

## COVID-19 PANDEMIC: CHALLENGES AND LESSONS FOR PASTORAL PRAXIS IN NIGERIA

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### **Abstract**

*History reveals that there have been pandemics that had taken place on earth in the past years. A pandemic is a disease outbreak or an epidemic that spreads across countries or continents. It affects more people and takes more lives than an epidemic. An epidemic is declared a global pandemic when it became clear that illness is severe and that it is spreading quickly over a wide area. Some pandemics are gone for good while others continue traumatizing humanity. These pandemics, whenever they occur, have a tendency of wiping out thousands of human lives. The author is aware of the pandemics with deadly viral infections including 1918-Spanish flu, 1957-Asian flu, 1968-Hong Kong flu, 1981-Human Immunodeficiency Virus / Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome (HIV/AIDS), 2009-Swine flu, and now Coronavirus disease of 2019 (COVID-19). All nations, big or small, developed or undeveloped, poor or rich, have suffered the presence of COVID-19 pandemic. This pandemic has no respect and do not select: young or adult, women or men, Christians or non-Christians, African or non-African, white or black person, rich or poor people. COVID-19 pandemic is a great threat to humanity, to the countries and to the whole world in so many ways. People are only sure of yesterday, but does not know how today will end, not to talk of what will happen tomorrow. The pandemic has brought considerable challenges to the Church's mission in Nigeria. The Church is challenged to come up with new appropriate pastoral praxis that accept and care for all COVID-19 infected and affected faithful. The love and respect for the weak, the poor, the needy, and the sick should motivate the Church to take the situation of the modern pandemic more seriously. This pandemic calls for a pastoral approach that grows out of the reality between what is believed and what is done, theology and ministry, faith and life. This article, "COVID-19 Pandemic: Challenges and Lessons for Pastoral Praxis in Nigeria", presents to us the challenges and lessons posed by COVID-19 on the Pastoral Praxis of*

*the Church in Nigeria and how the Church is responding through pastoral ministry. This article reveals the successful and unsuccessful lessons learnt to give the reader a wealth of knowledge, reliable information and useful resource material as a guide in exploring ones' thoughts and feelings for better understanding of COVID-19 pandemic. Using a narrative approach the author finds out that new pastoral strategies are inevitable to improve pastoral ministry for it to be more effective to Covid-19 demands and to reduce the negative effects of the disease in our communities.*

**Keywords:** COVID-19, Pandemic, and Pastoral.

### **Introduction**

From the year 2019 till date, human beings in the world have been facing some remarkable challenges and lessons posed by Covid-19 pandemic. This pandemic has created a situation in which everybody is only sure of yesterday, but does not know how today will end, not to talk of what will happen tomorrow. However, history reveals that there has been pandemics that had taken place on earth in the past years. Jeffrey Ryan defines pandemic as “an epidemic that spreads across a large region or even worldwide. Pandemics end when all or most of the population has been exposed to the disease and have either contracted the disease, died from it, or developed a subclinical infection that rendered them immune”<sup>71</sup>. A pandemic spreads across countries or continents. It affects more people and takes more lives than an epidemic. An epidemic is understood as “an outbreak of a disease that appears as new cases in a human population during a given period at a rate substantially exceeding what is expected, but it is usually limited in its geographic distribution”<sup>72</sup>. In other words, “an epidemic refers to an unexpected, widespread rise in disease incidence at a given time while a pandemic can be said to be an epidemic that spreads over multiple countries and even continents”<sup>73</sup>. An epidemic is declared a global pandemic when it become clear that illness is severe and that it is spreading quickly over a wide area.

A pandemic event is “not a singular incident but one that is felt in waves, each lasting weeks or months. Regardless of the place of origin, a pandemic will pass through

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<sup>71</sup> Jeffrey R. Ryan. “Past Pandemics and their Outcome” in *Pandemic Influenza: Emergency Planning and Community Preparedness*, edited by Jeffrey R. Ryan. New York: CRC Press, 2009, p. 6.

<sup>72</sup> Jeffrey R. Ryan. “Past Pandemics and their Outcome” in *Pandemic Influenza: Emergency Planning and Community Preparedness*, edited by Jeffrey R. Ryan. New York: CRC Press, 2009, p. 6.

<sup>73</sup> Christian W. McMillen. *Pandemics: A Very Short Introduction*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2016, 1.

communities and nations, and migrate around the world”<sup>74</sup>. Pandemics “create more than medical problems. They affect every sector of a community and it takes a community effort to assemble a functional plan”<sup>75</sup>. Apart from medical problems, pandemics are able to create spiritual, psychological and mental problems. Some pandemics are gone for good while others continue traumatizing humanity. These pandemics, whenever they occur, have a tendency of wiping out thousands of human lives. The world have had deadly viral infections including “1918-Spanish flu, 1957-Asian flu, 1968-Hong Kong flu, 1981-Human Immunodeficiency Virus / Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome (HIV/AIDS), 2009-Swine flu, and Coronavirus disease of 2019 (COVID-19)”<sup>76</sup>. All nations, big or small, developed or undeveloped, poor or rich, have suffered the presence of pandemics. These pandemics have “no respect and do not select: young or adult, women or men, Christians or non-Christians, African or non-African, white or black person, rich or poor people”<sup>77</sup>. Pandemics have a tendency of threatening humanity, the Church, the country and the whole world.

The Church in Nigeria is challenged to face Covid-19 pandemic situation and accept it, and learn from it on how to care for all infected and affected faithful. For Pope Francis, “this is the Church in a difficult situation”<sup>78</sup>. According to Kawama:

The love and respect for the weak, the poor, the needy, and the sick should cause every pastoral agent take the situation of our modern pandemic Covid-19 a focus of his spiritual, pastoral and theological reflection. This novel pandemic call for a pastoral approach that grows out of the reality between what is believed and what is done, theology and ministry, faith and life<sup>79</sup>.

This article aims at helping the reader to learn more about Covid-19 under the theme “COVID-19 Pandemic: Challenges and Lessons for Pastoral Praxis in Nigeria”. It confirms that earthly life is a journey with challenges to solve and lessons to learn.

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<sup>74</sup>Jane Thomas Cash and Martha Griffith Lavender. “Federal and International Programs and Assets” in *Pandemic Influenza: Emergency Planning and Community Preparedness*, edited by Jeffrey R. Ryan. New York: CRC Press, 2009, 118.

<sup>75</sup>Jeffrey R. Ryan and Jan F. Glarum. “Defining the Response at the Local Level” in *Pandemic Influenza: Emergency Planning and Community Preparedness*, edited by Jeffrey R. Ryan. New York: CRC Press, 2009, p. 182.

