

Reimagining Ecumenism in Africa with Saint Augustine of Hippo

Bodija Journal
Vol. 14 (2024): 59-75

Hilary Ndu Okeke, Ph.D
Catholic Institute of West Africa (CIWA)
Port-Harcourt, Rivers State
ndnwokeke@yahoo.com

Abstract

The ancient African Church was laden with crises of heresies and schisms. They disorganized the peace and unity of the one perfect Church of Christ in Africa even before Augustine became bishop of Hippo. The Church in North Africa then witnessed several controversies and divisions with concomitant dialogues aimed at uniting the groups that kept excommunicating themselves. That resulted in a movement that was not ecumenical but designed to unify the Church. Both Cyprian as the bishop of Carthage and Augustine at Hippo remained firm in their understanding that the Church in her nature is called to be a visible unity of the body of Christ. This article examines some significant biblical images adopted by the African fathers especially Augustine of Hippo in resolving the ecclesial disunity in North Africa. It further recommends that Africa's contemporary ecumenists align themselves with some of the principles inherent in this work.

Keywords: African Church Fathers, Augustine of Hippo, Donatism, Pentecostalism, Ecumenism.

1. Introduction

Contemporary African theologians tend to be oblivious of the African ecclesiastical ancestors whose names, works and influences shaped most of the Church's doctrines and practices. They seem to be oblivious to the fact that Africa gave Latin Christianity the most

original thinkers of the ante-Nicene period.¹ The ingenuities and writings of such African fathers like Cyprian of Carthage, Tertullian, Optatus, and above all, Augustine of Hippo were behind the shaping of the western ecclesiology.

From the 2nd to the late 5th centuries, their thoughts and writings were the principal sources of intergenerational theological investigations. Admitting such reality, Pope Paul VI notes that “it may be said that all the thought-currents of the past meet in Augustine’s works and form the source which provides the whole doctrinal tradition of succeeding ages.”² In his post-synodal apostolic exhortation *Ecclesia in Africa*, Pope John Paul II reaffirms that “the Christian writers of Africa remain today a basic source for deepening our knowledge of the history of salvation in the light of the Word of God.”³

Based on such awareness, this work is a conspicuous attempt to reaffirm that the idea or call to Christian unity has been in the African soil. It has been the recurrent theme in the writings of the African Fathers of the Church. Though the term “ecumenism” cannot be considered a patristic terminology, one cannot rule out its implicit undertone in the writings of the Fathers of the Church especially Cyprian and Augustine whose numerous writings bear laudable testimonies to ecclesial unity in Africa. Indeed, their singular efforts to advance Christian unity in North Africa between the 3rd and late 4th centuries gave the Christian world the primordial understanding of ecumenism.

Our present goal is to demonstrate that history continues to repeat itself and that the call for ecclesial unity hinges on Christ’s injunction that all may be one (Jn. 17:21). That was the preoccupation of Augustine’s episcopal ministry in Africa and his teaching on that cannot be overlooked in any modern discussion of Christian unity in Africa, and beyond. To that effect, we shall first consider the nature of the Church in Africa when Augustine became the bishop of Hippo, the factors that fractured the unity of

¹ See Johannes Quasten, *Patrology*, vol. II (Notre Dame: Christian Classics, 1986), 243.

² Paul VI, “Inaugural Address,” *L’Osservatore Romano*, (May 4, 1970), 8.

³ John Paul II, *Ecclesia in Africa* (September 14, 1995), sec. 31.

the Church, his ecumenical strategies and theories, and workable solutions. We shall also look into the factors that unite and divide Christians in the continent of Africa and proffer possible solutions.

