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DEVELOPMENT AND CHALLENGES OF ECUMENICAL MOVEMENT IN NIGERIA

Abstract. “The attainment of union is the concern of the whole Church, faithful and shepherds alike. This concern extends to everyone, according to his talent, whether it be exercised in his daily Christian life or in his theological and historical research. This concern itself reveals already to some extent the bond of brotherhood between all Christians and it helps toward that full and perfect unity which God in His kindness wills.” This statement from the Second Vatican Council’s Decree on Ecumenism, presents journey towards unity of all Christian as imperative for all Christians irrespective of nationality and status. This makes ecumenical movement most relevant in a pluralistic society like Nigeria with diverse cultures and tradition, different ethnic and religious sentiments. The objective of the work is to present different stages of ecumenical movement in Nigeria as well as the extent of participation and contributions of various Christian denominations at each stage of its development. This work also aims at considering those attitudes of many Christians in Nigeria that pose as challenge or stumbling block to the realization of unity among Christians. Some of which are ignorance of the teaching and practical principles of ecumenism, Christian fundamentalism and fanaticism, personal-interest, religious and ethnic sentiments which ordinarily had already created a division and mutual suspicion among Nigerian people. Bearing in mind that Christians are “salt of the earth and light of the world,” the actualization of unity among Christians in Nigeria will serve as catalyst to full realization of peace, justice and unity in Nigeria. Hence, this work propose spiritual ecumenism and Christian cooperation as practical steps to the attainment of Christian unity in Nigeria.

Key words: ecumenical movement; religious denomination; denominationalism; fundamentalism; fanaticism.

1. INTRODUCTION

The movement for Christian Unity in Nigeria began in 1911 alongside the various Ecumenical movements at the international level: For instance, World Christian Conference of 1910 in Edinburgh, the World Council of

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Churches of 1948 and the Second Vatican Council of 1962-1965. The early Christian (protestant) missionaries to Nigeria took the initiative “to overcome «*denominational gospel*» which created enormous division and enmity that gave rise to rivalry among the Christians in place of unity and love.”¹ Although in the opinion of Ogbu U. Kalu, this initiative to unite protestant missionaries in Nigeria was, “to break the Roman Catholic monopoly of the mission fields in Nigeria.”² This initial efforts could not yield the desired result until 1970 when the Catholic Church in Nigeria joined the rest of the Christian Churches to form what is known as Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) with the aim of establishing peace and unity among Christians in Nigeria. This could be regarded as a Catholics response to the message of the Vatican II *Decree on ecumenism* which states that: “Today, in many parts of the world, under the inspiring grace of the Holy Spirit, many efforts are being made in prayer, word and action to attain that fullness of unity which Jesus Christ desires. The Sacred Council exhorts all the Catholic faithful to recognize the signs of the times and to take an active and intelligent part in the work of ecumenism.”³ Aware that scandal of division among Christians, the council further states that “the restoration of unity among all Christians is one of the principal concerns of the Second Vatican Council. Christ the Lord founded one Church and one Church only. However, many Christian communions present themselves to men as the true inheritors of Jesus Christ; all indeed profess to be followers of the Lord but differ in mind and go their different ways, as if Christ Himself were divided. Such division openly contradicts the will of Christ, scandalizes the world, and damages the holy cause of preaching the Gospel to every creature.”⁴

This effort to bring together all Christians in Nigeria under the umbrella of CAN could be regarded as progress in ecumenical journey, in accordance with the statement of Pope Francis who said that “To journey together is already to be making unity.”⁵ Yet ecumenical movement in Nigeria faces numerous challenges, like mutual suspicious, fanaticism, proliferation of

¹ Ogbu U. KALU, *The Divided People of God: Church Union Movement in Nigeria 1857–1966* (New York: NOK Publishers International Ltd., 1978), 3.

² *Ibid.*, 3.

³ *Unitatis Redintegratio*, No. 4.

⁴ *Ibid.*, No. 1.

⁵ Pope Francis’ Homily at the Conclusion of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, with the theme “Let us remember that unity is always better than conflict!,” Rome, January 27, 2014, <http://www.zenit.org/en/articles/pope-francis-homily-at-the-conclusion-of-the-week-of-prayer-for-christian-unity> (accessed on 1st December, 2015).

Churches and doctrines, competing for relevance and popularity, as well as quest for members. In order to address these issues, this paper highlights Catholic principles of ecumenism as contained in the Vatican II decree on ecumenism *Unitatis Redintegratio* with emphasis on the spiritual ecumenism as the best approach to ecumenism in Nigeria.

