

CHRISTIAN-MUSLIM RELATIONS IN NORTHERN NIGERIA AS A RELIGIO-POLITICAL CONTEXT FOR THE JUBILEE YEAR OF MERCY

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Abstract

*The unfolding of events in the history of Nigeria, right from independence, reveals an incessant tension between the adherents of Christianity and Islam. Their relationship has been characterized by mutual suspicion, hate and unhealthy rivalry. This has placed the Nigerian nation on the boil. In the face of all these, the fundamental question that this research addresses is 'what is the way forward?' To find a solution to the problem at hand, this paper focuses on *Misericordia Vultus*, the Bull of Indiction of the Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy of Pope Francis I to see how the Christian-Muslim relations, especially in Northern Nigeria can be a religio-political context for the celebration of the Jubilee Year of Mercy. It emphasizes dialogue and respect for differences between the adherents of the two religions. It further emphasizes the need to focus on the things that unit them rather than on their differences.*

Keywords: Christian-Muslim, Relations, Northern Nigeria, Religio-Political, *Locus, Theologicus, Misericordia Vultus*

Introduction

A cursory glance at the unfolding of events in the history of Nigeria, right from independence, reveals an incessant tension between the adherents of Christianity and Islam. Their relationship has been characterized by mutual suspicion, hate and unhealthy rivalry. This has placed the Nigerian nation on the boil. The climate can be compared to a powder keg of frustration which often explodes at the slightest provocation. According to Onwukeme (2008), this has dealt a terrible blow on the nation's unity and brought untold hardships on the people. Kukah (2012) observes that the conflict between the two religions is triggered by a range of factors, like arguments over election results, the burning of Koran in any part of

the world, the making of provocative statements by Christian leaders in any part of the world, etc. For instance, 12th October 2001, in Kano, there was an anti-American protest rally spurred by the US-led strikes on Afghanistan- this led to over 200 deaths. In 2006, cartoons of Muhammad were published in Denmark, in reaction many lives and properties were lost, with many innocent people dying without knowing what it was all about. In the same year, Pope Benedict XVI questioned Islam's position on peace, this also led to the loss of lives and properties in Nigeria. These, according to Jimoh (2008), continue to affect the relationship between Christians and Muslims. More recently, the outburst of a new face of violence in Northern Nigerian under the aegis of the *Boko Haram* sect which rejects what it understands as pervasive and corrupting Western influence has deepened the mutual suspicion, hate and unhealthy rivalry between the two religions. In the face of all these, the fundamental question that this piece asks is 'what is the way forward?' This paper focuses on *Misericordia Vultus*, the Bull of Indiction of the Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy of Pope Francis I to see how the Christian-Muslim relations, especially in Northern Nigeria is a religio-political context for the celebration of the Jubilee Year of Mercy.

Christian-Muslim Relations in Northern Nigeria (1980-2014)

Christian-Muslim relations in Nigeria have been predominantly on the negative. While Kazah-Toure (2003) dates this mutual suspicion and conflict from the pre-colonial period, Sangosanya and Sha (2005) argue that this phenomenon began with the colonial period- the result of the construction of ethno-religious identities by the colonial masters. Gotan (2008) opines that whatever time frame we put as the beginning of religious intolerance between the two religions, the fact remains that it is a danger that is capable of destroying the corporate existence of Nigeria. Because of the sensitive place and role of religion in Nigeria, sectional economic and social interests, political ambition, ethnic considerations, easily take up the garb of religion, and thus, religion has become a tool in the hands of politicians and other pursuants of selfish interests to realize their quest.

A glance at the Nigeria history reveals that in 1980-1985, there were the Maitatsine religious riots; in 1987, at the College Education, Kafanchan, there was a religious riot; in 1990- Bauchi; in 1991, 14th October in Kano which was a reaction to Reihard Bonke's crusade; in 1992, in Zangon Katab; in Kaduna February 2000; In Bauchi, 2001 June, as a result of the introduction of the Sharia Law legal system in the state; In Jos, September 2001; in Kaduna, November 2002. Below is a summary of

the religio-political crisis from 2009–2013 between Christians and Muslims in the Northern part of Nigeria, giving a picture of the relations between the two major religions in Nigeria.

