
***Nostra Aetate* and Thomas F. Michel's Approach to Interreligious Dialogue**

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ABSTRACT: Globalization has made interactions between Christians and Muslims not only inevitable but also very urgent. As Francis Arinze notes, "we are living in a world in which contacts between peoples, cultures, and religions are happily increasing."¹ Therefore, the need for healthy interaction has necessitated understanding the religious traditions of others. *Nostra Aetate* was the bedrock for the relationship between Catholics and non-Catholics. One of the fruits of *Nostra Aetate* was the institution of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue (PCID). As the Director of PCID, Thomas F. Michel SJ promoted programs that fostered conversations between Catholics and non-Catholics. According to Michel, three phrases from *Nostra Aetate* shaped his concept of interreligious dialogue: "The Church regards with esteem also the Moslems. They adore the One, God, living and subsisting in Himself; merciful and all-powerful, the Creator of heaven and earth "Since in centuries, not a few quarrels and hostilities have arisen between Christians and Moslems. This sacred synod urges all to forget the past and to work sincerely for mutual understanding and to preserve as well as to promote together for the benefit of all mankind social justice and moral welfare, as well as peace and freedom."² According to Michel, these phrases from *Nostra Aetate* challenge Christians and Muslims to work together in four essential areas: 1) to build peace 2), to work for justice 3), to defend moral values, and 4), to work for freedom. Michel asserts that to respond to *Nostra Aetate*'s challenge, dialogue must go beyond theories and ideas; it must be institutionalized. Michel proposes practical dialogue as a key to an effective interfaith interaction that would transform society. This article analyzes Michel's approach to dialogue and contends that Nigeria should consider practical dialogue a significant component of interreligious dialogue between Christians and Muslims.

KEY WORDS: *Nostra Aetate*, Thomas F. Michel, Christian and Muslim Relations

1.0. INTRODUCTION

Nostra Aetate, one of the sixteen documents of the Vatican II Council, marks a turning point in Roman Catholic relationships with people of other faith traditions. In 2005, Pope Benedict XVI referred to *Nostra Aetate* as the *Magna Carta* of the Catholic Church in terms of Muslim and Christian relations.³ In *Nostra Aetate*, the Church recognizes all people's common origin and destiny and their search for answers to the ultimate question of life through religion.⁴ Other documents such as *Dignitatis Humanae* (Declaration on Religious Freedom), *Unitatis Redintegratio* (Declaration on Ecumenism), *Gaudium et Spes* (Pastoral Constitution of the Church in the Modern World), *Ad Gentes* (To the Nations), and *Lumen Gentium* (Light of the Nation) called on Catholics to respect religious liberty and to take an active and intelligent part in the dialogue. *Lumen Gentium*, for example, posits that the Church as a Mystical Body of Christ acknowledges that there are "many elements of sanctification and of truth found outside of its visible structure,"⁵ and that "those who have not yet received the Gospel are related in various ways to the people of God."⁶ *Ad Gentes* similarly states that the salvific presence of God and the seeds of the Word are present in non-Christian religions.⁷

¹ Francis A Arinze, "The Church and Interreligious Dialogue,' L," *A Journal of Catholic Thought and Culture* 4, no. 1 (n.d.): 156–77.

² Pope Paul VI, "Nostra Aetate : Declaration on the Relations of the Church to Non-Christian Religions Vatican II," 1965, No.3, https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decl_19651028_nostra-aetate_en.html.

³ "Pope Benedict and Islam," accessed July 28, 2022,

https://www.bc.edu/content/dam/files/research_sites/cjl/texts/cjrelations/topics/Benedict_Islam.htm.

⁴ *Nostra Aetate*, "The Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religion" (Vatican Council II: Constitutions, Decrees, Declarations, ed. Austin Flannery, OP, 1996), 21.

⁵ *Lumen Gentium*, "Dogmatic Constitution on the Church," 1964, 8–13,

https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html, accessed March 20, 2020.

⁶ *Lumen Gentium*, 8-13,16.

⁷ *Ad Gentes the Decree on the Mission Activity of the Church* (1965), no.2.

http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decree_19651207_ad-gentes_en.html, accessed March 20, 2020.

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Following the Council, Pope Paul VI established a secretariat for non-Christians in 1964, which is now the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue (PCID). Under John Paul II in 1984, the PCID issued the document *Dialogue and Mission*, which outlined authentic dialogue “as presence and witness; commitment to social development and human liberation; liturgical life, prayer, and contemplation; interreligious dialogue; proclamation and catechesis.”⁸ Another document, *Dialogue and Proclamation*, also issued by PCID, states that the goal of interreligious dialogue is the more profound conversion to the truth for each partner involved in it.⁹