2. African Church of the Early Centuries

As far back as the 3rd and early 4th centuries, the African Church was wielding enormous influence in the Latin Church under a well-organized, educated, and experienced hierarchy. Their Christian population stretched across the southern Mediterranean coastlands, from the Gulf of Sidra in western Libya, through modern Tunisia and Algeria, to Morocco – Tripolitania, Africa Proconsularis, Numidia, and Mauretania.⁴ In these early centuries the number of Christians in Africa was bigger than what was found in so many regions of the world. Consequently, the African Church not only had a distinctive and respective voice among the global Churches but it equally survived various oppressions, especially the Great Persecution of Emperor Diocletian in 303-305 C.E.

By the 4th century, the once robust African Church with a strong voice began to experience disunity. At the foundation of this fracture was the Church leaders' surrender of the Scripture and other property to the civil authority. It subsequently gave birth to those who consider themselves conservatives and true custodians of the Christian faith in North Africa. They took their name Donatism from the leader of the sect, a certain Donatus Magnus who with other members staged a stern opposition against the members of the authoritative established hierarchy that cooperated with the Imperial Rome rather than seek martyrdom.

At the base of the controversy is the declaration of the surrender as an act of *traditio*. The lapsed priests and bishops were considered as *traditores*. And as *traditores* they are no longer capable of administering valid sacraments precisely because their action is like that of Judas who betrayed Christ. They are *ipso facto* excommunicated from the ecclesial unity. "Since the sin of *lapsis* is contagious, it extends to whoever receives the sacraments from

⁴ See Pamela Bright, "Church, North African, 312 to 430" *Augustine through the Ages: An Encyclopedia* ed. Allan D. Fitzgerald (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2009), 185.

these traitor bishops, priests, or their successors. Those having anything to do with them are children of the traitors – *fili traditorum*.”⁵

Since the Donatist community envisioned themselves as a gathered assembly of the ritually pure amid their unclean enemies, they avoided contact with both *-traditores* and *-filii traditorum*. To ensure their distinct identity and avoid assimilation with these lapsed groups into the Catholic community, they applied to themselves the positive image of the *Jewish collecta*,⁶ that is those who stand out as pure Israel at prayer, having preserved the ritual purity since their bishops remained firm during the persecution (1 Kings 2:25-26).⁷ However, the traitors can be readmitted into ecclesial unity only if they seek rebaptism.

It is important to note that the attack of the Donatists was not directed to the Church outside of Africa, precisely because the Church outside Africa in their opinion had maintained her *status quo ante bellum*. So, they think that the Church outside Africa did not lose its ecclesial status because she had not entered into communion with the alleged *traditores* of North Africa.⁸ As the gulf of division between the hierarchies deepens among those who surrendered and those who remained faithful, it on record that throughout Africa there was one altar against another. But recourse was made to the vicar of Christ in Rome since both parties were claiming to be the true Church is one, holy, catholic and apostolic.

3. Augustinian Ecumenical Approaches

Before 354 AD when Augustine was born in Thagaste, a small North African town in Numidia, geographically located in present-

⁵ Hilary N. Okeke, *Augustinian Grace-Theology Underlying Lumen Gentium's Ecclesiology* (Thesis Diss.; Rome: Gregoriana, 2021), 319.

⁶ See Maureen A. Tilley, “Sustaining Donatist Self-identity: From the Church of the Martyrs to the *Collecta* of the Desert” *JEChrist* 5 (1997): 21.

⁷ See Joseph Carola, *Augustine of Hippo, The Role of the Laity in Ecclesial Reconciliation*, (Rome: Editrice Pontificia Gregoriana, 2005), 192.