2. DEVELOPMENT OF ECUMENISM IN NIGERIA

The World Christian Conference of 1910 in Edinburgh created an opportunity for many Christians across the world to take steps towards unity. In 1911, Presbyterian missionaries in Nigeria initiated a conference that brought together Presbyterian, Methodist and Anglican missionaries. This conference focused its discussion on practical issues like; “to secure uniformity of discipline within the native Churches founded by the different missionary societies, (and) discuss such matters as the relation of the Church to marriage under native law, the baptism of women themselves, Christian married to polygamous husbands, the definition of spheres of influence in the untouched (missionary) fields.”⁶ These missionaries were conscious of the urgent need for a united front in the missionary land since the “*denominational gospel* they brought to the Africans has created rivalry, division and enmity among the Christians instead of unity and love.”⁷ Hence, the conference targeted on erasing denominationalism and resolves to attain this unity by mutual and full recognition of the discipline of the native Churches of Southern Nigeria.

Despite the ecumenical reasons given by missionaries in Nigeria for initiating the conference at that time, the main aim of these united front was obvious. According to Emma Ekpunobi, convoking the conference was to fight denominational competitions.⁸ The fact that the Catholic Church was the main target was obvious. According to Ogbu U. Kalu, “the truth remains that it was convened in order to break the Roman Catholic monopoly of the mission fields in Nigeria.”⁹ This conscious effort by protestant missionaries to unite against the Catholic Church was emphasized by John Baur in his

⁶ Felix K. EKECHI, *Missionary Enterprise and Rivalry in Igboland, 1857-1914* (London: Cass, 1972), cited in O.U. KALU, *The Divided People of God*, 4.

⁷ O.U. KALU, *Divided People of God*, 3.

⁸ Emma EKPUNOBI, *We Are Closer Than We Think: An Analysis of Contemporary Issues in Ecumenism* (Enugu: Rabboni Publisher International, 2001), 68.

⁹ O.U. KALU, *Divided People of God*, 3.

statement as follows: “For protestants, the ecumenical movement has been restricted to a search for unity among the protestant Churches, sometimes as a strengthening bond against the so-called Roman (Catholic) danger.”¹⁰ Whatever might be the case, their effort was regarded as a conscious effort to unite Christians in Nigeria. In 1947, another missionary conference was held at Onitsha (a town in the South-Eastern Nigeria). The proposed participants were representatives of Anglicans, Methodists, Presbyterians, Qua Iboes, and Sudan United Mission (the missionary body working in Northern Nigeria, by then), but the latter was forced to withdraw from the conference because the colonial policy then could not favour her.¹¹ There was no indication of any involvement of the Catholic Church in these conferences at this stage.

With the formation of the World Council of Churches in 1948, and its corresponding mandate on the unity of Churches, the conference in Nigeria received new impetus to continue the struggle despite its challenges. Hence, in 1965 serious effort was made for the inauguration of what was to be known as *United Church of Nigeria* to serve as national body to facilitate *Church Union*. It is referred to at this stage as *Church Union* because there was no conscious ecumenical exercise in place. It was more of established as a united front for Christian (mainly protestant) Churches. This could be one of the reasons why it was aborted before the inauguration day. Emma Ekpunobi described the scenario as follows; “the inauguration of the united Church of Nigeria was scheduled for 11th December 1965. Some of the guests had arrived in Lagos (the then capital of Nigeria in the South-Western Nigeria). Many other guests were on their way to Lagos. The visitors did not know that urgent messages had been sent to their offices regretting an indefinite postponement of the inauguration ceremony. Thanksgiving services were already held for the new united Church of Nigeria in parts of Africa and Europe. Funds close to \$15,000.00 were raised from Britain and North America in Support of the new United Church of Nigeria. Unfortunately, it wasn’t still born.”¹² Many other subsequent attempts to unite Christians in Nigeria failed as a result of; “lack of clear ideology, inadequate mass education (Christian public enlightenment), personality conflict (among leaders of different denominations), ethnic sentiments, interdenominational antago-

¹⁰ John BAUR, *2000 Years of Christianity In Africa: An African Church History* (Kenya: Paulines Publications Africa, 1994), 500.

¹¹ E. EKPUNOBI, *We Are Closer Than We Think*, 69.