2009 Religio-Political Crises in Nigeria (Kanu 2014)

Date	Place	Number of Deceased
July 26 th 2009	Bauchi	Over 1,000
July 27 th 2009	Yobe, Borno, Bauchi, Kano	800

Figure 5

2010 Religio-Political Crises in Nigeria (Kanu 2014)

Date	Place	Number of Deceased
January 2010	Borno	4
March 13 th 2010	Jos	300
October 1 st 2010	Abuja	12
December 24 th -29 th 2010	Jos and Borno	94

Figure 6

2011 Religio-Political Crises in Nigeria

Date	Place	Number of Deceased
January 2011	Jos	200
January 28 th 2011	Borno	6
March 3 rd 2011	Suleja	14
April 16 th 2011	Borno	6
April 25 th 2011	Borno	5
May 28 th 2011	Dambo	5
June 7 th 2011	Borno	14
June 16 th 2011	Abuja	2
June 26 th 2011	Borno	25
July 10 th 2011	Suleja	6
August 1 st 2011	Borno	1
August 26 th 2011	Abuja	24

November 4 th 2011	Damaturu	150
November 27 th 2011	Yobe	7
Dec. 22 nd /23 rd 2011	Borno and Yobe	100
December 25 th 2011	Madalla	46
December 30 th 2011	Borno	7

Figure 7

2012 Religio-Political Crises in Nigeria (Kanu 2015)

Date	Place	Number of Deceased
January 5 th 2012	Gombe	6
January 6 th 2012	Adamawa	17
January 20 th 2012	Kano	200
June 3 rd 2012	Bauchi	15
June 17 th 2012	Kaduna	50
June 17 th 2012	Jos	150
August 2012	Kogi	19
October 3 rd 2012	Mubi	50
October 28 th 2012	Kaduna	8
December 2012	Jaji	60

Figure 8

2013 Religio-Political Crises in Nigeria (Bazza 2014)

Date	Place	Number of Deceased
March 18 th 2013	Kano	22
May 7 th 2013	Borno	55
July 6 th 2013	Yobe	42
July 28 th 2013	Borno	30
July 29 th 2013	Borno	40
September 7 th 2013	Borno	74
September 18 th 2013	Borno	166
September 20 th 2013	Borno	142
September 21 st 2013	Abuja	17
September 29 th 2013	Yobe	78
September 30 th 2013	Adamawa	2

September 30 th 2013	Yobe	62
October 8 th 2013	Borno	30
October 11 th 2013	Plateau	21
October 16 th 2013	Borno	40
October 16 th 2013	Borno and Yobe	900
October 21 st 2013	Borno	20
October 25 th 2013	Borno	74
November 4 th 2013	Adamawa	30

Figure 9

From the above figures, dating from July 26th 2009 to November 4th 2013, 5,248 lives were lost, not counting the property also lost. In 2014, which is not in this collection, many more lives were lost, for at this time preceding the election of 2015, more heinous crimes were committed by the *Boko Haram* sect.

Misericordia Vultus of Pope Francis I

Mercy is a mystery that is a wellspring of joy, serenity, and peace- revealing the mystery of the Most Holy Trinity. Our salvation depends on it. The Holy Father, Pope Francis I proclaimed the Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy so that the Church may gaze even more attentively on mercy so that she may become a more effective sign of the Father's action in our lives. It is also a special time for the Church when her witness might grow stronger and more effective (Francis I, 2015, p.6). The Jubilee year opens on 8 December 2015, the Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception (Francis I, 2015, pp.6-8). The reason being that it recalls God's redemptive action of mercy from the very beginning of the history of mankind. After the sin of Adam and Eve, God did not wish to leave humanity alone in the throes of evil. So he turned his gaze to Mary, holy and immaculate in love (cf. Eph 1:4), choosing her to be the Mother of man's Redeemer. When faced with the gravity of sin, God responds with the fullness of mercy. The Roman Pontiff writes, "I have chosen the date of 8 December because of its rich meaning in the recent history of the Church. In fact, I will open the Holy Door on the fiftieth anniversary of the closing of the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council. The Church feels a great need to keep this event alive" (Francis I, 2015, p.7). This is based on the teachings of his predecessors and the vision of Vatican II. Saint John XXIII, at the opening Vatican Council II, indicated the path to follow: "Now the Bride of Christ wishes to use the medicine of mercy rather than taking up arms of severity" (Francis I,

2015, p.7). The Jubilee Year would end on 20th November 2016, the Solemnity of Christ the King. "On that day, as we seal the Holy Door, we shall be filled, above all, with a sense of gratitude and thanksgiving to the Most Holy Trinity for having granted us an extraordinary time of grace" (Francis I, 2015, pp.8-9).