<sup>76</sup>Virgilius Kawama. *Pastoral Approach to our Modern Pandemics: HIV/AIDS and Covid-19*, Beau Basin: Lambert Academic Publishing, 2020, 1.

<sup>77</sup>Virgilius Kawama. *Pastoral Approach to our Modern Pandemics: HIV/AIDS and Covid-19*, Beau Basin: Lambert Academic Publishing, 2020, 1.

<sup>78</sup>Carol Glatz. “Pope says Living Faith without Sacraments, Community is Dangerous”, in *National Catholic Reporter*. April 17, 2020. [www.ncronline.org](http://www.ncronline.org)

<sup>79</sup>Virgilius Kawama. *Pastoral Approach to our Modern Pandemics: HIV/AIDS and Covid-19*, Beau Basin: Lambert Academic Publishing, 2020, 2.

### **Challenges caused by Covid-19 Pandemic**

There are so many things about the pandemic outside the Church control, how long the pandemic will last cannot be certain, how we are to behave and other peoples' behavior cannot be predicted, and what is going to happen in our communities only God knows. Pope Francis acknowledged that "The impact of everything that is happening, the serious consequences that are already being reported, and those things which we have glimpsed, the pain and mourning for our loved ones, all have the capacity to disorient, distress and paralyze us"<sup>80</sup>. Covid-19 has affected the people of God socially, economically, religiously, and morally.

#### *Stay at home measure challenge*

At the onset of Covid-19 pandemic, people were panicking for a number of reasons: it was a new virus, no one was sure of his or her immunity, there was no vaccine, people did not anticipate such an infectious disease, there was rise in the number of deaths and so forth. We were all "struck by the global coronavirus pandemic, and nation by nation the world went into lockdown mode"<sup>81</sup>. The government proposed 'Stay-at-Home-measure' as the only hundred percent sure way of stopping or reducing the spread of Covid-19 pandemic. Stay at home measure directly implied closure of the Church buildings and active pastoral activities.

#### *Fear of the infection challenge*

People had every reason to worry about the emerging cases of coronavirus because the disease had no cure and could be contacted through mingling with the people who have been infected. Since some people were worried about contracting the virus, they embraced hostile attitudes toward those around them, they found it difficult to go about their daily duties as fear had paralyzed them, they had fear of their unknown future, and they feared their loved ones of getting infected. They were aware that "the Covid-19 crisis is a pandemic of a global scale which knows no race, gender, class, boundary or nationality"<sup>82</sup>. Covid-19 pandemic created a situation in which almost everyone lived in fear. The Church was not exempted, she had to look for ways which could promote the wellbeing of her faithful and stop the spreading of the pandemic. The Church believes that "every individual action is not an isolated action, for better or for worse. It has

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<sup>80</sup> Pope Francis, *Life after the Pandemic*, Rome: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2020, p. 42.

<sup>81</sup> Thom S. Rainer. *The Post Quarantine Church: Six Urgent Challenges and Opportunities that will determine the Future of your Congregation*. Illinois, USA: Tyndale Momentum, 2020, p. 2.

<sup>82</sup> Tinashe Kondo. "Providing for the Unwanted in a Time of Crisis: The Socio-Economic Rights of Migrant Workers in Southern Africa during the Covid-19 Pandemic", in *Covid-19 Pandemic and Socio-Economic Rights in Selected East and Southern African Countries*, edited by Justice Alfred Mavedzenge. Cape Town: Juta and Company Ltd., 2020, p. 13.

consequences for others, because everything is interconnected in our common house”<sup>83</sup>. So the Church, especially in line with pastoral praxis had to make a lot of adjustments so as to allow the Covid-19 pandemic precautions bear healing fruits.

#### *Restriction on travel challenge*

There was a restriction on travel so as to stop the exportation of the disease to different places or countries. This measure necessitated “the closure of inter-town and inter-country travels except for essential services. The bus stations, car parks, rail stations, and airports were closed”<sup>84</sup>. Since movements were stopped or highly regulated, the Church buildings too were locked and all Church programs were affected negatively. It also facilitated “the staggering costs in terms of lives and livelihoods; the anguish; physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual; afflicting millions, even billions, of people; and the stress and strains put on all, but especially on those whose calling it is to serve, protect, treat, and care for others”<sup>85</sup>. The pastoral ministers could not serve God’s children according to peoples’ expectations.

#### *Social Isolation challenge*

Due to stay-at-home-measure, people were automatically cut off from their neighbours. Some of the steps taken against Covid-19 like “the closure of borders, shopping malls, movie theaters, restaurants, airports, schools and offices; cancelling games and vacations; no big gatherings and closing of the places of worship”<sup>86</sup> affected negatively the social life of the people. In consonance with Kaaba, “the virus has wreaked havoc across the globe, disrupting social life, destroying economies, overwhelming health systems and limiting the enjoyment of human rights”<sup>87</sup>. Coping with the coronavirus preventative actions though good in themselves posed various challenges to people who are used to leading lives as it pleases them.

Some Covid-19 Survivors expressed the stigmatization they experienced in their families and neighbourhoods. The people kept on avoiding the survivors for the fear of possible transmission. Some family members “vacated their rooms for the survivor, others despite being discharged by the hospital authority, their families took them to different clinics and

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<sup>83</sup> Pope Francis, *Life after the Pandemic*, Rome: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2020, p. 47.

<sup>84</sup> Virgilius Kawama. *Pastoral Approach to our Modern Pandemics: HIV/AIDS and Covid-19*, Beau Basin: Lambert Academic Publishing, 2020, p. 51.

<sup>85</sup> Stephen Bullivant. *Catholicism in the Time of Coronavirus*, Park Ridge, IL: Word on Fire, 2020, p. 3.

<sup>86</sup> Virgilius Kawama. *Pastoral Approach to our Modern Pandemics: HIV/AIDS and Covid-19*, Beau Basin: Lambert Academic Publishing, 2020, p. 50.

<sup>87</sup> O’Brien Kaaba. “Deliberate disregard: Socio-Economic Rights, Constitutionalism and the Covid-19 Pandemic in Zambia”, in *Covid-19 Pandemic and Socio-Economic Rights in Selected East and Southern African Countries*, edited by Justice Alfred Mavedzenge. Cape Town: Juta and Company Ltd., 2020, p. 108.

have their temperature taken before they were allowed in the house, and even at that, they still distanced themselves from them”<sup>88</sup>. Because of stigmatization, many survivors refuse to go back into their homes immediately, choosing instead to live somewhere for some days or weeks. This is because “the current coronavirus pandemic disrupt social order by engendering stigmatization of the victim, uncertainty, panic, and social disintegration”<sup>89</sup>. Family members needed to support the survivors for them to understand that they were still needed in their families. Being Covid-19 positive is not a death sentence.