¹² Ibid.

nism, etc.”¹³ According to Ogbu U. Kalu, these missionaries came together to champion the cause of Church unity, but failed to fight the forces of rivalry. Therefore, they ended up fighting or pursuing their denominational interests, which finally killed the vision of the Church Union.¹⁴

It is a fact that the Church Union initiative failed, but it left traces which later gave birth to the Christian Council of Nigeria¹⁵. The Council comprised of various “protestant Churches, notably; Church Missionary Society (CMS) (which is known today as Church of Nigeria), Anglican Communion, Methodists, Baptists, Presbyterians, Qua Iboe, and Salvation Army.”¹⁶ The newly formed Christian Council of Nigeria (CCN) was formed with the following objectives: to create opportunity to foster and express the fellowship and unity of the Christian Church in Nigeria, to provide forum for member Churches to co-operate in projects relating to pastoral education, joint ownership of schools, and health institutions and to connect Christian Churches in Nigeria with the International Missionary Council and the WCC¹⁷. Christian Council of Nigeria (CCN) was orchestrated only by Protestant missionaries at the early stage of its development. The Roman Catholics in Nigeria were not involved in any of these conferences until 1970, that is, after Second Vatican council defined Catholic participation in ecumenical conferences and dialogue. Thus, ecumenism became a common agenda of both Catholics and protestants in Nigeria, while conferences, meetings and theological discussions began earnestly to facilitate the desired Christian unity. Hence, in 1976, CCN evolved to Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN).

3. THE FORMATION OF CHRISTIAN ASSOCIATION OF NIGERIA

Christian Association of Nigeria with the acronym CAN is an organized Christian body which comprise all Christian denomination in Nigeria: Catholic, protestant, Evangelical, Pentecostal and many other Christian denominations. It began in the Northern part of Nigeria as regional association for all protestant Churches and was made up of both lay and clerical leaders of the

¹³ Ibid., 69.

¹⁴ O.U. KALU, *Divided People of God*, 3.

¹⁵ E. EKPUNOBI, *We Are Closer Than We Think*, 69.

¹⁶ Hilary Odili OKEKE, *Milestones in Ecumenism: Evolution in Canonical Legislation in Ecumenical Matters* (Enugu: Think Ltd., 1996), 216.

¹⁷ E. EKPUNOBI, *We Are Closer Than We Think*, 69.

Church, who used the platform for consultation and common action.¹⁸ In 1976, Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) became redefined, restructured and reconstituted as a national ecumenical body, and on 24 February 1980 it was officially inaugurated in Lagos.¹⁹ Following its revised constitution of 1988, membership of CAN consists not of individual Christians or denominations, but of Church groups. Accordingly, five categories of Christian bodies in Nigeria were recognized: Christian Council of Nigeria (CCN), which includes mainly protestants and Anglicans; Catholic Secretariat of Nigeria, headed by the Catholic Bishops Council of Nigeria (CBCN); Christian Pentecostal Fellowship of Nigeria (CPFN), Organization of African Independent Churches (OAIC); Evangelical Church of West Africa / Tarayya Ekklesiyayin Kristi A Nigeria (ECWA/TEKAN). Through this body, CAN, Catholics and non-Catholics join together in pursuit of the desired Christian unity in Nigeria with the following objectives:

- ♦ To serve as a basis of response to the unity of the Church especially as contained in our Lord's pastoral prayer: "That they all may be one" (John 17:21);
- ♦ To promote understanding, peace and unity among the various people and strata of society in Nigeria through the propagation of the gospel;
- ♦ To act as a liaison committee by means of which its member Churches can consult together and when necessary, to make common statement and take common actions;
- ♦ To act as a watchman of the spiritual and moral welfare of the nation.²⁰

From inception in 1976 CAN's administrative headquarters were situated at Catholic Secretariat of Nigeria which was at that time in Lagos. In the year 2004, CAN's administrative headquarters were formally transferred to the *National Ecumenical Centre*, Abuja, with its branches in the 36 states of Nigeria including Abuja, the Federal Capital Territory.²¹ With the continued global call for deeper ecumenical work, CAN increases her momentum in facilitating the spirit of unity among the Christians in Nigeria. Its activities

¹⁸ Hilary C. ACHUNIKE, *Dreams of Heaven: A Modern Response of Christianity in North-Western Igboland 1970-1990* (Onitsha: Africana-FEP Publishers Ltd., 1995), 89.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ *Notes On Christian Association of Nigeria*, ed. Charles O. Williams (Lagos: Femi Commercial Works, 1979), 3-4.