⁸ See Robert B. Eno, “Some Nuances in the Ecclesiology of the Donatists,” *Revue des études Augustiniennes*, 18/ 1-2 (1972), 46-50.

day Algeria, the entire Numidia was a veritable sea of Donatism. The Donatist movement was like a whirlwind that changed not just the religious and political undercurrent in North Africa, but their social and personal lives. The Donatists sturdily propagated that they alone are the purified remnants, sanctified by the blood of martyrs, and constantly united by the presence of the Holy Spirit in the font of baptism, nourished by the prophetic words of Scripture. They insisted that all their members must stand firm as witnesses to the imminence of the Day of Judgement, that is when the persecutors of the 'martyr church' would be revealed as followers of the Antichrist.⁹

Since the Donatists saw themselves strictly as the one holy church of the saints, elects, and martyrs, those who do not belong to them they see as sinners and Marcarians, that is Christians persecuting Christians and the clearest manifestation of the antichrist. Precisely because the socio-political atmosphere of North African Church was overcharged with conflicts, Augustine and other ecclesial hierarchy saw them as the *causa instrumentalis* in defense of ecclesial unity. Acclaimed to be the greatest father of the Church, with the greatest number of writings, Augustine left a deep mark on the cultural life of the Latin West, and entire global Christendom. Anchoring on both the Scripture and Tradition, the sword of the Word in his sermons and writings thundered against backsliders, and wielded itself skillfully in debates.¹⁰ In fact, "it could be said that on the one hand, all the roads to Latin Christian literature led to Hippo (today Annaba, on the coast of Algeria), the place where he was bishop from 395 to his death in 430. On the other, that from this city of Roman Africa, many other roads of later Christianity and of Western culture itself branched out."¹¹ With these writings, we resonate some of his ecumenical theories.

4. Mixture of Saints and Sinners

While countering the claim of the Donatists of being the church of the saints, Augustine developed a strong ecclesiology that presents

⁹ See Bright, "Church, North African, 312 to 430," 187.

¹⁰ See Bright, "Church, North African, 312 to 430," 190.

¹¹ Benedict XVI, *The Fathers* (Huntington: Our Sunday Visitor Inc, 2008), 175.

the Church as a mixture of saints and sinners. The African bishop maintains that the Church as terrestrial and in pilgrimage cannot be devoid of sinners. Hence the Church is a pilgrim people compromised of carnal and spiritual elements.¹² He admits that from inception, the Church as a mixture of the saints and sinners was prefigured from both the Old and New Testaments with several biblical images. The flood in Genesis 6: 9-22 suggests that God wants to save both the sinners and the saints within the Church. He notes that the ark of Noah with both clean and unclean animals prefigures the Church as a mixture of saints and sinners-*corpus permixtum*. Thus, Noah's ark was the perfect symbol of the city of God in pilgrimage.¹³

Augustine advanced the doctrine of mixed society- *societas permixta*, that is, that the Church in pilgrimage can never be a holy or perfect society devoid of sinners. He calls to mind another model of one ecclesial community with Isaac and Ishmael who lived together. Whereas Hagar's son Ishmael symbolizes the members of the Church whose interest might be considered worldly or sinful, Sarah's son Isaac represents those who are holy with a special interest in things above.¹⁴ Rebecca's sons Esau and Jacob were another paradigm that depicts that the Church on earth is never a perfect holy one. He notes that as Rebecca's womb bears these two opposing sons, the Church on earth bears all groups within an ecclesial unity. Rebecca cried for the pain these sons caused her and stood with both of them in charity. Augustine concludes that "since she stood with them in charity, she stood for all the saints and all the sinners, for there are no saints who do not have charity."¹⁵

Appealing to the New Testament's parables, especially the wheat and tare, sheep and goat, and good and bad fish caught in the same net that was dragged ashore (Mat. 13. 24-30), he continues to demonstrate against the puritan Donatists that the

¹² See Augustine, *De baptismo libri septem*, 1. 15. 24 CSEL 51, 168.

¹³ See Augustine, *In Iohannis euangelium tractatus*, 6. 2 CCL 36, 54.

¹⁴ See Augustine, *Enarrationes in Psalmos*, 119.7. CCL 40, 1783-85.

¹⁵ Augustine, *Sermones*, CCL 41, 35.