Before the declaration in *Nostra Aetate*, there were initiatives to encourage dialogue among people of different religions. In 1893, the Parliament of the World's Religions held in Chicago brought together notable religious leaders, the Indian Hindu Swami Vivekananda, who directly called for dialogue among the world religions.¹⁰ This event triggered a positive explosion of interreligious dialogue worldwide. Following the Parliament of the World Religions in Chicago, the World Council of Churches (WCC) made Dialogue one of its core aims.¹¹ Subsequent conferences organized by the WCC including those held at Edinburgh (1910), Jerusalem (1928), Tambaram (1938), Canada (1948), U.S.A. (1954), and Sri Lanka (1967), have played a pivotal role in the promotion of interreligious dialogue. In 1971, the WCC established "Dialogue between People of Living Faiths" to promote Christian-Muslim relations and relationships with Hindus, Buddhists, and Jews.¹² In July 1974, a regional Christian-Muslim dialogue forum, the first of a series, was held in Accra, Ghana.¹³ In 1979, the WCC established guidelines on "Dialogue with People of Living Faith and Ideologies." This document, a revision of the 1979 "Guidelines on Dialogue with People of Living Faiths and Ideologies," emphasized the need for genuine relationships, greater understanding, and cooperation among people of diverse faiths.¹⁴ In 2002, the WCC issued another document called "Guidelines for Dialogue and Relations with People of Other Religions."¹⁵ Dialogue among people of different religions has continued to grow. However, there are no specifics regarding collaboration and interaction with people of other faith traditions. While the Parliament of the World's Religions and the teachings of Vatican II, and the documents issued by the PCID continue to provide theoretical frameworks and pastoral insights to the questions relating to interreligious dialogue and religious diversity, there is no specific step-by-step guidance on how to collaborate with people of other faith traditions. Michel's discussion on practical dialogue, the four instances of institutional approach is worth exploring.

2.0. MICHEL'S APPROACH

Michel is one of the most influential figures in promoting interreligious dialogue between Christians and Muslims. In the 1980s, Michel ran the Office for Islam in the Vatican. He worked in many Islamic countries, teaching, and promoting dialogue between Christians and Muslims. According to Michel, the essential aspect of his work was his encounter with people of other religions, especially Muslims. Michel's experience working in Muslim countries reveals that "Christian and Muslim dialogue is not something that can wait until easy relationships characterize the two communities around the world, but a need that must be pursued in the midst of and despite the tensions and conflicts of our time."¹⁶

⁸ Pontifical Council for Inter-religious Dialogue, "Dialogue and Mission: The Attitude of the Church toward Followers of Other Religions: Reflections and Orientations," 1984, 7, <https://www.cam.org.au/Portals/66/documents/Dialogue-Mission-1984.pdf>, accessed March 20, 2020.

⁹ Pontifical Council for Inter-religious Dialogue, "Dialogue and Proclamation," 1991, 49, https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/interelg/documents/rc_pc_interelg_doc_19051991_dialogue-and-proclamatio_en.html, accessed March 17, 2020.

¹⁰ Marcus Bray Brooke, "The Interfaith Movement: The Present Reality," *Vidyajyoti Journal of Theological Reflection*, 56, no. 4 (1992): 182.

¹¹ Brooke, 182.

¹² In 1971, before establishing "Dialogue between People of Living Faiths," the WCC formed a dialogue sub-unit and a study program in 1955 called "The Word of God and the Living Faiths of Men." The program constituted several centers worldwide, including a series of regional ecumenical centers. Further development includes the organization of conferences around the globe to respond to the question of Christian unity and interfaith interactions. Brooke, 22–23; Douglas Pratt, "The World Council of Churches in Dialogue with Muslims: Retrospect and Prospect," *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 20, no. 1 (January 1, 2009): 22–24; Pratt, "The World Council of Churches in Dialogue with Muslims."

¹³ Pratt, "The World Council of Churches in Dialogue with Muslims," 22–25.

¹⁴ "Guidelines for Dialogue and Relations with People of other Religions," 3.

¹⁵ "Guidelines for Dialogue and Relations with People of other Religions," 1.

<https://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/central-committee/2002/guidelines-for-dialogue-and-relations-with-people-of-other-religions>, accessed April 2, 2020.

¹⁶ Thomas Michel and Omar Irfan A, *A Christian View of Islam : Essays on Dialogue by Thomas F. Michel, S.J. (Faith Meets Faith)*. (New York: Maryknoll, 2010), 155.

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2.1.0. Encountering the Other

For Michel, encountering the other changed his perspectives on Islam. Michel points out that it is imperative to give purchase to the idea of personal encounter for several reasons. First, personal encounter offers the experience and understanding of the "other" in ways that no written texts would. Also, in encountering the other, Christians and Muslims can discover their common humanity and common desire for peace and harmony in this world.¹⁷ Second, personal encounter dissipates suspicion and fears, allowing room for mutual understanding. Put more succinctly, Michel states, "If we do not know what it is that bothers others, what are their main preoccupations, their areas of sensitivity, and how the world and the problems of life appear to their eyes, we are not yet in a position to achieve any level of fellow-feeling, acceptance, and affection for them."¹⁸ In other words, dialogue as a personal encounter requires stepping into the other person's shoes and knowing how the other feels, and the willingness to live with the strengths and weaknesses of the other person. This disposition is what Michel calls "Seeing the 'other' with the eyes of the 'other.'"¹⁹ Personal encounter as an approach to dialogue offers the dialogue participants the opportunity to move beyond the world of their respective confessions to see "with the eyes of others" their concerns, hopes, beliefs, and, yes, their complaints.