²¹ Hypolite A. ADIGWE, "The Youth Wing of the Christian Association of Nigeria – A Call for Unity of Action", An Address Presented at the Meeting of Representatives of the Youth of the Church Groups of CAN by the Director of Education, Youths and Women Development, CAN, October 2007, 2.

are enhanced with the creation of both the Youth and Women's Wings of CAN as well as its sub-division according to dioceses/deaneries within a given State. This makes it easier for CAN to continue to create opportunities for interaction and co-operation among the Christian Churches in Nigeria.²²

4. THE CATHOLIC CONTRIBUTION IN NIGERIA

CAN is the Christian body that oversee issues bordering Christians unity in Nigeria and at the same time, a socio-political association to stand against anti-Christian policies of different regimes in Nigeria. It continues to seek for better ways of actualizing the ultimate goal of ensuring unity in the Church. According to Adewale Martins, the Catholic archbishop of Lagos, "though Christian Association of Nigeria has not been able to hold any dialogue on doctrinal issues both at the national and state level, CAN also engages in both spiritual and practical ecumenical activities at all levels in Nigeria."²³ Concerning the growth, stability, success and the contribution of CAN to the spiritual, ecumenical and socio-political life of her members, the Catholic Church plays a vital role both as a facilitator and as a *conscience* of this association. This is because in most cases members of other Christian denominations are preoccupied with individual/personal interest to the detriment of the interest and goal of the association, especially when CAN is confronted with ethnic, political and denominational interest.

In many occasions, it is the Catholic Church that give direction to CAN both administratively and spiritually. For 28 years the administrative headquarters of CAN were situated at the Catholic Secretariat of Nigeria (1976 - 2004) before they were formally transferred to the *National Ecumenical Centre*, Abuja. It is also the Catholic Church that introduced YOWICAN (The youth Wing of CAN), WOWICAN (The Women Wing of CAN), for the Education, Youth and Women Development plans for the promotion of ecumenism in Nigeria. Within the Catholic Church she established different ecumenical commissions to facilitate the achievement of its objectives. Within the Catholic Bishop Conference of Nigeria (CBCN), the Church established an Episcopal committee on Ecumenism with Most Rev. Mathew

²² H.O. OKEKE, *Milestones in Ecumenism*, 219.

²³ Martins ADEWALE, "Ecumenical Dialogue," in *One God, Many Religions: Let Us Talk*, ed. Hypolite Adigwe (Abuja: Department of Mission and Dialogue, Catholic Secretariat of Nigeria, and Pontifical Mission Societies, 2003), 103.

Audu (Bishop of Lafia) as the current chairman. The CBCN continues to encourage all Catholics in Nigeria, “to regard non Catholics in a human and charitable way and establish dialogue with them; socialize with them; and do not discriminate against them, (to) avoid criticizing them; (to) prudently encourage associations that favour ecumenism; (to) have special care for children in mixed marriages.²⁴ This instruction follows the directives of the Second Vatican Council which states that; “Catholics must gladly acknowledge and esteem the truly Christian endowments from our common heritage which are to be found among our separated brethren. It is right and salutary to recognize the riches of Christ and virtuous works in the lives of others who are bearing witness to Christ, sometimes even to the shedding of their blood. For God is always wonderful in His works and worthy of all praise.”²⁵

At the Catholic Secretariat of Nigeria (CSN), CBCN also established five major committees: Pastoral Affairs, Pastoral Agents, Directorate of Communications, Church and Society as well as committee of Mission and Dialogue. The Committee on Ecumenism (which is currently directed by Rev. Fr. Cornelius Omonokhua) comes under the committee of Mission and Dialogue. The committee on Ecumenism is saddled with the responsibility of Promoting Christian unity at human, social, political and strictly religious areas. Its aim is to bring the various Christian denominations in the country together to study and understand better each other, to work together in identifying areas of agreement and try to deepen them, while seeking solutions for those areas of disagreement.²⁶ For instance, the Committee on Ecumenism is currently facilitating contacts with the Anglican Communion in Nigeria, to establishing the “National Anglican/Roman Catholic Commission” (NARC). NARC would engage in theological reflections on themes discussed at the Anglican /Roman Catholic International Commission (ARCIC). This is aimed at driving home the decisions and resolutions of Anglican/Roman Catholic International Commission (ARCIC) and through this national body, NARC, these resolution will reach the grassroots at the diocesan level. Hence, similar committee/commissions on Ecumenism are also in existence at the Provincial and diocesan level. Furthermore, the Catholic Secretariat of Nigeria (CSN) has from time to time organized joint prayer sessions and interdenominational services at national, diocesan and parish levels. For

²⁴ H.O. OKEKE, *Milestones in Ecumenism*, 222.

²⁵ *Unitatis Redintegratio*, No. 4.