Church is a mixture of saint and sinners – *corpus permixtum*.¹⁶ He accused them of being guilty of attempting to separate the tares from the wheat. Similarly, Augustine charged them with usurpation of duties since God alone can separate the wicked from the good or sinners from the saints. He never disregarded the essential nature of the true Church which is holiness, and so states against the Donatists that the pilgrim Church as a mixed society-*societas permixta* remains *sine macula et ruga* – without having spot or wrinkle (Eph. 5: 27-28) in all her members.

5. Call for Holiness

The reality of holiness amid the Church that has both saints and sinners alike has been promoted by Augustine and other ecclesial authorities. The call to universal holiness is continues and the Father of the Second Vatican Council states that “even now on this earth the Church is marked with a genuine though imperfect holiness ... But we have not yet appeared with Christ in the state of glory (Col. 3,4), in which we shall be like to God since we shall see him as he is (Jn. 3, 2). Therefore, while we are in the body, we are exiled from the Lord (2 Cor 5, 6), and having the first fruits of the Spirit we groan within ourselves (Rom. 8, 23), and desire to be with Christ (Phil. 1, 23).”¹⁷ The Second Vatican Council continues to emphasize this aspect of the Church through its treatment of the people of God as a pilgrim people. It made clear that there is never any absolute finality in the insights that the Church may gain of God’s designs for it. In the Decree on Ecumenism, the Council declared at least three times that the people of God are pilgrims and wayfarers, who gradually come to understand more of the mystery of the Church.¹⁸

The bishop of Hippo maintains that given the sinners in the city of God in pilgrimage, it is only the Church in eschaton that is uncompromisingly pure and holy. He concludes that one can

¹⁶ See Augustine, *De doctrina christiana libri quattuor*, 3. 32. 45 CCL 32, 104.

¹⁷ Vatican II Council, *Lumen Gentium* (Dogmatic Constitution on the Church), sec. 48.

¹⁸ See Vatican II Council, *Unitatis Redintegratio* (Decree on Ecumenism), sec. 8.

belong to the Church in *communio sacramentorum* and not *communio sanctorum*. Sinners in the Church are destined for conversion but if they remain obstinate in their sins like Judas who enjoyed Christ's company, they will like him forfeit the glories of the Church of the eschaton in the end. For Augustine, holiness is an essential aspect of the Church, and both the sinners and saints are called to it. Pope Benedict XVI states that when we say that the Church is holy, it "does not apply in the first place to the holiness of human persons but refers to the gift that bestows holiness amid human unholiness. The Church is not called 'holy' in the Creed because her members collectively and individually are holy, sinless men ..."¹⁹

The saints are by no means perfect since the pilgrim's spiritual progress remains incomplete until he possesses that towards which he tends. It is a journey that finds its fulfillment in heaven. The Fathers of the Second Vatican II remind us that the vocation of each Christian is holiness. "Christ, the Son of God, who with the Father and the Spirit is praised as 'uniquely holy,' loved the Church as His bride, delivering Himself up for her. He did this so that He might sanctify her. He united her to Himself as His own body and brought it to perfection by the gift of the Holy Spirit for God's glory. Therefore in the Church, everyone whether belonging to the hierarchy, or being cared for by it, is called to holiness,..."²⁰ Holiness of the Church is a mystery that the human reason aided by grace is capable of achieving some understanding of it, but not all. The pilgrim Church is missionary by nature. For it is from the mission of the Son and mission of the Holy Spirit that she takes her origin, by the decree of God the Father. It flows from the fountain of love or charity with God the Father.²¹ Therefore, the Holy Spirit makes the Church holy.

The condition of Christianity in the African continent today calls for a unification of Christian efforts and prayers. African

¹⁹ Joseph Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2004), 340.

²⁰ *Lumen Gentium*, sec. 39.

²¹ See Vatican II Council, *Ad Gentes Divinitus* (Decree on the Church's Missionary Activity), sec. 2.