The uniqueness of Michel's method is exemplified in his person-centered approach. As Pope Francis notes, "dialogue is not a technique..., the man is the goal not the means of action."²⁰ Michel thinks of dialogue as "The effects of faith in action on both sides."²¹ In other words, Christians and Muslims must express their faith in actions, and their actions must bear witness to their faith. This phrase is a consistent argument in Michel's approach to interreligious dialogue. Like Michel, Dariusz Tułowicki agrees, "Faith does not draw us away from the world or prove irrelevant to the concrete concerns of the men and women of our time. Rather, the light of faith is capable of enhancing the richness of human relations, their ability to endure, to be trustworthy, to enrich our life together."²² Interreligious dialogue is about living one's faith in concrete life situations. Muhammad Ayoub puts it so well when he says that Christians and Muslims may never be able to agree on the doctrinal level. Still, they could live out their Faith by committing to actions things that will bring mutual development to the community.²³ He added, "Christians do not have to become Muslims, and Muslims do not have to become Christians. It suffices if a Muslim becomes a good Muslim and a Christian a good Christian."²⁴

2.1.1. The Culture of Dialogue

Michel notes that a consistent encounter with the other in an unbiased relationship could gradually lead to a culture of dialogue. A culture of dialogue is a prospect of building a healthy relationship and the openness to habitually engage in a dialogue with people of other religious traditions.²⁵ In other words, a culture of dialogue is an enterprise that involves a constant commitment to live out one's faith in a society characterized by religious diversity. The need to create a culture of dialogue is more now than ever. In his speech at the Forum 2000 Conference, 1997, Dalai Lama stressed the importance of the culture of dialogue when he said, "In human societies, there will always be differences of views and interests. But the reality today is that we are all interdependent and must coexist on this small planet. Therefore, the only sensible and intelligent way of resolving differences and clashes of interests, whether between individuals or nations, is through dialogue." The culture of dialogue "does not ignore obvious differences."²⁶ Instead, it breaks down communication barriers and promotes active participation among people of various cultural and religious affiliations for the community's common good.²⁷ The promotion of a culture of dialogue and non-violence for the future of humanity is thus an important task of all people.²⁸ Pope Francis added, "If there is one word that we should never tire of repeating, it is this: dialogue. We are called to promote a culture of dialogue by every possible means and thus to rebuild the fabric of society."²⁹

¹⁷ Michel and Irfan A, 9.

¹⁸ Michel and Irfan A, 9.

¹⁹ Michel and Irfan A, 9.

²⁰ "Fratelli Tutti (October 3, 2020) | Francis," accessed July 24, 2022,

https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20201003_enciclica-fratelli-tutti.html.

²¹ Michel and Irfan A, *A Christian View of Islam: Essays on Dialogue by Thomas F. Michel, S.J. (Faith Meets Faith)*, 4.

²² Dariusz Tułowicki, "Dialogue and the 'Culture of Encounter' as the Part to the Peace in the Modern World (in the Light of Pope Francis Course)," *Ukrainian Religious Studies*, September 8, 2015.

²³ Michel and Irfan A, *A Christian View of Islam: Essays on Dialogue by Thomas F. Michel, S.J. (Faith Meets Faith)*, 68.

²⁴ Michel and Irfan A, 68.

²⁵ Michel and Irfan A, *A Christian View of Islam: Essays on Dialogue by Thomas F. Michel, S.J. (Faith Meets Faith)*, 21.

²⁶ George Anawati, *In Ellis, Kail C. The Vatican, Islam, and the Middle East. Contemporary Issues in the Middle East.*, First (Syracuse, N.Y.: University Press, 1987), 59.

²⁷ Berghout, A., "In Sintang, Suraya, Azizan Baharuddin, and Khadijah Khambali@Hambali. "Dialogue of Life and Its Significance in Inter-Religious Relation in Malaysia.," *International Journal of Islamic Thought* 2 (2012): 69–79.

²⁸ Dalai Lama, "Building a Culture of Dialogue (among Other Things)," A Speech to the "Forum 2000" Conference, 1997, https://co-intelligence.org/CIPoI_CultrOfDialog.html.

²⁹ "Conferral of the Charlemagne Prize (May 6, 2016) | Francis," accessed July 28, 2022,

https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2016/may/documents/papa-francesco_20160506_premio-carlo-magno.html.