Expounding on the implications of the theological content of the Year of Mercy, the Holy Father taught that this year is a key that indicates God's action towards us. In the Sacred Scripture, God does not limit himself merely to affirming his love, but makes it visible and tangible. Love, after all, can never be just an abstraction. By its very nature, it indicates something concrete: intentions, attitudes, and behaviours that are shown in daily living. The mercy of God is his loving concern for each one of us (Francis I, 2015, pp.8-13). This is the path which the merciful love of Christians must also travel. As the Father loves, so do his children. This is at the heart of the Church's mission: her credibility is seen in how she shows merciful and compassionate love. "Mercy is the foundation of the Church's life. All her pastoral activity should be caught up in the tenderness she makes present to believers; nothing in her preaching and in her tenderness to the world can be lacking in mercy" (Francis I, 2015, p.13).

To resound the message of mercy, Pope Francis drew attention to the great teaching of John Paul II's encyclical *Dives in Misericordia (Rich in Mercy)*. He drew attention to two passages: First, Saint John Paul II highlighted the fact that we had forgotten the theme of mercy in today's cultural milieu: "The present-day mentality, more perhaps than that of people in the past, seems opposed to a God of mercy, and in fact tends to exclude from life and to remove from the human heart the very idea of mercy." (John Paul II, no. 15) Furthermore, Saint John Paul II pushed for a more urgent proclamation and witness to mercy in the contemporary world: "It is dictated by love for man, for all that is human and which, according to the intuitions of many of our contemporaries, is threatened by an immense danger. The mystery of Christ ... obliges me to proclaim mercy as God's merciful love, revealed in that same mystery of Christ. It likewise obliges me to have recourse to that mercy and to beg for it at this difficult, critical phase of the history of the Church and of the world"(John Paul II, no. 15). The church is therefore called upon to be a servant of mercy and to mediate it to all peoples.

The Vicar of Christ places the practice of pilgrimage at the heart of the Year of Mercy. The act of pilgrimage to the Holy Door of Mercy in Rome and other parts

of the world requires pilgrimage, which further teaches believers that mercy requires dedication and sacrifice. He further expresses his burning desire that during this Jubilee, the Christian people may reflect on the corporal and spiritual works of mercy. "It is my burning desire that, during this Jubilee, the Christian people may reflect on the corporal and spiritual works of mercy. It will be a way to reawaken our conscience, too often grown dull in the face of poverty. And let us enter more deeply into the heart of the Gospel where the poor have a special experience of God's mercy. Jesus introduces us to these works of mercy in his preaching so that we can know whether or not we are living as his disciples. Let us rediscover these corporal works of mercy: to feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, clothe the naked, welcome the stranger, heal the sick, visit the imprisoned, and bury the dead. And let us not forget the spiritual works of mercy: to counsel the doubtful, instruct the ignorant, admonish sinners, comfort the afflicted, forgive offences, bear patiently those who do us ill, and pray for the living and the dead" (Francis I, 2015, pp.18).

The document also teaches that the season of Lent during this Jubilee Year is to be lived more intensely, with emphasis on the Sacrament of Reconciliation: "The season of Lent during this Jubilee Year should also be lived more intensely as a privileged moment to celebrate and experience God's mercy. How many pages of Sacred Scripture are appropriate for meditation during the weeks of Lent to help us rediscover the merciful face of the Father!" (Francis I, 2015, p.20). focusing more intensely on the sacrament of reconciliation, the Roman Pontiff writes: "Let us place the Sacrament of Reconciliation at the centre once more in such a way that it will enable people to touch the grandeur of God's mercy with their own hands. For every penitent, it will be a source of true interior peace" (Francis I, 2015, p.21). In a very practical way, Pope Francis will send out Missionaries of Mercy during Lent of this Holy Year, who will be a sign of the Church's maternal solicitude for the People of God, enabling them to enter the profound richness of this mystery so fundamental to the faith. Added to this is that the jubilee year entails the granting of indulgences.

With this, it is hoped that the message of mercy would reach everyone especially for those involved in criminal organizations and in corruption. He writes, "May the message of mercy reach everyone, and may no one be indifferent to the call to experience mercy. I direct this invitation to conversion even more fervently to those whose behavior distances them from the grace of God. I particularly have in

mind men and women belonging to criminal organizations of any kind. For their own good, I beg them to change their lives” (Francis I, 2015, p.23). Extending the invitation further, he writes: “The same invitation is extended to those who either perpetrate or participate in corruption. This festering wound is a grave sin that cries out to heaven for vengeance, because it threatens the very foundations of personal and social life. Corruption prevents us from looking to the future with hope, because its tyrannical greed shatters the plans of the weak and tramples upon the poorest of the poor” (Francis I, 2015, p. 23).