#### *Economic crisis challenge*

The pandemic has substantial negative economic impact on people. This is because the very measures that are crucial to slowing the spread of the virus have a direct cost on local economies. The disruption to people’s daily lives means less paid work, less income, more spending due to idleness, and fewer jobs. And with borders closed, “travel and tourism quickly dried up, and shipping and trade suffered. The pandemic has caused much pain and suffering on the street vendors, recyclers, farmers, construction workers, dressmakers, and others who rely on their daily income to earn a meal”<sup>90</sup>. Pastoral activities were also affected negatively because “the financial support for many Churches came primarily through the offering plate. Consequently, with no in-person worship services, there was no offering. With no offering, there were no incoming funds to support the ministries of the Church”<sup>91</sup>. The pastors need money for their feeding and fueling vehicles to facilitate ministries, yet funds were not forthcoming.

#### *Spiritual life meltdown*

In the midst of Covid-19 pandemic crisis, “Catholics have faced another trial, one that is not only economic, social, or medical, but spiritual”<sup>92</sup>. In response to the outbreak of Covid-19, the Catholic Church in different dioceses announced precautionary measures to be adopted. They include:

Strict access to some sacraments like confession, baptism, anointing of the sick, and confirmation; forbidding the shaking of hands at Mass, no public stations of

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<sup>88</sup> Virgilius Kawama. *Pastoral Approach to our Modern Pandemics: HIV/AIDS and Covid-19*, Beau Basin: Lambert Academic Publishing, 2020, p. 28.

<sup>89</sup> O’Brien Kaaba. “Deliberate disregard: Socio-Economic Rights, Constitutionalism and the Covid-19 Pandemic in Zambia”, in *Covid-19 Pandemic and Socio-Economic Rights in Selected East and Southern African Countries*, edited by Justice Alfred Mavedzenge. Cape Town: Juta and Company Ltd., 2020, p. 109.

<sup>90</sup> Virgilius Kawama. *Pastoral Approach to our Modern Pandemics: HIV/AIDS and Covid-19*, Beau Basin: Lambert Academic Publishing, 2020, p. 18.

<sup>91</sup> Thom S. Rainer. *The Post Quarantine Church: Six Urgent Challenges and Opportunities that will determine the Future of your Congregation*. Illinois, USA: Tyndale Momentum, 2020, p. 5.

<sup>92</sup> Stephen Bullivant, *Catholicism in the time of Coronavirus*, Park Ridge, IL: Word on Fire, 2020, p. ii.

the cross, Holy Communion to be received on palms and not on the tongue, forbidding sprinkling of holy water, sitting three or four persons in each pew depending on the length of the pew<sup>93</sup>.

In agreement with Pope Francis, this disease “has not only deprived us of human closeness, but also of the possibility of receiving in person the consolation that flows from the sacraments, particularly the Eucharist and Reconciliation”<sup>94</sup>. In some dioceses, persons planning spiritual ceremonies like weddings and burials were advised to either postpone the event or restrict it to family members only.

Pope Francis realized that “the ideal of the Church is always with the people and with the sacraments”<sup>95</sup>. Pope Francis is concerned about the “faithful not being able to come together as a community to celebrate Mass or to receive the sacraments because of the government being against people gathering in groups as part of efforts to stem the spread of the coronavirus”<sup>96</sup>. The Pope stated, “one’s relationship with Jesus is intimate, it is personal, but it is in a community, and this closeness to Christ without community, without the Eucharist, without the people of God assemble together, and without the sacraments is dangerous”<sup>97</sup>. Sacramental life has become very challenging to our faithful.

#### *Pastoral ministry restrictions challenge*

When public worship was suspended, the Church directed the parishioners to participate at Masses aired on radio and television channels. Where possible, priests were requested to produce handouts on daily reflections, prayers and homilies to be distributed to their parishioners using text messages, WhatsApp and twitter. In this manner, “the internet became a complementary tool for experiencing the sacraments and for predisposing, preparing, and leading people to a concrete experience of community”<sup>98</sup>. Such situations “inherently deprived the Christian community of its cherished assets of personal relationship, physical encounter, and a communal familiarity nourished by the sacraments”<sup>99</sup>. Not every Catholic has a phone, not to talk of WhatsApp, Twitter or Facebook. It is true that Holy Water is not a hand sanitizer and prayer is not a vaccine,

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<sup>93</sup> Virgilius Kawama. *Pastoral Approach to our Modern Pandemics: HIV/AIDS and Covid-19*, Beau Basin: Lambert Academic Publishing, 2020, p. 56.

<sup>94</sup> Pope Francis. *Life after the Pandemic*, Rome: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2020, p. 28.

<sup>95</sup> Pope Francis. Pope warns of danger in online Masses, 20-04-2020. [www.catholicweekly.com.au](http://www.catholicweekly.com.au)

<sup>96</sup> Pope Francis. Pope warns of danger in online Masses, 20-04-2020. [www.catholicweekly.com.au](http://www.catholicweekly.com.au)

<sup>97</sup> Pope Francis. Pope warns of danger in online Masses, 20-04-2020. [www.catholicweekly.com.au](http://www.catholicweekly.com.au)

<sup>98</sup> Agbonkhianmeghe E. Orobator. *The Pope and The Pandemic: Lessons in Leadership in a Time of Crisis*. New York: Orbis Books, 2021, p. 115.

<sup>99</sup> Agbonkhianmeghe E. Orobator. *The Pope and The Pandemic: Lessons in Leadership in a Time of Crisis*, New York: Orbis Books, 2021, p. 114.

however, for believers, religion is a fundamental source of spiritual healing and hope. It is a remedy against despair, providing psychological and emotional support that is an integral part of wellbeing<sup>100</sup>.

#### *Worsening existing inequalities Challenge*

Inequality in the society is unavoidable. However, the coming of Covid-19 pandemic has worsened the already existing inequalities. The pandemic situation is not able to “give everyone his due place”<sup>101</sup>. There is more poverty, structural injustices, lack of proper treatment for some patients due to high medical bills, lack of suitable hospital facilities in some areas, insensitivity towards human dignity and human rights, and creation of barriers between them and us. In accordance with Lily Mburu, “The novel coronavirus (Covid-19) pandemic and its profound impacts on the most vulnerable groups in society have considerably aggravated existing inequalities”<sup>102</sup>.