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Also, the culture of dialogue is necessary for building trust.³⁰ Edmund Emeka Ezejobelu agrees with Michel that the culture of dialogue is integral in building trust among dialogue participants. In his assessment of how to enhance dialogue in Nigeria, Ezejobelu observes a significant need to focus on building trust and confidence among those who participate in dialogue.³¹ Though building trust entails a slow process of planning, communication, change of attitudes, and making choices and decisions, it certainly promotes shared understanding on important issues. It enables the community to take responsibility individually or collectively on matters that affect their growth and transformation.³²

Furthermore, the culture of dialogue considers cultural differences in a way that dialogue is not imposed but tailored according to the cultural background and needs of the participants.³³ By so doing, the participants are not merely coexisting but effectively interacting in a way that cultural dialogue becomes an opportunity to look at oneself through the eyes of others.³⁴ When people see each other from the lens of others, there is more likelihood that mutual understanding and respect will grow. Cultural dialogue brings cultures to a new way of understanding the world. Now let's turn to Michel's discussion on the institutionalization of dialogue.

3.0. INSTITUTIONALIZATION OF DIALOGUE

Michel discusses four instances of institutional approaches to interfaith dialogue to support his assertion that practical dialogue is central to interreligious dialogue, namely, 1) Muslim and Christian Agency for Rural Development (MuCARD), 2) the Study of Media Presentation of Religion, 3) Educating Youth for Dialogue, and 4) Monks in Dialogue.

3.1. *Muslim and Christian Agency for Rural Development (MuCARD):*

MuCARD is a collective action by a group of Christians and Muslims in about 120 villages in the southern Philippines. After many years of conflict, they decided to engage in a dialogue that would bring both groups healing.³⁵ The villagers' problems were economic hardship and cultural differences disguised in a religious garment. To overcome their problems, the villagers committed to engaging in activities that would produce concrete improvements in their lives.³⁶ Thus, MuCARD arranged transportation for farmers and fishermen to attend agricultural seminars; it provided training for new skills, adult literacy programs, and preventative health care projects.³⁷ While the projects were going on, old suspicions and resentments between Christians and Muslims were slowly being overcome. The change in attitude and thought reorientation enabled the villagers to see committed believers of the other religion not as rivals or foes but as partners in the work for a more just, humane, and harmonious society.³⁸

3.2. *The Study of Media Presentation of Religion*

In 1980, the Islamic Call Society based in Tripoli, Libya, and the Vatican's Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue studied how religion is presented in modern communications media.³⁹ This was necessitated because both Muslims and Christians felt their religions were often misrepresented in the media.⁴⁰ They undertook a six-year project to study and analyze the role of the media in Tripoli, Rome, and Vienna. The Islamic Call Society and the Vatican believed that the media could play an important role to overcome prejudices, misunderstandings, and tensions among religious groups. The project aimed to challenge the media to desist from such reporting as would perpetuate religious, national, and ethnic stereotypes.⁴¹ Although this interreligious dialogue was scholarly on the surface, it was also action-oriented because the Christian and Muslim community did not just fold their hands to complain but followed up with action, which insisted on promoting a non-stereotyped image of Christians and Muslims in the media.

3.3. *Educating Youth for Dialogue*

This third example of interreligious dialogue involved Michel's study of the documents of the Catholic Church dealing with interreligious dialogue with fifty Jesuit brothers from twelve different countries.⁴² These young Jesuits were engaged in a project

³⁰ Michel and Irfan A, *A Christian View of Islam : Essays on Dialogue by Thomas F. Michel, S.J. (Faith Meets Faith)*, 31.

³¹ Edmund Emeka Ezejobelu, *Challenges of Interreligious Dialogue: Between the Christian and the Muslim Communities in Nigeria* (Frankfurt am Main: Lang, 2009), 186.

³² Michel and Irfan A, *A Christian View of Islam : Essays on Dialogue by Thomas F. Michel, S.J. (Faith Meets Faith)*, 21.

³³ Michel and Irfan A, 23.

³⁴ Ibragim Melikov, "Dialogue Of Cultures As An Alternative To Tolerance In Intercultural Communication" (The European Proceedings of Social & Behavioural Science, United Kingdom: Academy www.FutureAcademy.org.UK, 2019), 2225.

³⁵ Michel and Irfan A, *A Christian View of Islam : Essays on Dialogue by Thomas F. Michel, S.J. (Faith Meets Faith)*, 29-47.

³⁶ Michel and Irfan A, 29-47.

³⁷ Michel and Irfan A, 29-47.

³⁸ Michel and Irfan A, 29-47.

³⁹ Michel and Irfan A, 29-47.

⁴⁰ Michel and Irfan A, 29-47.

⁴¹ Michel and Irfan A, 29-47.

⁴² Michel and Irfan A, 29-47.

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called "exposure." What is implied by "exposure" is that besides reading texts, the Jesuit brothers also visited the places of worship and had long discussions with adherents of Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, and Sikhism.⁴³ Michel argues that theory alone is not sufficient to change attitudes. Idea must be supplemented by a personal encounter, which is here exemplified by the actions of the young Jesuits who came to know people of other faiths as friends and prospective co-workers.