Church leaders must unite to preach against poverty, radical religious extremism, killings, political subjugations, and other forms of illness that have kept them in perpetual misery. Let them not use colossal technological development in attacking each other or churches. Let them eschew the unnecessary emphasis on the holiness of one ecclesial communities and appreciate that the holiness of any ecclesial community stems from Christ. Let them appreciate that “a Christian church is a structured people; structured by such formal, constitutive elements as Christian faith, sacraments, and the charismatic and hierarchical gifts that equip people for ministry. When we say that the Church owes its institution to Christ, we mean that these formal elements are not mere products of human ingenuity; rather, they are the fruits of Christ’s ministry, passion, death and resurrection, and sending of the Holy Spirit. They are gifts which his Church to make it an effective instrument of grace and salvation.”²²

6. Diversity of Tradition

From its inception, the Church has encountered various rifts in its history from within itself. Evidence of these is seen in St. Paul’s epistles to the Corinthians and Galatians where he bitterly condemns the divisions among the nascent Church in Corinth and says, “I hear that there are divisions among you” (1 Cor. 11:18). He also went further to do the same in his letter to the Galatians stating that they must live in peace with their various gifts and traditions (Gal. 1:6-9) to demonstrate in strict terms that there is unity in diversity. It is such diversity that many involved in ecumenical dialogues might consider to be their tradition.

As such, tradition has become an ecumenical term that designates the differences among the various groups. It is important to note that all Christians say the same thing but in different ways which they see as their tradition. Pope Benedict XVI admits that such tradition has become a theological classification of differences between the various ecumenical communities. Hence, “this terminology expresses a quite definite idea about the

²² Francis A. Sullivan, *The Church we Believe In: One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic* (New York: Paulist Press, 1988), 69-70.

degree of separation and the way to restore the Church unity. According to this perspective, the different forms of the reality 'Church' are 'traditions' in which the heritage of the New Testament has taken shape concretely in manifold ways. This means that divisions are regarded as theologically secondary, albeit historically venerable and noteworthy realization of common Christianity."²³

The traditions which the bishop of Hippo anchored in his defense were the authority of his predecessors. These were African Fathers mainly bishops and others in the clerical state before him whose teachings and writings were very essential, such that recourse were made to them by all the parties in all their ecumenical dialogues. We see in their writings, citations and appeal to the authorities of their predecessors in resolving doctrinal and ecclesial matters. These traditions before Augustine were instrumental to his fight for the Christian unity especially when divisions and heresies crept into the Church. Precisely because they saw the Church as an organic unity, the African fathers at various times fought to preserve such unity.

Successively, the African Church Fathers preached the same unity and emphasized that the Church is the limped fountain of grace, and estimation of the high dignity of man. All believed that the very fact that we are one with Christ should be a deterrent against sin, a motivation for charity, an inducement for self-sanctification, and ability to lead others to the same fountain of grace. Thus, they kept quoting the writings of the bishops who lived before them as their traditional authority. For instance, Augustine remarked that the Donatist appealed to Cyprian but, they appealed wrongly to bring division and unity.

He reprimanded them that Cyprian was the first to apply the biblical parable of the wheat and tares in the same field which contradicts such absolute holiness they are claiming (Mt. 13: 24-30, 36-43). He notes that St. Paul's image of the house with its vessels unto honor and dishonor (2 Tim. 2: 20) is a proof that it was wrong to split the Church because it is yet imperfect in

²³ Benedict XVI, *Church, Ecumenism & Politics: New Endeavors in Ecclesiology* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2008), 81.

holiness. Nonetheless the Donatists still seeing themselves as the authentic Church also cited the authority of Cyprian as their tradition to maintain that they had the true baptism, episcopate, and ministry

In the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, Vatican II Fathers also assert that such tradition was handed down to the Church from the apostles. Hence, “this tradition which comes from the apostles develops in the Church with the help of the Holy Spirit. For there is a growth in the understanding of the realities and the words which have been handed down As the centuries succeed one another, the Church constantly moves forward towards the fullness of divine truth until the words of God reach their complete fulfillment in her.”²⁴