The Pope takes the practice of mercy beyond the walls of the church to include other peoples: Muslims and Christians. He writes: “There is an aspect of mercy that goes beyond the confines of the Church. It relates us to Judaism and Islam, both of which consider mercy to be one of God's most important attributes. ... I trust that this Jubilee year celebrating the mercy of God will foster an encounter with these religions and with other noble religious traditions; may it open us to even more fervent dialogue so that we might know and understand one another better; may it eliminate every form of closed-mindedness and disrespect, and drive out every form of violence and discrimination” (Francis I, 2015, pp.28-29).

Towards the end of the bull, Pope Francis turns to Mary, Mother of Mercy: “My thoughts now turn to the Mother of Mercy. May the sweetness of her countenance watch over us in this Holy Year, so that all of us may rediscover the joy of God's tenderness. No one has penetrated the profound mystery of the incarnation like Mary. Her entire life was patterned after the presence of mercy made flesh. The Mother of the Crucified and Risen One has entered the sanctuary of divine mercy because she participated intimately in the mystery of his love” (Francis I, 2015, pp.29-30). After Mary as the Mother of Mercy, Pope extends his thoughts to the saints and blessed ones who have made divine mercy their mission in life. In this regard, he singles out St. Faustina: “Our prayer also extends to the saints and blessed ones who made divine mercy their mission in life. I am especially thinking of the great apostle of mercy, Saint Faustina Kowalska. May she, who was called to enter the depths of divine mercy, intercede for us and obtain for us the grace of living and walking always according to the mercy of God and with an unwavering trust in his love” (Francis I, 2015, p.30). He ended the Bull by asking us to open our hearts to God who can surprise us on the path of mercy (Francis I, 2015, pp.31-33).

Misericordia Vultus and Christian-Muslim Relations in Nigeria

From the foregoing, religion is a unique phenomenon in the Nigerian society and history. Although it is one of the few factors that has succeeded in bringing together a good number of Nigerians under one umbrella, irrespective of ethnic considerations, Onwukeme (2008) avers that it has also been associated with conflicts and violence which has dealt a terrible blow on the nation's unity and brought untold hardships on the people. Religion has been politicized, manipulated and militarized by unscrupulous people to fan the embers of rivalry, antagonism and ethnic discrimination.

In response to this challenge, Francis I (2015) sees the Jubilee Year of Mercy as an opportune time to build a relationship between Christians and Muslims. Mercy would therefore be a uniting factor since both religions "consider mercy to be one of God's most important attribute" (p. 28). He further writes that: "Among the privileged names that Islam attributes to the Creator are 'Merciful and Kind'... This invocation is often on the lips of faithful Muslims who feel themselves accompanied and sustained by mercy in their daily weakness. They too believe that no one can place a limit on divine mercy because its doors are always open" (p. 29). Muslims and Christians are therefore, called upon to focus on the things that unite them rather than on their differences. Focusing on the factors that unite makes for a successful dialogue. In *Ecclesia in Africa*, it is in this regard that Pope John Paul II (1995) calls for an increased commitment to dialogue that must also embrace the people of other religions of good will. He emphasizes that the Living God, Creator of heaven and earth and the Lord of history, is the Father of the one great human family to which we all belong. As such, he wants us to bear witness to him through our respect for the values and religious traditions of each person, working together for human progress and development at all levels. Particular care will therefore be taken so that Islamic-Christian dialogue respects on both sides the principle of religious freedom with all that this involves, also including external and public manifestations of faith. Christians and Muslims are called to commit themselves to promoting a dialogue free from the risks of fundamentalism, and to raising their voices against unfair policies and practices, as well as against the lack of reciprocity in matters of religious freedom.

Conclusion

The foregoing has studied the development of the history of the relationship between Muslims and Christians in Nigeria, right from the period of independence. This study has revealed an incessant tension between the adherents

of Christianity and Islam. This relationship as already observed has been defined by mutual suspicion, hate and unhealthy rivalry. This has placed the Nigerian nation on the boil. In the face of all these tensions, hate, suspicion and unhealthy rivalry, this work has attempted to address the question of what the way forward. To find a solution to the problem, the researcher strongly believes that *Misericordia Vultus*, the Bull of Indiction of the Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy of Pope Francis I has some help to offer on the Christian-Muslim relations, especially in Northern Nigeria. It also understands this historical context of religious violence as a religio-political context for the celebration of the Jubilee Year of Mercy. Taking from the document of the Roman Pontiff, this piece calls for dialogue and respect for differences between the adherents of the two religions. It also emphasizes the need to focus on the things that unit them rather than divide.

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