3.4. Monks in Dialogue

The fourth approach highlights the respect that results in the present ongoing program of exchange between Christian and Buddhist monks.⁴⁴ About twenty years ago, monks from Christian monasteries in Europe and those from Buddhist monasteries in Japan began spending one to three months in each other's monasteries. They were not present as observers but as participants in the respective monastery's activities. They took part to the extent that they could, without jeopardizing their respective faiths, in the worship practices of the host monastery. According to Michel, the most important element of these encounters is the time shared. Though this model is not strictly Christian-Muslim dialogue, it highlights an important point. Namely, progress can be made if we try to respect and understand the faith practices of other religions through personal encounters.

4.0. ANALYSIS AND CRITICISM

Michel used the four instances of institutional dialogue to demonstrate the importance of practical dialogue. Three points are worth flagging: First, the assertion that the role of personal encounters in interreligious dialogue is inevitable. Michel demonstrates that dialogue goes beyond ideologies and the formulation of doctrines. Dialogue is an encounter, a conscious choice to transcend individual differences to promote greater liberation, integration, and the moral values of all people. As Pope Francis notes, "The culture of encounter has the power of social integration. It removes marginalization."⁴⁵ The effect of a personal encounter is exemplified in the activities of the MuCARD group. The participants went beyond their faith confessions. They came together and used their resources and talents to improve their living conditions. Michel argues that positive interreligious encounter with others promotes mutual understanding, enhances society, and also bring about the reign of God on earth. Consequently, dialogue as an encounter becomes means of living according to God's will and fulfilling our proper destiny as human beings. Speaking of the importance of dialogue as an encounter in his message on the World Day of Peace 1986, Pope John Paul II said:

Dialogue is a means by which people discover one another and the good hopes and peaceful aspirations that too often lie hidden in their hearts. A genuine dialogue goes beyond ideologies. Dialogue breaks down pre-conceived notions and artificial barriers. Dialogue brings human beings into contact with one another as members of one human family, with all the richness of their various cultures and histories. A conversion of heart commits people to promote universal brotherhood; Dialogue helps to effect this goal.⁴⁶

Like Pope John Paul II, Pope Francis emphasized the invaluable role of personal encounters as a vital element that fosters universal brotherhood/sisterhood. In his encyclical *Fratelli Tutti*, "on Fraternity and Social Friendship," he notes, "The fruit of encounter brings enduring stability."⁴⁷

Second, Michel's approach to dialogue reveals that dialogue cannot be reduced to mere intellectual and professional interactions. His approach considers the ordinary believers as its agents, those with no formal or academic training, that is, those at the "grassroots" of their faith. We see an example of inclusive dialogue in the activity of the Christians and Muslims in the southern Philippines. Michel states that interreligious dialogue is unlike a "tea party," where the elite meet and share exotic tea. Dialogue should include people on every level. Similarly, Pope Francis points out that "Dialogue, with all that it entails, reminds us that no one can remain a mere onlooker or bystander. Everyone, from the smallest to the greatest, has an active role in creating an integrated and reconciled society. This culture of dialogue can come about only if all of us take part in planning and building it. The present situation does not permit anyone to stand by and watch other people's struggles."⁴⁸ Thus, "Each of us can learn something from others."⁴⁹ Excellent friendships develop between people of different faiths when everyone is part of the conversation, including professionals and non-professionals.

Third, Michel's approach directly responds to the needs of the people. The Islamic Call Society based in Tripoli, Libya, and the Vatican's Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue embarked on a project to address a common concern of Christians and Muslims.⁵⁰ This initiative was necessitated by the mutual concern that Christians and Muslims felt the media often

⁴³ Michel and Irfan A, 29–47.

⁴⁴ Michel and Irfan A, 29–47.

⁴⁵ "Fratelli Tutti (October 3, 2020) | Francis."

⁴⁶ Pope John Paul II, "World Peace Day 1996," accessed April 27, 2016, http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/messages/peace/documents/hf_jp-ii_mes_19851208_xix-world-day-for-peace.html.

⁴⁷ "Fratelli Tutti (October 3, 2020) | Francis," No.217.

⁴⁸ "Conferral of the Charlemagne Prize (May 6, 2016) | Francis."

⁴⁹ "Fratelli Tutti (October 3, 2020) | Francis," No.215.

⁵⁰ Michel and Irfan A, *A Christian View of Islam: Essays on Dialogue by Thomas F. Michel, S.J. (Faith Meets Faith)*, 29–47.

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misrepresented them.⁵¹ This mutual collaboration to address everyday needs is what Michel means when he says for dialogue to be a reality, it must take up the issues that respond to people's needs and must offer hope that dialogue will improve the lot of the people in the society involved.⁵² Interreligious dialogue, therefore, encompasses a wide variety of human interactions and includes a broad range of relationships and activities.