Acknowledging our diversity and tradition in Africa and as Africans is very crucial. Efforts show be made at all times to know that we think differently and so, allowing liberty of expression to other traditions or churches no matter how small they are will enrich the African ecumenical dialogues. Francis Cardinal Arinze made it explicit that such “dialogue helps each participant to grow in his own faith when he encounters another of a different religious persuasion and confronts his faith with the other. Truth is often better reached, appreciated, understood, and lived when met by other views.”²⁵

African Catholics were encouraged to accept these cultural differences so that the prayer of Christ on unity might be achieved. This is implicit in the Council Fathers’ statement that “the divisions among Christians prevent the Church from attaining the fulness of catholicity proper to her, in those other sons who, although attached to her by baptism, are yet separated from full communion with her. Furthermore, the Church herself finds it more difficult to express in actual life her full catholicity in all its bearings.”²⁶ When

²⁴ Vatican II Council, *Dei Verbum* (Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation), sec. 8.

²⁵ Francis Arinze, *Church in Dialogue: Walking with Other Believers* (San Francisco, Ignatius Press, 1990), 129.

²⁶ *Unitatis Redintegratio*, sec. 2.

every voice is heard and people are receptive to new ideas, then Christian universal brotherhood will be sustained.²⁷

Contemporary African Ecumenists must take advantage of their diversity and eschew things that divide them. They should look inward to see so many good factors that can culturally and religiously unite and not lead their followers into error. The history of the Church shows that, at times, large numbers of the faithful may be led away into error by the obstinacy of their leaders or representatives. We see them for example in the attitudes of the Donatists' leaders of earlier centuries which left a great mark in Church history. African ecumenists and "churches should deliberately ignore the old disputes about doctrine and devote themselves to the new questions revolving about peace, justice, and the protection of the environment."²⁸ Let there be unity of purpose and progress in our diversity.

7. Tolerance and Fraternal Correction

In the face of these confusions in the African Church, the bishop of Hippo will counsel a dynamic form of tolerance so as to bring the wayward back to the unity of the body of Christ. Tolerance is not a matter of complacency, but the Christian tolerates to correct. It is a concrete expression of the ecclesial bond of love outside of which the sinner will be lost. Based on that ground, the wayward can listen to whatever is being said. Consequently, he urges his congregation to rebuke the sinner in mercy, bear with him in patience, and pray for him in love to preserve the unity of the Church. In his sermons *ad populum*, Augustine advocates for fraternal correction insisting that "the evil to be removed is not one's erring brother but rather one's erring ways."²⁹

He enjoined those in the Catholica (his group) to be agents of fraternal correction which is part of a life in pilgrimage. The

²⁷ See John Paul II, *Ut Unum Sit*, Encyclical Letter (May 25, 1995), AAS 87, sec. 42.

²⁸ Konrad Raiser, "Thirty Years in the Service of the Ecumenical Movement: The Joint Working Group between Roman Catholic Church and World Council of Churches," *Centro Pro Unione* 48 (1995), 2.

²⁹ Augustine, *Contra epistulam Parmeniani libri tres*, 3. 2. 15 CSEL 51, 118.

faithful is to correct the wayward, admonish the pagan and heretics for their erroneous beliefs and the bad Catholics for their immoral life. Those faithful in the Catholica must be solicitous, not for the wayward within but for those still outside the Church. He says that “the true Christian suffered for the pagan as the Church once had pity on him.”³⁰ With this, Carola argues that Augustine exhorted those who would remove the speck of anger from their brother’s eye first to remove the plank of hatred from their own.³¹ It is sincere love that will motivate fraternal corrections.