²⁶ *Profile of Catholic Secretariat of Nigeria Department*, Retrieved from official CSN website <http://www.csnigeria.org/deptcomm.php?tab=19> (accessed on 21st November, 2015).

instance, the annual week of prayer for Christian Unity is organized at all levels with seminars, lectures and joint prayers sessions with other denominations.²⁷ This takes place in Nigeria between 18–25 January of every year and significantly covers the feast of St Peter and St. Paul the foremost Apostles of the Christian Church. Catholic faithful share equally in non-sacramental liturgical worships such as Morning or Evening Prayer, special vigils, Bible week etc.²⁸

Annually, the Church organizes, at the national, provincial and diocesan levels, symposia, seminars, public lectures and ecumenical conferences for clergy, religious, lay faithful and major seminarians as means of inculcating ecumenical spirit in order to enhance Christian unity, foster cooperation and joint social action among Christ's faithful.²⁹ Furthermore, On June 29, 1980, an ecumenical institute was established to enhance sound academic and theological research on the Church's mission and ecumenism. This institute is known as Institute of Ecumenical Education, Thinker's Corner, Enugu. Also under the auspices of the Bible Society of Nigeria (BSN) Catholics with other Christian denominations participated in the translation of the Bible. During the historic visits of the Holy Father, Pope John Paul II, to Nigeria in 1982 and 1997, his openness to meet and address leaders of various Christian and Islamic groups, improved the ecumenical spirit in Nigeria and till date the Church has been actively involved in seeking for better ways of propagating ecumenism in Nigeria.

5. CHALLENGES FACING ECUMENISM IN NIGERIA

Despite the efforts and contributions so far made, Christians in Nigeria have persistently encountered difficulties and challenges towards full realization of their mission to "unite all in Christ". The attitude of Christians, particularly, pursuit of self-interest of Church leaders which leads to proliferation of Churches constitute a stumbling block and hinder, to a large extent, this mission. Although many of the separated brethren justify proliferation as "Church planting", the disintegration Churches give rise to

²⁷ M. ADEWALE, "Ecumenical Dialogue," 102.

²⁸ Patrick I. OKONKWO, "Ecumenical Week of Prayer for Christian Unity as Instrument for Cultivation of Global Peace and Social Progress", paper presented at the Catholic Theological Association of Nigeria (CATHAN), Catholic Institute of West Africa (CIWA), Port Harcourt, 2014.

²⁹ M. ADEWALE, "Ecumenical Dialogue," 102.

multiplication of doctrine which makes it difficult to have common understanding and a unified purpose. Fundamentalism and *holier-than-thou* attitude among Pentecostals is also considered as hindrance to ecumenism, since the so call, *living Churches* (Pentecostals), who demand from the new convert to *accept Jesus as personal Lord and Saviour*, refer to other Christian denominations as *old time religion* on the road to damnation. Inter-Church criticism and discrimination are carried over to the daily civil life of individual Christians to the extent that Christians of a particular denomination discriminate against those of other denominations in the area of employment, business, corporate societies and even national/state politics. Job opportunities are offered to those who belong to the same Christian denomination with the owner or managements of any establishment. This is mainly perpetuated by members of protestant and Pentecostal Churches in Nigeria to forestall Catholic tendency to dominate. These perceive attempts to dialogue or unite with the Roman Catholic Church as means of losing their identity. The Catholics, on the other hand, have to overcome the attitude of superiority over non-Catholics and appreciate the riches of divine graces operational in other Christian Churches. Some Catholics avoid any form of interaction or common prayer session with other brethren and disregard other Christian denominations as *mushroom Churches*. There is no doubt that some Catholics are slow in assimilating the ecumenical spirit/teachings of the Second Vatican Council.

It is in this regard that Ikenga R. Ozigbo tried to assess and at the same time to give reasons for the current behaviour of Christians in Nigeria. Thus he stated that, “ecumenical efforts in Nigeria had been long though largely cosmic. This was against the backdrop of bitter memories of strife (prejudice) and rivalry in Eastern Nigeria between the Catholic Mission on one hand and all the protestant (and Pentecostal) Churches on the other from 1890’s right up to the 1960’s. The memories of hate, hostilities, mistrust and suspicion were still fresh and raw. They had not been able to make Catholics and Anglicans see themselves as comrades of the same Christian religion”.³⁰ Similarly, Nathaniel Ndiokwere maintained that rivalries, unhealthy competition, mutual distrust and scepticism are bane of ecumenism in Nigeria³¹. While H. O. Okeke concluded that the denominational rivalry is worst

³⁰ Ikenga R. OZIGBO, *Igbo Catholicism: The Onitsha Connection 1967–1984* (Onitsha: Africana-FEP Publishers, 1985), 85–86.

³¹ Nathaniel NDIOKWERE, *The African Church Today And Tomorrow: Prospects, and Challenges* (Onitsha: Effective Key Publishers, 1994), 317–330.

between Catholics and Anglicans at least in Eastern Nigeria, where each target the other in their relentless criticism and attacks.³² Ignorance is also identified as one of the major challenges to the realization of the principles of ecumenism in Nigeria. Many Christians in Nigeria (Catholics and non-Catholics) are ignorant of the true meaning, guidelines/principles and approach to ecumenism, especially as decreed in the Second Vatican Council.