#### **Lessons from Covid-19 Pandemic**

Whatever happens to humanity has its own goodness and badness. On the positive note, with all the pains, the lockdowns, the social and economic disruption, the enormous fatality, the fear and the panic Covid-19 pandemic engenders, at the end of it all, the life of an individual and community has been reshaped dramatically. According to Kawama, “These lessons help us to stop relying on ourselves, and to rely on God who raises the dead to life. As the Lord has helped us so many times before, we can be certain that he will continue helping us in our trials and sufferings in order for us to fix our eyes on our anticipated glory, which is so great, and in itself the cause of joy in suffering”<sup>103</sup>. John Piper will say that if testing is endured, it brings praise and glory to God and blessing is received<sup>104</sup>. Humanity has historically “emerged from each cycle of plague fewer in number, but more resilient and determined to press on”<sup>105</sup>. Some people are coming out of the challenges Covid-19 pandemic posed to its survival stronger, resilient, determined,

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<sup>100</sup> Cf. John C. Lennox. *Where is God in a Coronavirus World?*, New Zealand: The Good Book Company, 2020, p. 36.

<sup>101</sup> Virgilius Kawama. *Igwebuike: Towards an African Indigenous Ethical Theory*, Nairobi: Tradecraft Enterprises, 2023, p. 155.

<sup>102</sup> Lily Mburu. “The Dual Crisis of Forced Evictions and Covid-19 in Kenya: Rethinking Judicial Enforcement and Civic Engagement of the Right of Housing”, in *Covid-19 Pandemic and Socio-Economic Rights in Selected East and Southern African Countries*, edited by Justice Alfred Mavedzenge. Cape Town: Juta and Company Ltd., 2020, p 32.

<sup>103</sup> Virgilius Kawama. *Pastoral Approach to our Modern Pandemics: HIV/AIDS and Covid-19*, Beau Basin: Lambert Academic Publishing, 2020, p. 88.

<sup>104</sup> Cf. John Piper. *Coronavirus and Christ*, USA: Crossway Publishers, 2020, p. 56.

<sup>105</sup> Agbonkhanmeghe E. Orobator. *The Pope and The Pandemic: Lessons in Leadership in a Time of Crisis*, New York: Orbis Books, 2021, p. 126.



creative and innovative. For Pope Francis, “The basic rule of a crisis is that you do not come out of it the same. If you get through it, you come out better or worse, but never the same”<sup>106</sup>. There are a lot of challenges but they offer significant opportunities for people to turn things around. People are able to understand that “a time of crisis offers an opportunity for conversion, personally, but also for the Church, for the world, and for the whole of creation”<sup>107</sup>. The pandemic crisis “has called forth in some a new courage and compassion”<sup>108</sup>, promoted positive values and good attitudes, responsibility, respect, prayer life, and solidarity.

### **Solidarity among people**

The pandemic has made solidarity possible among people as they work for the common good or for “the protection of both individual and the community, for the growth and prosperity of the human person”<sup>109</sup>. People are in solidarity with one another to protect life because they are aware that “life can become the place where God manifests himself, where we meet him and enter into communion with him”<sup>110</sup>. Therefore, we are all called to a service of love which ensures to our neighbors, that their life will always be protected. This is because,

It is not only a personal but a social concern which we must all foster: a concern to make unconditional respect for human life as the foundation of a renewed society. We are asked to love and honor the life of every man and woman and to work with perseverance and courage so that our time, marked by many signs of death, may at last witness the establishment of a new culture of life, the fruit of the culture of truth and of love<sup>111</sup>.

Unconditional love and respect for humanity in a community should entice true solidarity and collaboration in a pandemic situation so as to save lives and bring hope to the infected and affected people. People are to be united in finding lasting solutions to a pandemic.

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<sup>106</sup> Pope Francis. *Let us Dream: The Path to a Better Future*, London: Simon & Schuster, 2020, p. 1.

<sup>107</sup> Agbonkhanmeghe E. Orobator. *The Pope and The Pandemic: Lessons in Leadership in a Time of Crisis*, New York: Orbis Books, 2021, p. 112.

<sup>108</sup> Pope Francis. *Let Us Dream: The Path to a Better Future*, London: Simon & Schuster, 2020, p. 7.

<sup>109</sup> E. Opongo – A. Orobator, *Faith Doing Justice: A Manual for Social Analysis, Catholic Social Teachings and Social Justice*, Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 2008, p. 30.

<sup>110</sup> Pope John Paul II. *Encyclical Letter, Evangelium Vitae: The Gospel of Life*, Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 1995, p. 38.

<sup>111</sup> Pope John Paul II. *Encyclical Letter, Evangelium Vitae: The Gospel of Life*, Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 1995, p. 77.

This is because “Covid-19 containment strategies cannot be effective if a section of the population is excluded”<sup>112</sup>.

Saint Pope John Paul II reminds us that, “the relationships between the members of the family community are inspired and guided by the law of free-giving. This free-giving takes the form of heartfelt acceptance, encounter and dialogue, disinterested availability, generous service and deep solidarity”<sup>113</sup>. This deep solidarity encourages people to have a look beyond immediate interests, it leads to a change in the way of thinking, working, loving and living with one another. People are able to work for the good of all and to remain truly responsible for each other. The wisdom of John S. Mbiti in “I am because we are and because we are, therefore I am”<sup>114</sup> has become more relevant. They have learnt to work for the common good, to be mediators of compassion and justice, to bring consolation and healing in a pandemic situation. In the spirit of solidarity, “People prayed for friends and loved ones who were stricken by Covid-19. They prayed for economic issues as millions lost their jobs. They prayed for those who were lonely, depressed, and seeking answers for the pain around them”<sup>115</sup>.

### **Importance of Holistic Pastoral Approach**

The Church discovered that in the present moment she needs a holistic pastoral approach, the pastoral care which is complete and integrated in its response to the needs of the human person in a pandemic situation covering the spiritual, physical, psychological, social and material aspects. Holistic pastoral approach brings about new vision, new forms of working, praying and living in the world. The Christians are able to see the crisis of Covid-19 pandemic as an “encounter with grace, prompting them to be generous and to love others as Christ loves them”<sup>116</sup>.

The Church learnt that keeping people at their homes and worshipping in their small families gave them ample time to read and reflect on the Word of God, to understand the family members’ spirituality through their sharing, thus coming to the common

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<sup>112</sup> Tinashe Kondo. “Providing for the Unwanted in a Time of Crisis: The Socio-Economic Rights of Migrant Workers in Southern Africa during the Covid-19 Pandemic”, in *Covid-19 Pandemic and Socio-Economic Rights in Selected East and Southern African Countries*, edited by Justice Alfred Mavedzenge. Cape Town: Juta and Company Ltd., 2020, p. 6.

<sup>113</sup> Pope John Paul II. *Apostolic Exhortation, Familiaris Consortio: The Family in the Modern World*, Nairobi: Catholic Bookshop Publications, 1982, p. 43.