One of the flaws in Michel's work is that he draws almost entirely on Vatican II documents, especially *Nostra Aetate*. He should have referred also to teachings held by other Christians and by Muslims. Other Christian denominations were not mentioned in his work, nor was the effort by Islamic scholars discussed. Said Nursi, one of the most influential Muslim thinkers of the 20th century, is well known for his attempt to foster dialogue and collaboration between Christians and Muslims.⁵³ According to Islamic scholars, Nursi called for Dialogue between Christians and Muslims 54 years before the declaration of *Nostra Aetate*.⁵⁴ Nursi emphasized practical dialogue. He states that focusing obsessively on doctrinal differences can blind Muslims and Christians to "the more important task they share, that of offering the modern world a vision of human life and society in which God is central, and God's will is the norm of moral values."⁵⁵ Another Islamic scholar who believed in the effectiveness of practical dialogue is Fethullah Gulen. Gulen believes that personal encounter with people of other religion is an important step toward mutual understanding. According to Salih Yucel, when a meeting between Muslim and non-Muslim leaders was considered unacceptable in the Republic of Turkey, Gulen broke this unwritten rule and met with Christian leaders, including Pope John Paul II, in 1998.⁵⁶ Gulen established over 50 interreligious dialogue centers in North America, many tertiary institutes devoted to studying and researching interfaith relations, faith, and spirituality. Other institutions are the Nursi Chair in Islamic Studies at John Carroll University in Ohio, the Fethullah Gülen Chair in the Study of Islam and Muslim-Catholic Relations, Australian Catholic University, the Fethullah Gülen Chair at Syarif Hidayetullah Islam University, Indonesia, Gülen Institute at Houston University and Fethullah Gülen Chair for Intercultural Studies at the Catholic University of Leuven in Belgium.⁵⁷ Michel's silence about the tremendous efforts of other non-Catholic scholars gives the impression that only the Catholic Church is involved in promoting dialogue between Christians and Muslims.

Third, just as common factors between Christians and Muslims were highlighted, it would have been proper also to mention the point of divergences in both religious traditions. Indeed, an obsessive focus on doctrinal differences may not foster a deep relationship between Christian and Muslims. However, understanding why these two groups are different could enhance mutual respect and an appreciation of their religious uniqueness. Pope Francis notes, "Without encountering and relating to differences, it is hard to achieve a clear and complete understanding even of ourselves and our native land."⁵⁸ One would not be wrong to say that while Michel's approach has many insights, it is not entirely free from flaws.

In the above discussions, I have presented Michel's approaches to dialogue. I highlighted Michel's central point: dialogue most involves personal encounters, which takes into consideration not just the needs of the people but also includes everyone in the process of dialogue, professional and non-professional. However, on a "practical bent," this approach underestimates the doctrinal differences and faith perspectives between Muslims and Christians. Pope John Paul II might have had in mind this difficulty when he cautioned, "There must be no abandonment of principles or false irenicism, but instead a witness given and received for mutual advancement on the road of religious inquiry and experience, and at the same time for the elimination of prejudice, intolerance, and misunderstanding."⁵⁹ Also, Michel does not recognize the efforts of non-Catholics who also promote practical dialogue. For example, Nursi and Gulen established dialogue centers and tertiary institutions to encourage encounters between Christians and Muslims. In the next section, I will assess the implication of Michel's method for interreligious dialogue in Nigeria. I will conclude by illustrating why in my estimation, practical dialogue is key to interfaith dialogue.

5.0. PRACTICAL DIALOGUE: THE NIGERIAN SITUATION

Nigeria is a country with almost an equal population of Christians and Muslims. Nigeria has more Muslims than most countries in the Middle East, and it is the fifth largest Islamic country after Indonesia, India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh. The relationship between Christians and Muslims in Nigeria is longstanding and complex. The two religious traditions have had centuries of interaction and

⁵¹ Michel and Irfan A, 29–47.

⁵² Michel and Irfan A, 29.

⁵³ Salih Yucel, "Muslim-Christian Dialogue: Nostra Aetate and Fethullah Gülen's Philosophy of Dialogue," *Australian E-Journal of Theology* 203 (January 1, 2013): 197.

⁵⁴ Yucel, 197.

⁵⁵ "Rev. Thomas Michel, SJ, Full-Text Version Wednesday, February 29, 2007, Presentation at Marquette University," accessed June 17, 2022, https://academic.mu.edu/taylor/Abrahamic_Conference/Full_Text_of_Fr_Michels_Presentation.html.

⁵⁶ Yucel, "Muslim-Christian Dialogue," 200.

⁵⁷ Yucel, 201.

⁵⁸ "Fratelli Tutti (October 3, 2020) | Francis," No.147.

⁵⁹ Austin. Flannery, *Redemptoris Missio, No.56 in Vatican Council II: More Postconciliar Documents. Vatican Collection, 1st ed, two vols.* (Grand Rapids: Mich.: Eerdmans, 1982).