African ecumenists must look back to Augustine’s doctrine of tolerance which he insists must characterize the Church as *socitias permixta*. All involved in ecumenism should have continuous self-reformation, setting aside in themselves what displeases them in others.³² The bishop of Hippo notes that they should assume that such people are like Judas who though Christ knew his plans but yet allowed him into the apostolic college. Therefore, since Christ tolerated Judas irrespective of himself, he sets that as a perfect example that Christians must follow if they must progress in faith and unity.³³

Augustine who believes in the conversion of sinners states that a sinner today can become a saint tomorrow. Who is good and who can withstand the scrutiny of God? God tolerates all so that sinners might repent and return to him. Thus, for Augustine, the locus of that toleration is the Church. For only on the morrow of Judgement Day will the unrepentant sinner be definitively separated from her.³⁴ He calls for suspension of judgment in all ecclesial dialogue to achieve unity in diversity and not unity in uniformity. Tolerance involves the application of *epochē*, since no one can clearly state who will be saved or not. For Augustine, tolerance is loving the sinner and hating his sin. But it does not by

³⁰ Augustine, *In Iohannis euangelium tractatus*. 34.10 CCL 36, 316.

³¹ See Joseph Carola, *Augustine of Hippo: The Role of the Laity in Ecclesial Reconciliation*, (Rome: Editrice Pontificia Gregoriana, 2005), 246.

³² See Carola, *Augustine of Hippo*, 222.

³³ See Augustine, *Enarrationes in Psalmos*, 100.1 CCL 39, 1404.

³⁴ Augustine, *Enarrationes in Psalmos*, 100.13 CCL 39, 1417.

no means imply laxity. So, “the ecclesial spirit of tolerance does not compromise the ecclesiastical judge’s medicinal mission.”³⁵

This dynamic African nature of *koinonia-communion* should help both theologians and ecumenists to create a new fundamental relationship that brings to unity their communal and religious interests. “Communion proves to be as helpful a concept in expressing the relationship between the various parts and the whole, as it is in describing oneness to something so demographically and geographically complex as the international Church.”³⁶ We must aim in all our ecumenical dialogues, to promote the various aspects of the lives, and culture we share not just externally but internally. They should mediate a more direct and intimate whole which constitutes the nature of the Church as a body. Even though we are many, we are one body in Christ. One body that believes in the action of the Holy Spirit at all times.

The bishop of Hippo maintains that fraternal correction is a form of preaching.³⁷ Therefore, preachers or those who perform liturgical activities on such occasions should be conscious of the presence of others who do not belong to them and not make divisive statements. Efforts should be made to tailor their kerygma or teachings to the benefit of all present even the non-Christians bearing in mind Vatican II’s *paedagogia ad Deum verum*-instructions leading to a knowledge of God.³⁸ The Dicastery for Promoting Christian Unity noted that human folly and human sinfulness have continued to bring about such divisions in the Church, weakening her power of love and charity. It is important to understand that all churches involved in the ecumenical movement believed that baptism was instituted by Christ, that it is with water and in the Trinitarian formula that baptism is

³⁵ Carola, *Augustine of Hippo*, 224.

³⁶ John J. Markey, *Creating Communion; The Theology of the Constitutions of the Church* (New York: New City Press, 2003), 49.

³⁷ See Augustine, *In Iohannis euangelium tractatus* 10.9 CCL 36, 105-06.

³⁸ See *Unitatis Redintegratio*, sec. 3.

administered.³⁹ Therefore, let there be tolerance to achieve, unity in our diversity.

8. Unity of Koinonia

The African Fathers preached that schism is in opposition with the mind of the Christ that his Church may be one (Jn. 17: 21). They all upheld the teaching that whoever is outside this Body of Christ, the Church is outside the unity prayed for by Christ. The unity of the Church according to Augustine is the unity of faith, unity of charity, and mutual love which binds all the members in one. The principle of Catholic unity is the Holy Spirit, the bond of unity in the Trinity. The Second Vatican Council Fathers following the African Fathers saw in the ecumenical movement an impulse of the Holy Spirit at work, who awakened in divided Christian's remorse over their divisions and bestowed upon them longing for unity.⁴⁰