All Christians are called to be the “salt of the earth and light of the world” and to remain the conscience of the civil society. When unity in heart and mind, they can join to fight evil in the society and upturn an unjust government. Therefore, successive government in Nigeria consider the unification of Christians as a threat to their continuous manipulation of the polity as well as exploitation of the citizenry. While they take advantage of pluralistic nature of Nigerian society in terms of tribes, ethnic groups and religious ideology (which includes Muslim, Christians, traditionalists), they consistently use power and wealth within their control to manipulate and perpetual the disunity of Christians taking advantage of some greedy and gullible Church leaders. They are aware that united Christianity will positively affect the socio-political unity of our country as well as hinder looting of the national treasury.

6. PRINCIPLES AND PRACTICE OF ECUMENISM

The Second Vatican Council in the decree on Ecumenism directs all Christ faithful to participate actively in the realization of Christian Unity. Thus, it states that; “the attainment of union is the concern of the whole Church, faithful and shepherds alike. This concern extends to everyone, according to his talent, whether it be exercised in his daily Christian life or in his theological and historical research. This concern itself reveals already to some extent the bond of brotherhood between all Christians and it helps toward that full and perfect unity which God in His kindness wills.”³³ Therefore, it is imperative on all Christians of every race and nationality to carry on the mission of ecumenism without denominational bias and with respect for the graces that are at work among Christians of different denominations. Hence, the council instructs that “Catholics (indeed all Christians) must

³² Hilary Odili OKEKE, “African Perspective On Ecumenical Dialogue,” *Bigard Theological Studies*, 117 (1997), 1: 44–60.

³³ *Unitatis Redintegratio*, No. 5.

gladly acknowledge and esteem the truly Christian endowments from our common heritage which are to be found among our separated brethren. It is right and salutary to recognize the riches of Christ and virtuous works in the lives of others who are bearing witness to Christ, sometimes even to the shedding of their blood. For God is always wonderful in His works and worthy of all praise.”³⁴

As mentioned above, Christian ecumenical movement is described by S. Anih as, “essentially *movement* for the renewal and reform of all Churches”³⁵. Thus, *ecumenical movement*, can be called a *journey* towards Christian unity. Pope Francis during a celebration held at St Paul Outside the Walls to mark the close of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity in January 2014, emphasized the necessity and benefit of the ecumenical journey when he said: “To journey together is already to be making unity.” Bearing in mind that Christian unity comes as a gift of the Holy Spirit, Pope Francis enumerated the necessary aspects of this *journeying together* as: the presence of the Holy Spirit invoked through prayer and collaboration of Christians. Hence, he said: “Unity will not come about as a miracle at the very end. Rather, unity comes about in journeying; the Holy Spirit does this on the journey. If we do not walk together, if we do not pray for one another, if we do not collaborate in the many ways that we can in this world for the People of God, then unity will not come about! But it will happen on this journey, in each step we take. And it is not we who are doing this, but rather the Holy Spirit, who sees our good will.”³⁶ Ecumenism is Christ-centred (not Church-centred) and the closer Christians, or diverse Christian Churches, *journey* towards Christ and rally around him, as on the spokes of a wheel, the closer they move towards one another.

Against backdrop, thorough examination of the activities of Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) leaves no doubt that CAN needs more proactive steps towards Ecumenism in order to recognize, expand and deepen ecumenical spirit among Christians. It has to take into consideration the principles laid down by the Second Vatican Council which put succinctly states that; “Renewal of the Church, interior conversion (change) of hearts and holiness of life, along with public and private prayer for the unity of

³⁴ *Unitatis Redintegratio*, no. 4.

³⁵ Stanley ANIH, *Towards A Nigerian Ecumenical Education* (Enugu: Snaap Press Ltd, 1987), 15.

³⁶ Pope Francis’ Homily at the Conclusion of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, with the theme “Let us remember that unity is always better than conflict!,” Rome, January 27, 2014, retrieved from <http://www.zenit.org/en/articles/pope-francis-homily-at-the-conclusion-of-the-week-of-prayer-for-christian-unity> (accessed on 1st December, 2015).