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often have struggled to bring themselves into conversation with each other. On Sunday, May 5, 2022, during a service to mark the Feast of Pentecost, well-armed terrorists entered St Francis Catholic Church in the town of Owo, Ondo State, Nigeria. These terrorists fired at the congregation, killing many people, and leaving many others wounded.⁶⁰ On Thursday, May 12, 2022, Deborah Samuel, a nineteen-year-old student of Shehu Shagari College of Education, Sokoto, Nigeria, was lynched and burnt by a mob of her Muslim classmates. They claimed she blasphemed against the prophet Muhammad.⁶¹ In 1998, an eighteen-year High School student was killed by a classmate over an argument about the divinity of Jesus. These are just a few instances of the ongoing religious violence between Christians and Muslims in Nigeria. These tensions are manifestations of inadequate progress made on the Christian and Muslim fronts. John Cardinal Onaiyekan notes, "We have an adequate theological basis for soliciting dialogue and inviting people into it... the question is how to set about it."⁶² Practical dialogue may be a better approach to deepen the relationship between Christians and Muslims in Nigeria.

Despite the existence of many interreligious centers, Nigeria is still far from establishing a cohesive relationship between Christians and Muslims. One reason for the slow progress is the elite approach to dialogue adopted by the government and religious bodies. The Catholic Bishops Conference of Nigeria (CBCN) established a Catholic-Muslim dialogue, and the government established the Abuja Interfaith Peace-building Forum and the Abuja Women of Faith Network.⁶³ All these programs were organized for the community leaders to meet and dialogue. Although the dialogue of these experts was necessary, the results were short-lived because the ordinary person in the street who could not read the communiqué from the meetings was excluded. On the contrary, the tree planting project organized for Christian and Muslim youths in a community in Jos, Plateau state, to foster relationships between Christians and Muslims, yielded more positive results than the dialogue of seminars and roundtable discussion organized by the CBCN and the government. The tree planting succeeded because participants in practical dialogue interact more with each other as they focus on joint projects that will enhance both traditions.

Practical dialogue seems to be a more effective approach to interaction in Nigeria. Four instances demonstrate that practical dialogue is a significant component of inter-religious dialogue. First, in 2011 at the heart of the religious crisis in Kaduna State, which resulted in the loss of lives and property, when I was the Project Director of Hope for the Village Child Foundation (HVCF - N.G.O.), my colleagues and I organized a football match between Christians and Muslims from four villages. This event brought together many imams and pastors who accompanied their village teams to watch them play. Each team in this match was required to have some players who were Muslim and also some players who were Christian. As the game continued, members interacted more freely, talking more of "our team" instead of "our religion." The result was an increase in interaction between Christians and Muslims as they met every week to practice and plan for the next football competition.

Another reason practical dialogue is key to interreligious dialogue is Nigeria's illiteracy level. The illiteracy rate in Nigeria is about 40 percent.⁶⁴ Though this is the national average, it is worth mentioning that, for example, in the northern part of Nigeria, the rate of illiteracy is higher than in the southern part.⁶⁵ Additionally, the illiteracy rate is higher in rural areas than in urban areas. Another level of complexity is that literacy is only defined as those who can read and write and does not capture the level of education attained. Therefore, there are some in the literacy bracket who may still lack the capacity to appreciate the complexity of doctrinal formulations or communiqués issued after meetings. This means that dialogue based on doctrinal similarities or agreements is not likely to make the necessary impact because of the inability of many Christians and Muslims to understand such doctrinal formulations and their implication for the uniqueness of their religions. As a result, practical dialogue, which relies on enhancing mutual enrichment, will make a better impact.

The strong sense of community in Nigeria supports practical dialogue. Because of the strong feeling of solidarity, people participate in activities and programs that solidify their understanding of togetherness. In *Christianity, Islam, and Liberal Democracy*, Robert A. Dowd notes that there is more religious tolerance in a religiously diverse and integrated Ibadan, Oyo State, compared to religiously diverse and segregated Jos, Plateau State.⁶⁶ Dowd explains that failure in Dialogue in Nigeria is not necessary because of a lack of diversity or religious pluralism but the lack of integration. For example, Ibadan, the southern part of Nigeria, is religiously pluralistic. Still, because the community is closely integrated, Christian and Muslim leaders can collaborate

⁶⁰ "Nigeria Owo Church Attack: Gunmen Kill Catholic Worshipers in Ondo," *B.B.C. News*, June 6, 2022, sec. Africa, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-61697409>.

⁶¹ "Everything We Know About the Murder of Deborah Samuel," *Zikoko!* (blog), May 16, 2022, <https://www.zikoko.com/citizen/everything-we-know-about-the-murder-of-deborah-samuel/>.

⁶² John O Onaiyekan, "Seeking Common Grounds : Inter-Religious Dialogue in Africa" (Nairobi, Kenya: Paulines Publications Africa, 2013), 36.

⁶³ Onaiyekan, "Seeking Common Grounds."

⁶⁴ education2@fawco.org, "Literacy in Nigeria (S.D.G. Target 4.6)," accessed July 28, 2022, <https://www.fawco.org/global-issues/education/education-articles/4623-literacy-in-nigeria-sdg-target-4-6>.

⁶⁵ "Nigeria: Literacy Rate, by Zone and Gender," Statista, accessed July 28, 2022, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1124745/literacy-rate-in-nigeria-by-zone-and-gender/>.

⁶⁶ Robert Alfred Dowd, *Christianity, Islam, and Liberal Democracy : Lessons from Sub-Saharan Africa* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 164.