<sup>114</sup> John S. Mbiti. *African Religions and Philosophy*, New York: Anchor Books, 1970, p. 141.

<sup>115</sup> Thom S. Rainer. *The Post Quarantine Church: Six Urgent Challenges and Opportunities that will determine the Future of your Congregation*. Illinois, USA: Tyndale Momentum, 2020, p. 58.

<sup>116</sup> A. E. Orobator, *From Crisis to Kairos: The Mission of the Church in the time of HIV/AIDS, Refugees and Poverty*, Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 2005, p. 119.

knowledge on how God wants to direct their families through the different voices of the family members. According to Cardinal Sarah, “when everything collapses, only the bonds of marriage, family, and friendship remain”<sup>117</sup>. This is a graceful opportunity to bond at all family levels. The Church is able to coordinate pastoral plans, encourage and educate the people on different topics regarding conduct and behavior. People came to understand that remaining at home was “an opportunity to reflect, to withdraw from the frenetic pace of life, to stay with loved ones and to enjoy their company”<sup>118</sup>.

Covid-19 pandemic situation has alerted the pastoral agents of the importance of pastoral and psychological counseling training for better care towards the affected and infected people. An expansive approach in responding to the virus is “essential for improving public health management generally”<sup>119</sup>. They are to offer dynamic support to people to bring about healing, to give an opportunity to the affected and infected people to share their deeper emotional and spiritual difficulties. They are to provide the help people need to address personal issues and make informal decisions to better their lives. They should assist patients to recover their self-esteem and lead a fruitful life. Pope Francis advises that, “This is a moment to dream big, to rethink our priorities, what we value, what we want, what we seek, and to commit to act in our daily life on what we have dreamed of”<sup>120</sup>.

### **Control Strategies and their effectiveness**

Many are the control strategies put forward. Their effectiveness were obvious in the lifestyles being led now, confirming that “we can learn wisdom from any crisis, if we objectively analyze the causes of the crisis and rationally study the means to overcome it”<sup>121</sup>. The strategies challenged people to work tirelessly to eradicate Covid-19 pandemic, stigma and discrimination, to challenge any social, religious, cultural and political practices which do not protect human life. People learn that “an effective response will not only

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<sup>117</sup> Jeanne Smits. Vatican liturgy chief: COVID-19 victims have inalienable right to sacraments, 14-04-2020. [www.lifesitenews.com](http://www.lifesitenews.com)

<sup>118</sup> Pope Francis, *Life after the Pandemic*, Rome: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2020, p. 29.

<sup>119</sup> Tinashe Kondo. “Providing for the Unwanted in a Time of Crisis: The Socio-Economic Rights of Migrant Workers in Southern Africa during the Covid-19 Pandemic”, in *Covid-19 Pandemic and Socio-Economic Rights in Selected East and Southern African Countries*, edited by Justice Alfred Mavedzenge. Cape Town: Juta and Company Ltd., 2020, p. 6.

<sup>120</sup> Pope Francis. *Let Us Dream: The Path to a Better Future*, London: Simon & Schuster, 2020, p. 6.

<sup>121</sup> Virgilius Kawama. *Pastoral Approach to our Modern Pandemics: HIV/AIDS and Covid-19*, Beau Basin: Lambert Academic Publishing, 2020, p. 88.

require government intervention and international partnerships, but will also depend on the actions of individual citizens of all nations”<sup>122</sup>.

### **Church’s role in combating Covid-19 pandemic**

The Churches expanded their thinking and moved into new territories of “blending and balancing between digital and in-person ministry”<sup>123</sup>. It was very difficult for some laity to apprehend the Church’s directives about curbing the spread of the disease. They had to struggle with the challenges of following the masses and ceremonies on televisions or other social media platforms. This was not easy for them since they are used to large groups, good music and general participation. However, the Christian faithful have taken measures to enhance their safety without compromising the intrinsic beauty and relevant spiritual attitude of the Church<sup>124</sup>. Some parishioners at last realized the grace and appreciated the rare opportunity created by this novel coronavirus for the family to pray together. They considered the benefits of Covid-19 despite the many lives it has claimed and its negative impacts on our social and economical life.

The pastoral ministers have understood that they have a big responsibility of reminding the faithful to pray more in their homes despite the boringness and loneliness they might have been encountering. At the moment, God is asking us to make our prayers continually over Covid-19 in our homes. Covid-19 pandemic requires our collective action and discipline. The faithful need to join their hands, cooperation and understanding to ensure that the disease does not spread. This is because no single person or sector can “provide all of the services required to contain a disease and support an affected community”<sup>125</sup>. No doubt, this is a traumatic time for the Church. But it is also such time that tests the will and the resilience of the people of God. The Churches have demonstrated their resilience and determination to see how God could work for the good of His overall purpose through this devastating disease<sup>126</sup>.

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<sup>122</sup>Jane Thomas Cash and Martha Griffith Lavender. “Federal and International Programs and Assets” in *Pandemic Influenza: Emergency Planning and Community Preparedness*, edited by Jeffrey R. Ryan. New York: CRC Press, 2009, p. 118.

<sup>123</sup> Thom S. Rainer. *The Post Quarantine Church: Six Urgent Challenges and Opportunities that will determine the Future of your Congregation*. Illinois, USA: Tyndale Momentum, 2020, p. 27.

<sup>124</sup> Cf. John Piper. *Coronavirus and Christ*, USA: Crossway Publishers, 2020, p. 38.

<sup>125</sup> Jeffrey R. Ryan and Jan F. Glarum. “Defining the Response at the Local Level” in *Pandemic Influenza: Emergency Planning and Community Preparedness*, edited by Jeffrey R. Ryan. New York: CRC Press, 2009, p. 182.

<sup>126</sup> Cf. Thom S. Rainer. *The Post Quarantine Church: Six Urgent Challenges and Opportunities that will determine the Future of your Congregation*. Illinois, USA: Tyndale Momentum, 2020, p. 27.

### **Recommendable Pastoral Praxis in Covid-19 pandemic situation**

In the Gospel of Mark we read, “And no one puts new wine into old wineskins. If he does, the wine will burst the skins, and the wine is destroyed, and so are the skins. But new wine is for fresh wineskins” (Mk. 2:22). We have been used to pastoral praxis which might not be effective in Covid-19 pandemic situation. It is a new pandemic that deserves new pastoral approach if the Church is to remain meaningful to her followers. There is a need for “an effective and comprehensive response to a fast-moving, contagious, and potentially fatal disease”<sup>127</sup>. There is always a better way of responding to problems. We have to “modify our roles and habits in order to emerge from the crisis as better people”<sup>128</sup> who are up to the task.

