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**PROFESSIONAL SKILLS. COMMUNITY INTERESTS.**

December 13, 2011

His Holiness Pope Benedict XVI,

We, the executive board of the Orisa Community Development Corporation, a United States-based nonprofit organization dedicated to the economic and social empowerment of practitioners of Orisa traditions – one of the native religions of Benin, a country you recently visited – are writing this letter in response to your newly unveiled *Africae Munus* exhortation. While we understand your desire to do what you feel to be your duty as Pope, there are several portions of the exhortation, which we as people of African descent and practitioners of African Indigenous Religions find deeply troubling. We hope that you will consider entering into dialogue with us and those who have allied with us in the quest to facilitate interfaith relations that will truly allow each of us to “live our faith freely” – an idea articulated by your predecessor, Pope John Paul II upon his 1998 visit to Cuba.

Numerous practitioners and scholars of indigenous religions throughout the world - including many of us at the Orisa CDC - were encouraged by the recent meeting you held at the Vatican where you rallied with diverse religious leaders to denounce religious extremism and violence. We were particularly refreshed by your inclusion of traditional religious leaders from Africa and the Americas in the dialogue and by your censure of the historical violence committed in the name of Christianity. Given this sense of inspiration, it was deeply disappointing that little more than a month later you would issue a decree like the *Africae Munus*, which, in our view, calls for systemic cultural violence against Africans.

In particular, your calls for “profound inculturation” and “profound evangelization of the African soul” are alarming. These declarations, while not inciting physical violence, are certainly encouraging forms of cultural violence that re-inscribe Africans – and many other non-Christian and non-white peoples by extension – as backward and in need of a “civilization” that, purportedly, only Christianity can offer. Though couched in terms of God’s divine love, the reality of your *Africae Munus* is that, in calling for the shunning of African Indigenous Religions and what you refer to as “excessively African” forms of Christianity, it is essentially calling for the shunning of African cultures, as spiritual understandings are very deeply imbedded in the cultures of most African peoples. Much of the Catholic cultural milieu – including celibacy of priests, and strict, exclusionary dogma – is in direct contradiction to African cultural values and ethics, which are by and large family-centered and inclusionary. As such, seeking to “profoundly evangelize” and to replace indigenous means of reconciliation – which are largely communal – with individualized personal confession is also directly seeking to change people’s entire cultural orientation and understanding from an African one to a Eurocentric Christian one, and to

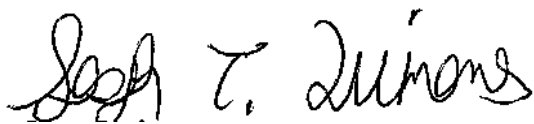
once again, assert foreign Eurocentric conceptions as superior to their own native understandings. These moves amount to cultural imperialism in the short term and cultural genocide in the long term. Both have been attempted before and we consider neither acceptable.

Though you express dismay at the reality of “dual affiliation” – meaning affiliation with both Christianity and African Indigenous Religions – within Africa, it is imperative to understand that if it weren’t for dual affiliation, the Catholic Church would have far fewer adherents in Africa, Asia and the Americas. Contrary to your statement in section 91 of *Africae Munus* that decries the “syncretistic sects that have sprung up in the last few decades” these sects have been in existence not for a few decades but for hundreds of years. And they arose precisely because Africans and other Indigenous peoples were “profoundly evangelized” upon the invasion of their lands, the enslavement of their bodies and the Church’s declaration of “pagans” as “enemies of Christ” in the *Romanus Pontifex* and other deeply problematic Papal bulls – several of which have never officially been rescinded. Though many peoples nominally converted for various reasons, it is clear that they never gave up their native cultural understandings. And we don’t feel that they should continue to be pressured to do so now.

Given the climates of intense racism, Eurocentrism, and Christiancentrism that have persisted on this planet for at least the last 500 hundred years, we of the Orisa CDC see the survival of African religions and cultures – and all indigenous cultures and religions – as a miracle and a blessing. Peoples the world over are openly reclaiming their cultures, lands, languages, and religions and they will no longer sit idly by while their religions, cultures and very selves are denounced by those who believe that there is only one “right way” to be and live on this planet. While we understand that some of those who seek to evangelize others are truly well meaning, we assert our rights to respectfully decline evangelization and to live our lives as we choose without any form of interference, well-intentioned as it may be.

The sacred knowledge corpus of the Yorùbá, known as the odù Ifá, teaches us that we are to live in balance and harmony with the world, not in dominion over it. Accordingly, we have no desire to dominate or suppress Christianity – or any other religion – nor do we evangelize or seek to present our ways of life as the only ways. What we do desire is truly open and fruitful dialogue that respects human dignity, religious freedom and the right of self-determination for all people. We look forward to engaging in such dialogue with you and hope that you will consider amending the *Africae Munus* to expunge it of its offensive content. This act would show the world that the Catholic Church is interested not in domination but in expressing a truly Christ-like love of humanity.

Signed,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Joe T. Quinones". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Joe T. Quinones

*Chairman*

The Orisa Community Development Corporation