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to prevent episodes of interreligious violence.⁶⁷ On the other hand, Jos is religiously diverse and segregated. Because the community in Jos is not integrated like the community in Ibadan, they cannot curb the incessant religious violence that has plagued the city for years. Evidence shows that the religious network in Ibadan has been more effective in warding off religious violence than in other parts of the country because of the great sense of integration in the community.⁶⁸ Dowd's point here is that neither religious diversity nor homogeneity will enhance cohesiveness in the community if there is no integration or mutual enrichment that binds the community together.

Another example of the impact of practical dialogue is establishing the Interfaith Mission Center (IMC) in Kaduna State, Northern Nigeria. According to Akintunde E. Akinade, the founders of this center, a Pentecostal Christian, Pastor James Morel Wuye, and a Muslim, Imam Muhammad Nurayan Ashafa, used to be enemies who visited mayhem on one another. Ashafa, the Muslim Imam, lost many of his family members, while Wuye, the Christian Pastor, lost his right arm during many violent religious conflicts between the two leaders. After many years of fierce combat, these two leaders came together to form a non-violent outreach where Christian and Muslim youths are trained to deflect conflict and rebuild Mosques and Churches.⁶⁹ The IMC has undertaken several projects and trained men and women on violence prevention strategies. It has also helped violent youths to channel their energy positively. Wuye and Ashafa have used their ability to transcend their grievances against each other to teach the power of forgiveness and personal encounters.⁷⁰ According to Ezekiel Babgario, "The Interfaith Mediation Center was credited with the effort of ending the bloody conflict in Kaduna through a peace effort they initiated."⁷¹ In addition to their activities in the communities, "they introduced curricula for schools to help reverse the enmity among students based on religious differences, which they called the 'Theology of hate'"⁷² In the context of the exigencies of widespread religious plurality and violence, one of the benefits of practical dialogue is that people from different traditions learn to cooperate for mutual understanding, respect, and peace. Peace is a necessary fabric of all communities. As Hans Kung points out, "No peace among the nations without peace among the religions."⁷³

As discussed above, practical dialogue could effectively promote Christian and Muslim relations compared to an endless doctrinal argument. For instance, a theological debate between Christian and Muslim scholars on the status of Mary would do nothing to diminish the conflicts perpetrated by the Islamic radicals (Boko Haram) in Nigeria. On the contrary, a joint project that improves the lives of the people of the region will go a long way towards bringing them together and healing the wounds of religious strife. Maybe, just maybe, believers will then learn to listen to each other and work toward greater human liberation and integration and avoid destruction and despair. I will end with a comment from Pope Francis on practical dialogue. Pope Francis gives an example of practical dialogue when he discusses the visit of St. Francis of Assisi to Sultan Malik-el-Kamil, in Egypt. He states that Francis of Assisi "did not wage a war of words aimed at imposing doctrines; he simply spread the love of God."⁷⁴ Practical dialogue is about holding firm to one's religious identity while at the same time treating others with love and respect.

6.0. CONCLUSION

This essay argues that though there are many essential approaches to interreligious dialogue, practical dialogue is key. To establish the truth of my argument, I discussed the concept of dialogue as propounded by Michel and explained Michel's argument for practical dialogue as demonstrated in instances of institutional approaches to interfaith dialogue: Muslim and Christian Agency for Rural Development (MuCARD), the Study of Media Presentation of Religion, Educating Youth for Dialogue, and Monk in Dialogue. Further, I pointed out the strengths and weaknesses of Michel's approach. Based on Michel's assertions, that practical dialogue is key to interreligious dialogue. I contend that Nigeria must consider practical dialogue a significant component of inter-religious dialogue. I agree that at the grassroots level, practical dialogue has enhanced the cohesiveness of societies and promoted inter-religious dialogue. This is because practical dialogue cuts across cultures, tribes, religions, and faiths. It does not depend solely on doctrinal formulations and communicate. Communities that practice dialogue of life may be more likely to interact freely and engage in community and life-changing projects than communities that participate only in roundtable conferences. However, dialogue between religious leaders, professors, and the government has its place and must not be abandoned.

⁶⁷ Dowd, 164.

⁶⁸ Dowd, 164.

⁶⁹ Akintunde E. Akinade, *Christian Responses to Islam in Nigeria: A Contextual Study of Ambivalent Encounters* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 166.

⁷⁰ Akinade, 166.

⁷¹ Ezekiel Abdullahi Babagario, "Babagario Interfaith Education and the Quest for Peacebuilding in Northern Nigeria" (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Massachusetts Amherst, 2019), 69.

⁷² Babagario, 69.

⁷³ Hans Kung, *Islam: Past, Present, and Future* (Oxford: Oxford: Oneworld, 2007), XXIII.

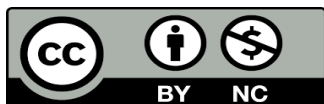
⁷⁴ "Fratelli Tutti (October 3, 2020) | Francis," No3-4.

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