It is wise for pastoral ministers to accept with ultimate humility that they do not have all the answers and the whole truth about Covid-19 pandemic. They have to remain open to God’s truth, which may come to them through different people’s experiences. They have to learn to accept people unconditionally as Christ accepts them, serve God in practical acts of solidarity and compassion, and seek solutions to the pandemic with the wisdom that God gives. With the words of Pope Benedict XVI, “the current crisis obliges us to re-plan our journey, to set ourselves new rules and to discover new forms of commitment, to build on positive experiences and reject negative ones. The crisis thus becomes an opportunity for discernment, in which to shape a new vision for the future”<sup>129</sup>. These words encourage us in our mission as evangelizers in this time of uncertainty and confusion to increase our love, zeal and joy for mission.

Saint Pope Paul VI said that, “the conditions of the society in which we live oblige all of us therefore to revise methods, to seek by every means to study how we can bring the Christian message to modern man. For it is only in the Christian message that modern man can find the answer to his questions and the energy for his commitment of human solidarity”<sup>130</sup>. This statement challenges us to an even more generous, intelligent and prudent pastoral commitment, modeled on the Good Shepherding response to the present pandemic situation. St. Pope John Paul II also acknowledged that, “the ordinary means of pastoral work are not sufficient. What is needed are associations, institutions, special

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<sup>127</sup>Jeffrey R. Ryan and Jan F. Glarum. “Defining the Response at the Local Level” in *Pandemic Influenza: Emergency Planning and Community Preparedness*, edited by Jeffrey R. Ryan. New York: CRC Press, 2009, p. 182.

<sup>128</sup> Pope Francis. *Let Us Dream: The Path to a Better Future*, London: Simon & Schuster, 2020, p. 3.

<sup>129</sup> Pope Benedict XVI. *Encyclical Letter, Caritas in Veritate: Charity in Truth*, Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 2009, p. 21.

<sup>130</sup> Pope Paul VI. *Apostolic Exhortation, Evangelii Nuntiandi: On Evangelization in the Modern World*, Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 2004, p. 3.

centers and groups, and cultural and social initiatives”<sup>131</sup>. This is because from the vital problems of our communities arise a coherent theological discourse that indicates the need for salvation through advancing the practical mission of the Church and discover the sorts of skills and tasks that are required of us.

### **Prayers against Covid-19 Pandemic**

As a way of fighting Covid-19 pandemic, Pope Francis and the Catholic Archdiocese of Lagos formulated two prayers. Pope Francis’ *‘prayer for protection from coronavirus’*:

O Mary, you shine continuously on our journey as a sign of salvation and hope. We entrust ourselves to you, Health of the Sick. At the foot of the Cross you participated in Jesus’ pain, with steadfast faith. You, Salvation of the Roman People, know what we need. We are certain that you will provide, so that, as you did at Cana of Galilee, joy and feasting might return after this moment of trial. Help us, Mother of Divine Love, to conform ourselves to the Father’s will and to do what Jesus tells us: He who took our sufferings upon Himself, and bore our sorrows to bring us, through the Cross, to the joy of the Resurrection. Amen. We seek refuge under your protection, O Holy Mother of God. Do not despise our pleas – we who are put to the test and deliver us from every danger, O glorious and blessed Virgin. Amen.<sup>132</sup>

While the Catholic Archdiocese of Lagos formulated *‘prayer against Covid-19 pandemic’*:

O God our Help in ages past, we, your children, humbly implore your mercy at this time of adversity. We are devastated by the coronavirus pandemic that is ravaging the whole world, snuffing life out of your people and spreading fear everywhere. You are the God of Life and nothing is impossible to you. You ask us to call on you in the day of trouble and you will answer us. We know that we are sinners who are unworthy of your favours. Although we have no merits of our own to plead before you, we stand on the merits of the death and resurrection of Christ and plead his saving blood over our lives and situation. We ask you to be merciful to us and save us from this scourge that is devastating the world. Be gracious to us and speak life and healing into the present coronavirus scourge and command it to depart from our world. Give leaders of Governments and scientists divine wisdom and knowledge to take the right decisions and to discover the medication needed to cure people who are infected with this virus. Protect all

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<sup>131</sup> Pope John Paul II. *Encyclical Letter, Redemptoris Missio (On The Mission of the Church)*, Limuru: St. Paul Publications, 1991, p. 37.

<sup>132</sup> Pope Francis. Prayer for protection from coronavirus, 15-04-2020. [www.sacredspace.ie](http://www.sacredspace.ie)

health workers and volunteers. Look with pity on those who are already infected with this deadly virus and heal them. Grant eternal rest to those who have died from it and comfort those they left behind to mourn their demise. Lord, through this scourge may the hearts of many be turned back to you their Creator. We make our prayer through Christ our Lord. Amen. Our Lady, Health of the sick - Pray for us. St. Raphael, the Archangel. - Pray for us. All Angels and Saints of God. - Pray for us. May Our Lady, Mother of the Church; the Health of the Sick intercede for the whole world. Amen.<sup>133</sup>

As pastoral agents, we cannot do much without prayer life. It is through prayer that we communicate with our Heavenly Father who is always ready to grant us the wisdom we deserve in this special ministry in Covid-19 pandemic situation. As priests, they should go ahead “praying alone and celebrating Mass in solitude, they are men of God, men of prayer, worshippers of the majesty of God and contemplatives. The immense greatness of the Eucharistic sacrifice does not need a large audience to produce its fruits. Through the Mass, the priest touches the whole world”<sup>134</sup>. Priests should continue touching the world through their sacrifice of the Holy Eucharist. Catholics should never cease praying.

Pope Francis prayed, “May the Lord of life welcome the departed into His Kingdom and grant comfort and hope to those still suffering. May He never withdraw His consolation and help from those who are especially vulnerable”<sup>135</sup>. May people adopt and strictly abide by the approved precautionary measures for the prevention and containment of the coronavirus infection. The words of Jesus Christ, “Where two or three are gathered in my Name, I am there among them” (Mt. 18:20) should be motivating. The efficacy of our prayers is not based on numbers and crowds. It is true that God reside in the tabernacle, He lives inside the Church, but God is not constrained to the Church. God lives in us, our families are domestic churches that forms parts of the wider Church. Praying together as a family, saying the rosary, novenas and so forth, has bonded families more. Indeed, the family that prays together, stays together. According to Robert Cardinal Sarah, the present Covid-19 is a “parable that should lead mankind to ponder its dependence on God, and help it discover the true values of entrusting oneself to God, returning to prayer and rediscovering the importance of national and family bonds”<sup>136</sup>. He went on saying “a

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<sup>133</sup> Claretian Missionaries. The Catholic Archdiocese of Lagos composes prayer against Covid-19 pandemic, 15-03-2020. [www.claretwestng.org](http://www.claretwestng.org)

<sup>134</sup> Jeanne Smits. Vatican liturgy chief: COVID-19 victims have inalienable right to sacraments, 14-04-2020. [www.lifesitenews.com](http://www.lifesitenews.com)

<sup>135</sup> Pope Francis, *Life after the Pandemic*, Rome: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2020, p. 28.