This unity of the Church is organic, not institutional, it is not just a private affair. With Vatican II's Decree on Ecumenism-*Unitatis redintegratio*, addressed the Catholic Church to open her door towards restoration of unity among all Christians. All the Catholic faithful are to recognize the signs of the times and to participate actively in the work of ecumenism.⁴¹ Pope John Paul II further admits that "the Catholic Church embraces with hope the commitment to ecumenism as a duty of the Christian conscience enlightened by faith and guided by love."⁴² In doing so, the Catholics must make "every effort to avoid expressions, judgements, and actions which do not represent the condition of our separated brethren with truth and fairness and so make mutual relations with them more difficult ..."⁴³

As Africans, the unity we are called to is a unity of *koinonia*. This biblical notion is central to almost all modern ecumenical dialogue and is widely accepted in Africa and beyond. With this in

³⁹ See Walter Kasper, *Harvesting the Fruits; basic Aspects of Christian Faith in Ecumenical Dialogue* (London: Continuum Int. Publishing, 2013), 164.

⁴⁰ See *Unitatis Redintegratio*, sec. 4.

⁴¹ *Unitatis Redintegratio*, sec. 1.

⁴² John Paul II, *Ut Unum Sit*, sec. 8.

⁴³ *Unitatis Redintegratio*, sec. 4.

focus, contemporary African Christians are encouraged to gainfully engage in a multilateral dialogue with our divided partners with whom we have shared the common apostolic faith. The Greek noun *koinonia* means a form of communion, participation, fellowship, and sharing. This implies having something in common, being a part of it, and acting together. “The Church’s modern commitment to ecumenical dialogue is based on the rediscovery of shared experiences among Christian denominations...”⁴⁴

What we have in common as Africans should form a bond of unity among those who share them. “It is because Christians and their churches share such essential things in common that they are ‘in communion’ with one another, and thus constitute one body, one church. For the kind of communion that justifies speaking of many churches as one church, it is necessary that they have absolutely everything in common.”⁴⁵

9. Conclusion

Having something to share in common is not strange to Africans even within the Church. Africans naturally believe in community and dialogue. In North Africa, when the unity of the Church was being shattered by the Donatists’ movement and other forms of schisms between the 4th and 5th centuries, African Church Fathers called all involved for dialogue because they shared a lot in common. It is clear that as Africans, we do not traditionally go to court but believe in family or communal dialogues to settle our differences. The contemporary African Churches must return to the *status quo* of amicable dialogues and not war. They should all convince themselves that not all the ecclesial problems of Africa are indigenous. Some are more external than internal but must be solved with the African mind of communion.

⁴⁴ Boniface A. Obiefuna and Ikechukwu A. Kanu, “African Culture as a Basis for Ecumenism,” *Igwebuike: An African Journal of Arts and Humanities* 2, No. 3 (2016): 42.

⁴⁵ Francis A. Sullivan, *The Church we Believe In: One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic* (New York: Paulist Press, 1988), 38.

The Church in Africa from the late 19th century inherited divisions and competition from the evangelizers. Such contradicted the organic unity in the Church. They sowed both tares and wheat in the same field called Africa. But, having found themselves that way, they must grow together in the same field without destroying themselves or the land. That is why Pope Paul VI acknowledged that “the African Church is full of history; a drama of charity, heroism, and sacrifice and that makes the African Church great and holy from its origin.”⁴⁶ Since Africans are no longer missionaries but are now going to the mission lands, it is time for them to unite together and rewrite their history.

In the final analysis, the ecumenists should understand that God only decides who is or is not holy. Therefore, in all ecumenical dialogues, they should always look back to their ancestors in faith and like them, see all Christians as being in the Noah’s ark, same field with wheat and tares, one dragnet with good and bad fish, and one sheepfold. It is not anyone’s duty to separate them.

⁴⁶ Paul VI, “Address to the Symposium of Ecclesial Conference of Africa and Madagascar, Kampala” (31 July 1968), AAS 61, 575.