Christians, have been identified as *the soul* of the whole ecumenical movement, and merits the name, «*spiritual ecumenism*».³⁷ Spiritual ecumenism, therefore, is the foundation, the soul, and the binding force of all ecumenical movements. The whole structure of ecumenism is built on it. According to Léon Joseph Suenens: “doctrine divides, whereas action unites.”³⁸

Renewal of the Church is seen by the council as important aspect of ecumenism. It states that, “Every renewal of the Church is essentially grounded in an increase of fidelity to her own calling. Undoubtedly this is the basis of the movement toward unity.”³⁹ This renewal touches all aspects of Churches’ life: preaching the word of God, liturgical worship, catechetical teachings and lay apostolate, *new forms of religious life* and spirituality of married life, as well as the Churches’ social teaching. The renewal of the Church, according to the council, is closely connected to the change of heart. Therefore, it calls for the conversion of heart for all Christians. This conversion of heart is rooted in renewal of inner life, self-denial and unstained love. Hence, the council decreed that: “there can be no ecumenism worthy of the name without a change of heart. For it is from renewal of the inner life of our minds, from self-denial and an unstinted love that desires of unity take their rise and develop in a mature way. We should therefore pray to the Holy Spirit for the grace to be genuinely self-denying, humble, gentle in the service of others, and to have an attitude of brotherly generosity towards them.”⁴⁰

Also the Second Vatican Council acknowledged the primary role of prayer in every ecumenical movement following the action of Jesus Christ when He prayed, “that they may all be one. As You, Father, are in Me and I in You...” (John 17:21). Thus, it instructs that Christians should, “pray to the Holy Spirit for the grace to be genuinely self-denying, humble, gentle in the service of others, and to have an attitude of brotherly generosity towards them.”⁴¹ Prayer for Christian unity is the life wire of ecumenism. According to Cardinal Walter Kasper, “It is significant that Jesus did not primarily express his desire for unity in a teaching or in a commandment to his disciples, but in a prayer to his Father. Unity is a gift from above, stemming from and growing towards loving communion with the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Christian prayer for unity is a humble but faithful sharing in the prayer of

³⁷ *Unitatis Redintegratio*, No. 8.

³⁸ Léon Joseph SUENENS, *A New Pentecost* (New York: The Seabury Press Inc., 1975), 14.

³⁹ *Unitatis Redintegratio*, No. 6

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, No.7.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

Jesus, who promised that any prayer in His name would be heard by the Father (John 15:7).⁴² Since *Unity is a gift from above*, it is necessary for all Christians to engage in pray. Thus, it is affirmed in the statement of the council when it states that, “such prayers in common are certainly a very effective means of petitioning for the grace of unity, and they are a genuine expression of the ties which even now bind Catholics to their separated brethren. «For where two or three are gathered together for my sake, there am I in the midst of them».”⁴³

Spiritual Ecumenism, therefore, finds its expression in *public and private prayer for the unity of Christians*. Stressing the necessity of prayer for Christian unity, Walter Kasper said that: “Prayer for unity is the royal door of ecumenism: it leads Christians to look at the Kingdom of God and the unity of the Church in a fresh way; it deepens their bonds of communion; and it enables them to courageously face painful memories, social burdens and human weakness.”⁴⁴ Hence, cardinal Kasper concludes that: “It (ecumenism) is a spiritual process, carried out in faithful obedience to the Father, following the will of Christ, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. The work of ecumenism is rooted in the foundations of Christian spirituality, requiring more than ecclesial diplomacy, academic dialogue, social involvement and pastoral cooperation. It presupposes a real appreciation of the many elements of sanctification and the truth wrought by the Holy Spirit both within and beyond the visible boundaries of the Catholic Church. The words of the psalm apply to the endeavour to foster Christian unity: «Unless the Lord builds the house, those who build it labour in vain. Unless the Lord watches over the city, the watchman stays awake in vain»” (Ps. 127:1).⁴⁵

It is also necessary to know and understand the outlook of our separated brethren through studying, with a sense of realism and good will, the respective doctrines, religious psychology and general background. According to Vatican II: “Catholics, who already have a proper grounding, need to acquire a more adequate understanding of the respective doctrines of our separated brethren, their history, their spiritual and liturgical life, their religious psychology and general background. Most valuable for this purpose are meetings of the two sides—especially for discussion of theological problems.”⁴⁶ Further-

⁴² Walter KASPER, *A Handbook of Spiritual Ecumenism* (New York: New City Press, 2007), 10.

⁴³ *Unitatis Redintegratio*, No. 8; cf. *Ut Unum Sint*, No. 21.

⁴⁴ W. KASPER, *A Handbook of Spiritual Ecumenism*, 11.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 12.