<sup>136</sup> Jeanne Smits. Vatican liturgy chief: COVID-19 victims have inalienable right to sacraments, 14-04-2020. [www.lifesitenews.com](http://www.lifesitenews.com).

Church is a sacred place that reminds us that in such a house of prayer everything must be lived in seeking to direct everything and every choice towards the Glory of God”<sup>137</sup>. Catholics need to be reminded that their homes are domestic churches; they are sacred as a parish Church. They are to pray in their homes as they pray in the Church. So being told to stay home due to coronavirus does not stop them from praying. In fact, we know that only the living worship God. It is better to stay at home than to stay in the grave. For when we stay at home, we are assured that one-day we shall sing praises to God Almighty Father in His Church.

Pope Francis prays, “At this moment in which everyone is supposed to be at home may society, men and women, realize this reality and help them, and that the Church might welcome them; may the Lord help those people who are not succeeding in coping and remaining in fear because of the pandemic to have the strength to cope for the good of the society and the entire community”<sup>138</sup>. The Pope is aware of how hard it is for people who are brought up in the free world to be forced by the pandemic to stay at home, and to stop their Church practices. However, the faithful need to know that despite the stay at home measure, we are not to stop to pray for one another, we are to make sure that our attachment to the sacraments is sealed, and that the Church and the people of God remain one. This is a time to “rediscover how precious can be the habit of reading the Word of God, reciting the rosary in the family and dedicating time to God, in an attitude of self-giving, listening and silent adoration”<sup>139</sup>. It is a time to rediscover family prayer, to practice adoration from their homes, to exercise sacramental life as a family, and to use their home altars for spiritual nourishment.

We need to “be alive and well in order to be able to pray. If you are sick, you will not be able to pray and neither would you be able to pray if you are not alive. Everyone should pray incessantly at this time of Covid-19 pandemic trial. Being unable to participate physically at communal liturgical function is also an opportunity to seek alternative ways of living our faith”<sup>140</sup>. Families should pray together and celebrate the Word of God, move closer to God Almighty, our Creator, and our Healer for assistance. This is the time to hear the assuring and soothing voice of God saying to us “Be still and know that I am God” (Psalm 46). It is pertinent for us to bear in mind that though our Church buildings

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<sup>137</sup> Jeanne Smits. Vatican liturgy chief: COVID-19 victims have inalienable right to sacraments, 14-04-2020. [www.lifesitenews.com](http://www.lifesitenews.com).

<sup>138</sup> Pope Francis. COVID-19: The Pope’s closeness to those who are suffering, 31-03-2020. [www.vaticannews.va](http://www.vaticannews.va)

<sup>139</sup> Jeanne Smits. Vatican liturgy chief: COVID-19 victims have inalienable right to sacraments, 14-04-2020. [www.lifesitenews.com](http://www.lifesitenews.com).

<sup>140</sup> Virgilius Kawama. *Pastoral Approach to our Modern Pandemics: HIV/AIDS and Covid-19*, Beau Basin: Lambert Academic Publishing, 2020, p. 63.



are closed, the Church, the body of Christ remains alive and active in our hearts, our homes, our families and our basic communities.

### **More Compassion with the sufferer**

There is no doubt that pandemics have imposed on people an enormous heavy cross of pain and suffering. However, in pastoral care, “while we have to stay objectively in our reactions to the suffering of others, we also need to suffer with them, the root meaning of compassion. By accompanying them in this manner, we can help them open their hearts and souls to the healing grace of God”<sup>141</sup>. Today, “Jesus continues to suffer in many of his members”<sup>142</sup> who are the body of Christ infected by a pandemic.

Orobator defines compassion as “the capacity of people to live in difficult and challenging situations as a shared experience”<sup>143</sup>. It is not about him or me, but about our common sharing in the situation at hand. He further clarified that “compassion is not a function of whether or not all is well with me; it is about what is happening to the world, to the other”<sup>144</sup>. Our interest is shifted from the self to the other or the community in which we live. This is because “compassion entails the willingness and capacity to persevere in embracing others in their discomfort, pain and suffering”<sup>145</sup>.

The priest should be able to “know the depths of the human heart, to perceive difficulties and problems, to make meeting and dialogue easy, to create trust and cooperation, to express serene and objective judgments”<sup>146</sup>. The pastoral agents’ compassion towards individuals and communities help them to respect the moral and spiritual requirements in a pandemic situation. Our concern as pastoral ministers for the infected is not only that they be consoled, but also we “suffer together, to not remain indifferent to the pain and suffering of others”<sup>147</sup>. The pastoral task is to stand with the “individuals and communities

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<sup>141</sup> R. J. Vitillo. *Pastoral Training for Responding to HIV-AIDS*, Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 2007, p. 198.

<sup>142</sup> M. J. Kelly. *Education: For An Africa Without AIDS*, Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 2008, p. 198.

<sup>143</sup> Agbonkhianmeghe E. Orobator. *The Pope and The Pandemic: Lessons in Leadership in a Time of Crisis*, New York: Orbis Books, 2021, p. 11.

<sup>144</sup> Agbonkhianmeghe E. Orobator. *The Pope and The Pandemic: Lessons in Leadership in a Time of Crisis*, New York: Orbis Books, 2021, p. 11.

<sup>145</sup> Agbonkhianmeghe E. Orobator. *The Pope and The Pandemic: Lessons in Leadership in a Time of Crisis*, New York: Orbis Books, 2021, p. 12.

<sup>146</sup> Pope John Paul II. *Apostolic Exhortation, Pastores Dabo Vobis (On The Formation of Priests)*, Boston: Pauline Books & Media, 1992, p. 43.

<sup>147</sup> Pope Francis. *The Name of God is Mercy: A Conversation with Andrea Tornielli*, New York: Random House, 2016, p. 91.

in their daily experiences”<sup>148</sup>, to help them reflect, find meaning, respond in ways that make sense and express their Christian identity. As Christians inspired by the Holy Spirit, therefore, we are called to care for those suffering from our modern pandemics. Bearing in mind that caring for people who suffer from pandemics “helps to make the community more aware of these people and their problems”<sup>149</sup>. In compassionate, we need “a global or integrated approach, which combines medical, spiritual, emotional and social support”<sup>150</sup> to help people in pandemics live comfortable lives.

