion set up without qualification would give the illusion of a unity which does not exist. So, full (*plerumque*) common worship (with AIC, for instance) is not possible because the necessary unity of faith does not exist...."<sup>67</sup> Consequently, worship in common is generally forbidden where that unity does not exist.<sup>68</sup> So, while the Church encourages *communicatio in spiritualibus* between Catholics and other Churches and Christian communities like the AIC, *communicatio in sacris* is permissible in a limited form only with the members of the Orthodox Churches because of their proximity to the Catholic Church.<sup>69</sup>

### Theological Dialogue<sup>70</sup>

This dialogue is primarily aimed at mutual understanding of each other's doctrine, mentality, vision, worldview, history, "liturgical life, religious psychology and cultural background."<sup>71</sup> Even though the AIC may not have a strong systematic theology and orthodox doctrinal and creedal formulae, they can articulate their own religious convictions, beliefs, and practices in a way that will enable us to understand their minds and the hermeneutical principles that guide their interpretation of the Scriptures. As I have hinted above, because of the hostility that has existed between the Catholic Church and other Christian communities, the information about the other which both sides possess is largely a product of polemics and monologue. That is, the information is a product of adversarial perception of the other and not what each group says about itself. There is a need to create a forum for mutual enlightenment where each group will present an earnest articulation of its own beliefs, doctrines, and rites.

According to *Unitatis Redintegratio*, this theological dialogue should take place among experts who have been "properly prepared." "Such meetings require that those

<sup>66</sup> LG 11.

<sup>67</sup> Becker, "Decree on Ecumenism," 108.

<sup>68</sup> UR, 8.

<sup>69</sup> Can. 844. Cf. U.R., 26-29.

<sup>70</sup> UR, 9; Directory, 19, 56 /c.

<sup>71</sup> Becker, "Decree on Ecumenism," 110.



who take part in them under authoritative guidance be truly competent.”<sup>72</sup> This implies that the dialogical participants must be people who have connatural knowledge of their own faith; that is, knowledge that comes from deep commitment to, and living of, the faith of one’s Church or denomination. “An ecumenical dialogue would be meaningless if everyone who took part did not firmly profess the faith of his own Church.”<sup>73</sup> They should also have the theological or academic expertise and dialogical skills necessary for a precise and clear articulation of the faith of their community or denomination in a way that precludes, or at least minimises, misunderstanding. This requirement of expertise is to preclude amateurish tinkering with the beliefs of one’s denomination in a way that muddles mutual understanding and leads to even deeper confusion. But this dialogue does not focus only on theological, doctrinal, liturgical, and devotional matters; it also extends to other areas that will enhance mutual understanding and reconciliation. Thus, the experts needed here may include experts in religious sociology, psychology, education, social work, etc.<sup>74</sup>

The theological dialogue begins with an in-depth, correct, clear, and precise articulation and clarification of the beliefs, doctrines, and the religious practices of one’s community to enable the dialogical partners to gain a true and deeper understanding. Therefore, one’s theological terms and articles of faith should be articulated in such a clear and precise way that it is comprehensible to the dialogical partners. This is important because sometimes, a particular term can mean different things to different Christians depending on their contexts, intellectual development, and religious inclinations.<sup>75</sup> Sometimes too, a particular term has undergone some diachronic transformation in a particular denomination of which the opponents might not be aware. In other words, each denomination should communicate in a “language” that is intelligible to the other. For instance, the Catholic Church that uses metaphysical and scholastic languages should try to use terms and expressions that are generally understood; or at least it should make efforts to clarify terms that are opaque or ambiguous and consequently vulnerable to misconstruction.

While the purity of Catholic doctrines must always be safeguarded in the course of ecumenical dialogue, the Catholic participants in the dialogue are urged by Vatican II to remember that in the Church, there is a hierarchy of truths. Even though all Catholic truths demand our assent, they vary in their relationship to the foundation of the Christian faith which consists of the mysteries revealed in Christ.<sup>76</sup> Recognising this order of truths gives some flexibility in recognising the unity that exists among Christians in our common

<sup>72</sup> UR, 9.

<sup>73</sup> Becker, “Decree on Ecumenism,” 110.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 116-117.

<sup>76</sup> UR, 11.



adherence to the central truths of the Christian faith like the divinity of Christ, his uniqueness as the universal Saviour, etc.