⁴⁶ *Unitatis Redintegratio*, No. 9.

more, it states that, "Sacred theology and other branches of knowledge, especially of a historical nature, must be taught with due regard for the ecumenical point of view, so that they may correspond more exactly with the facts."⁴⁷ These will enhance ecumenical cooperation among Christian that is free of prejudice. According to Second Vatican Council: "cooperation among Christians vividly expresses the relationship which in fact already unites them, and it sets in clearer relief the features of Christ as the Servant. This cooperation, which has already begun in many countries, should be developed more and more, particularly in region where a social and technical evolution is taking place be it in a just evaluation of the dignity of human person, establishment of the blessings of peace, the application of Gospel principles to social life and advancement of the arts and sciences in a true Christian spirit."⁴⁸ Furthermore, the Council is confident of the good effects of "the use of various remedies to relieve the various afflictions of our (modern) times such as famine and natural disasters, illiteracy and poverty, lack of housing, and the unequal distribution of wealth. All believers in Christ can, through this cooperation, be led to acquire a better knowledge and appreciation of one another, and so pave the way to Christian unity."⁴⁹

7. CONCLUSION

This work describes different stages of development of ecumenism in Nigeria since 1911 and considers the contributions of various Churches and councils within and outside Nigeria to the growth of ecumenism. It also points out the challenges facing the actualization of Christian unity, which, though mentioned only in reference to Nigerian context, may not be peculiar only to Christians in Nigeria. These challenges can be summarized as the inability of many Christians to be open minded and assimilate both the teaching of Christ on the unity of his 'flock',⁵⁰ and the teaching of the different ecumenical councils (Second Vatican Council and WCC) at the international level. This work considers ecumenism as imperative following the teaching and prayer of Christ and that of his Church and calls for the conversion of heart from the sin and scandal of division of Christians. It also

⁴⁷ *Unitatis Redintegratio*, No. 10.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, No. 12.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ John 10:16: "and I have other sheep that are not of this fold, and I must lead them. They shall hear my voice, and there shall be one sheepfold and one shepherd."

considers practice of spiritual ecumenism as the best approach to this journey towards Christian unity which is at the same time a journey towards Christ. Because, the more we journey towards Christ, the more we unite with one another. Since ecumenism is Christ-centred, Christian unity is the fulfilment of the missionary mandate of Christ “to make disciple of all nations.”⁵¹

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⁵¹ Matthew 28:19: “Therefore, make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you, I am with you always, even to the end of the world.”

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ROZWÓJ I WYZWANIA DLA RUCHU EKUMENICZNEGO W NIGERII

Streszczenie

Osiągnięcie jedności jest sprawą całego Kościoła – zarówno wiernych, jak i pasterzy. Troska ta rozciąga się na wszystkich, wedle ich talentów, czy to w codziennym życiu chrześcijańskim, czy też w pracach teologów i historyków. Troska ta ujawnia też do pewnego stopnia istniejącą więź braterstwa między wszystkimi chrześcijanami i przyczynia się do osiągnięcia pełnej i doskonałej jedności, jakiej chce Bóg w swej łaskowości. To stwierdzenie zawarte w Dekrecie o ekumenizmie *Unitatis redintegratio* II Soboru Watykańskiego przedstawia drogę wszystkich chrześcijan w kierunku jedności jako chrześcijański imperatyw, niezależny od narodowości czy stanu. Przydaje to najwyższego znaczenia ruchowi ekumenicznemu w pluralistycznym społeczeństwie Nigerii, łączącym różne kultury i tradycje, różne sentymenty etniczne i religijne.

Celem artykułu jest zaprezentowanie różnych poziomów ruchu ekumenicznego w Nigerii, jak również granic zaangażowania i wkładu różnych wyznań chrześcijańskich na każdym stopniu ich rozwoju. Opracowanie to stara się też wziąć pod uwagę postawy tych chrześcijan w Nigerii, którzy rzucają wyzwanie, a czasem i kłody, realizacji jedności między chrześcijanami. Niekiedy wynika to z nieznajomości nauczania Kościoła i praktycznych zasad ekumenizmu, z chrześcijańskiego fundamentalizmu i fanatyzmu, dbałości o własne interesy, sentymentów etnicznych i religijnych, które zwykle już spowodowały podziały i wzajemną podejrzliwość wśród ludu Nigerii. Pamiętając, że chrześcijanie są „solą ziemi i światłem świata”, osiągnięcie jedności między chrześcijanami w Nigerii stanie się katalizatorem nastania pokoju, sprawiedliwości i jedności w Nigerii. Z tego też powodu opracowanie to proponuje ekumenizm duchowy i współpracę chrześcijan jako praktyczne kroki do osiągnięcia jedności chrześcijańskiej w Nigerii.

Słowa kluczowe: ruch ekumeniczny; wyznania religijne; wyznaniowość; fundamentalizm; fanatyzm.