If each denomination is able to articulate its positions in a way that is correct, clear, precise, and comprehensible to the other, it may find out that it has a lot in common and that there have been a lot of misunderstandings due to mutual misinterpretation. Sometimes, what is true and even agreeable to other denominations can be presented in such a clumsy and muddled-up way that it becomes incomprehensible and can even be regarded as false by the other. Mutual understanding can also help to establish true differences by eliminating apparent differences occasioned by prejudices, misinterpretations, insufficient information, poor articulation, or even an outright deliberate misrepresentation of the other. Theological dialogue, ironically, not only helps the dialogical partners understand each other, it enables each denomination to come to a better understanding of its own doctrines and ecclesial life as it tries to articulate them for the other. Each denomination can be spurred to shorn unnecessary theological and doctrinal verbiages that create ambiguity and misunderstanding.

Theological dialogue, to be fruitful, requires that all the partners be given equal status; no one partner should be privileged over the other and no one should come into the dialogue as a teacher while others are treated as students. All are both teachers and students simultaneously.<sup>77</sup> They are all teachers as they enlighten others about their own faith; and they are all students as they learn about the beliefs of others. On the side of the Catholic partners, despite our theological and doctrinal sophistication and the singular privilege of possessing the fullness of the deposit of faith and the means of grace, we must be humble to learn a thing or two from the AIC. After all, according to *Unitatis Redintegratio*, whatever positive action the Holy Spirit is performing through our separated brethren, "can contribute to our edification."<sup>78</sup> Consequent on this, I would like to highlight some areas that I believe that AIC can enrich the Catholic Church. They include the areas of governance, spontaneity in worship, personal relationship with Christ and healing.

### **Simplicity of Administrative and Power Structures**

As the *Instrumentum Laboris* for the second synod for Africa rightly observes, "For a great number of Christians, the Church is identified with the hierarchy."<sup>79</sup> One of the reasons that led to the emergence of AIC was a desire for autonomy. Consequently, the AIC is characterised by the absence of elaborate and bureaucratic administrative

<sup>77</sup> It should be clearly noted that this is equality of persons not of Churches or doctrines; the Catholic Church and its doctrines cannot be put on equal footing with the AIC or any other Church or ecclesial community for that matter.

<sup>78</sup> UR, 4.

<sup>79</sup> IL, 95.



structure.<sup>80</sup> People want to have a say in the running of their Church. Of course, since Vatican II, the Catholic Church has improved in the area of collaborative ministry: the laity are increasingly given the opportunity to participate in Church affairs. But sometimes these changes, frustrate lay participation and consequently drive some lay people into the arms of these denominations where they gain some recognition and autonomy. Because of the simpler administrative structure of AIC and their smaller population, they can offer a sense of identity and belonging. With less control from a long hierarchical chain of command, ordinary members are given the opportunity for creativity and spontaneity. These characteristics undoubtedly make AIC and the sects attractive to some Catholics who long for some sense of belonging which they felt lacking in their large, anonymous, and sometimes, micro-managed community. The Catholic Church can learn to make its administrative structure simpler and more collaborative without in anyway endangering the privileged position of the hierarchy.

### Spontaneity in Worship

Some of the major characteristics of the AIC are spontaneity and expressiveness during worship which appear to satiate the emotional needs of its members. This contrasts with the more formal form of worship of the mainline Churches which sometimes degenerates into rubricism. There is a real danger in sacrificing people's emotional needs on the altar of doctrinal orthodoxy and liturgical correctness. Very often some Catholics equate reverence and sense of the sacred with liturgical "quietism" and formalised liturgical gestures. There must be equilibrium between the three defining principles of our Catholic faith: orthodoxy (right belief), orthopraxy (right conduct), and orthocardia (literally, correct heart or right feeling). Here, "correct heart" not only means right disposition towards God but also the communion, warmth, and love that one feels towards God and which is often manifested in emotional expression during worship. Right feeling in worship can never be dispensed with. Unfulfilled emotional needs can drive people out of the Church. The growth of the Charismatic Renewal in the Catholic Church is primarily because it allows for this emotional expression which is more in consonance with African expressive mode of worship but which is often stifled by over-rubricised liturgical worship. If there is anything that we can benefit from our dialogue with the AIC, it will be to have the opportunity to explore their African-oriented way of worship, not from our biased conception of it but from their own perspective.

### Personal Relationship with Christ

Because of their simple power structure and spontaneous acts of worship, worshippers in AIC have the feeling of being in direct, immediate personal communion with Christ. This is why AIC might seem attractive because they seem to offer an

<sup>80</sup> Dep Ayejoboyin & S. Ademola Ishola, *African Indigenous Churches: An Historical Perspective* (Lagos: Greater Heights Publications, 1997), 22-34.



opportunity for "an individual salvific relationship to Jesus" very often absent in the big Churches. So, even though the AIC may not possess systematic theology, one can say that they, like the Pentecostals, are characterised by a theology that puts a high premium on a Believer's intimate spiritual encounter with God through Jesus Christ.<sup>81</sup> According to Raymond Brown, one of the greatest strengths of the Johannine ecclesiology is its emphasis on believers' individual, personal relationship with Jesus Christ. Certainly it is important for Church members to receive sound pastoral care and doctrinal formation as emphasised by the Pastoral Letters (Timothy and Titus), have a strong connection with tradition as advocated by the Acts of the Apostles, and appreciate their dignity as members of the People of God as highlighted by 1 Peter; but it is also fundamental that they maintain a strong relationship with Christ. This is an essential characteristic of the Christian community.<sup>82</sup> Brown opines that lack of this intimate personal relationship with Christ could be the reason a parish may have a wonderful liturgy that is open to participation by all and yet people leave that parish to other small churches that emphasise personal relationship with Christ through the reading of the scripture and spontaneous prayers.

Worship in itself, without an accompanying personal spirituality, does not hold some people. The church, even in liturgical celebration, can seem abstracted from the Jesus described in the gospel pages.... How much more will the large impersonal parishes of any denomination lose parishioners, not only because the parishioners have no active sense of belonging to community from which to derive a sense of identity, but also because they do not encounter Jesus in the church.<sup>83</sup>

### Emphasis on Healing

As already noted, healing is one of the major reasons for the emergence of AIC. AIC's openness to healing attracts Christians who are dissatisfied with the snobbish attitude of the mainline Churches towards healing but who do not want to revert to ATR and its traditional healing system. Some scholars believe that the most important single reason people join the AIC is its healing practice.<sup>84</sup> Of course, that the AIC tend to absolutise healing does not mean that they actually heal. But whether they perform real healing or not, they have made serious efforts to respond to African Christians cry for healing. In doing so, they have also forced the mainline Churches, especially the Catholic Church, to rethink their positions towards the practice of miraculous healing. Today, healing ministry is an important element of the Catholic Church in Nigeria.<sup>85</sup> Therefore, if we are going to stem the "haemorrhage of the faithful from the parishes" to, not only the

<sup>81</sup> Cf Ogbu Kalu, *African Pentecostalism: An Introduction* (Oxford: University Press, 2008), 6.

<sup>82</sup> Raymond Brown, *The Churches the Apostles left Behind* (New York: Paulist Press, 1984), 98.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>84</sup> Joseph Healey & Donald Sybertz, ed., *Towards an African Narrative Theology* (N.Y: Orbis Books, 2004), 299; Udoh, *Guest Christology*, 105; Shorter, *Jesus and the Witchdoctor*, 18.

<sup>85</sup> Charismatic healing by Catholic clergy in Nigeria came to prominence with the emergence of Fr Geoffrey Ikeobi who started a healing ministry at Onitsha. He was followed by Fr Emmanuel Edeh who established his own healing ministry at Port Harcourt. Kalu, *African Pentecostalism*, 93.



sects, but also to the AIC as stated by the document,<sup>86</sup> then we must be humble enough to learn what makes the AIC attractive. I strongly believe that the healing ministry is their forte and constitutes their attractiveness to the suffering people of Africa.

### Conclusion

Ecumenical dialogue, especially since Vatican II, has become an essential ecclesial task promoted with verve by the Church. Even though, as this article has highlighted, *Africae Munus*' exhortation to ecumenical dialogue with AIC could appear unenthusiastic and defensive, it is, nevertheless, timely and pertinent. As Christians all over the world struggle to overcome their differences and realise the unity willed by Christ, Christians in Africa, in addition to this solemn motivation, have a more existential reason to engage in ecumenical dialogue. In addition to tribal conflicts, many African countries also have to contend with religious violence which is very often targeted at the Christian community. This has led many Christian Churches and communities to unite to form a common front against the external aggression. But this existential solidarity is often ineffective because of the shamefully enduring rancour and mistrust among Christians. As this work has stressed, dialogue is possible and also desirable because all stand to be enriched by the process. The separated brethren can benefit from the Catholic Church's rich tradition, theological depth and sophistication, doctrinal orthodoxy, and insights from a long history of experiences. On the other hand, the Catholic Church stands to benefit from our separated brethren's closeness to African culture and religion. The major questions are: has the Catholic Church in Africa, with or without papal exhortation, any inner conviction of the relevance and urgency of dialoguing with the separated brethren especially given the lingering mutual loathing that has hitherto characterised its relationships with the separated brethren? And can our separated brethren, on the other hand, break the ice and engage deeply in a dialogical encounter capable of challenging their positions and moving them from their comfort zone?

<sup>86</sup> *AM*, 91.