God is fundamentally compassionate and there is a distinct and significant link between God’s compassion, on one hand, and the kind of ministry to which God calls us as human beings, on the other. Compassion in ministry is an authentic response to pandemic situation. We must respond to people suffering in any specific pandemic with the compassion of our God. Our ministry and our lives must be thoroughly shaped by this God. Nwatu affirms this idea when he states that, “if humanity is made in the image of a compassionate God; a God who suffers with the lowly as the crucifix shows, then to be human means to be compassionate”<sup>151</sup>.

According to the Catholic Bishops of Africa and Madagascar, “Compassion must be offered without any moral judgment about the person who is afflicted and suffering. He or she must be treated as Christ our Lord treated the sick with love and, above all, respect for their God-given dignity”<sup>152</sup>. The call for compassion concerns those who work with the pandemic sufferers. Just as Christ identified Himself with the suffering, pastoral ministers are now called upon to identify themselves with the vulnerable and the suffering in the face of this great menace of the situation of pandemics. Barasa says that, “God is compassionate and caring towards human suffering. He is very close to the sufferer in a way that He feels what the sufferer goes through by sharing in the situation of the sufferer. Therefore, in human suffering, God suffers together with us in compassion while at the same time recreates, heals and redeems us”<sup>153</sup>.

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<sup>148</sup> Vatican II. Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, *Gaudium et Spes*, (December 7, 1965).  
Bandra Bombay: St. Paul’s Publications, 1983, no. 1.

<sup>149</sup> A. Shorter – E. onyancha, *The Church and AIDS in Africa*, Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 1998, p. 74.

<sup>150</sup> B. A. Joinet, *The Challenge of AIDS in East Africa: Basic Facts*, Dar es Salaam: Atiman House, 1991, p. 20.

<sup>151</sup> F. Nwatu, “The Cross: Symbol of Hope for Suffering Humanity”, in *AFER; Finding Meaning in Human Suffering*, AFER. Vol. 31.No. 1. 1997. 2-17, p. 13.

<sup>152</sup> Catholic Bishops of Africa and Madagascar, *Speak Out on HIV & AIDS: Our Prayer is always full of Hope*, A Collection of Excerpts 1987-2005. Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 2006, p. 14.

<sup>153</sup> P. W. Barasa. “Giving Meaning in Suffering: An Empirical Study in Pastoral Counselling from a Family Narrative Perspective with special reference to HIV/AIDS”, Unpublished M.A Thesis, Radboud University – Nijmegen, The Netherlands, 2004”, p. 17.

### **Solidarity during Covid-19 pandemic**

We are in a pandemic moment that challenges our solidarity. The Lord Jesus, who sends the pastoral agents, is present in the weak, the sick and those suffering in pandemics. As pastoral agents, we should recognize the face of the suffering Christ in them. The spiritual and pastoral care of these patients and their relatives is truly our duty. Nevertheless, we should work in solidarity with others; “doctors, nurses, families and lay people to ensure a comprehensive plan for the treatment and care of the sick”<sup>154</sup>. The lines of action should include supporting the infected people through families, strengthening community action, addressing family poverty, and delivering integrated family centered services. The new pastoral ministry strategy must influence the Government led support and services to make sure that they reach all people who experience grave forms of vulnerability and deprivation in poor communities affected by a pandemic. It should set up more organizations responsible for pandemics, be more involved in disease prevention and education and continue offering health care to the sick.

The Church must also ensure that it expresses solidarity with people living within pandemics by “incorporating them into its life and practices, welcoming them as integral and valuable members of the community and enabling their full and meaningful participation so that they can renew their self-esteem, replace corrosive self-stigma with a deep and liberating sense of self-worth.”<sup>155</sup> Paterne-Auxence Mombe writes that, “Christians are called to express solidarity with those who suffer by imitating the attitude and mind of Jesus”<sup>156</sup>. Jesus opened people’s eyes and hearts. He revealed to them the infinite dignity that belongs to every person in God his Father. He taught them forgiveness which renews relationships and the face of the earth. He opened to people the path of mercy and equality. He was the friend of sinners and the marginalized. He ate at their table and invited them to His. He gave hope to those who were rejected and scorned<sup>157</sup>.

Human solidarity requires that the strongest come to the aid of the weakest. Through human solidarity the Catholic Church should be able to discover “how best to reach out, how best to empower, how best to involve and how best to make people in need to enjoy

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<sup>154</sup> Virgilius Kawama. *Pastoral Approach to our Modern Pandemics: HIV/AIDS and Covid-19*, Beau Basin: Lambert Academic Publishing, 2020, p. 96.

<sup>155</sup> M. J. Kelly, *HIV and AIDS: A Social Justice Perspective*, Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 2010, p. 245.

<sup>156</sup> P. Mombe, *Rays of Hope: Managing HIV&AIDS in Africa*, Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 2008, p. 33.

<sup>157</sup> Cf. GENERAL COUNCIL OF THE MISSIONARIES OF AFRICA, *Longing for a Just World*, Rome, 1984, p. 38.

their human rights and their inherent human dignity”<sup>158</sup>, but also how to “access medication, food, and counseling”<sup>159</sup>. There is no better time to come to the aid of the population whose livelihood has been adversely affected by the novel Covid-19 pandemic than this time. There is a need to extend hands of generosity to those who are worse hit with some palliatives that will reduce the pains they are going through in these trying times.

From the Gospel of St. John we read that Jesus came “that we may have life and have it in full” (Jn. 10:10). Life is the greatest gift to human beings. Life is the basis of the Church’s mission and it must be seen and lived holistically. It must be saved, preserved and enhanced. Today, through pandemics, “we are challenged to preach, communicate and protect life according to God’s plan for humankind. All our efforts should be oriented towards revealing God’s solidarity so that we can combat diseases and restore life through physical, emotional and spiritual support”<sup>160</sup>. Solidarity should be strengthened in this situation of pandemics. A pandemic should be seen as an opportunity for Christians to exercise their love of God through those who suffer. As Christians, we need only to face the challenge, carry out the mission it demands and increase our commitment to the people God created and whose dignity we must uphold.

Solidarity simply means an “awareness of the fact that my life affects your life, and yours affects mine, and similarly, our lives affect their lives, and theirs affect ours. Subsequently, we have a moral and religious obligation to be responsible for each other’s life”<sup>161</sup>. Solidarity among people therefore is guided by the fact that we are one family, united by the fact that we are all created in the image and likeness of God. Whether affected or not, each individual represents the true face of God, the true part of the body of Christ the Church. It implies that if one part of the body of Christ is affected, the whole body is affected. A pain in the foot, the hand, the head or the chest is not only confined to the specific part affected but make the whole human body feel affected. The pain diffuses itself to the whole body, and if not arrested, it is conveyed through all the members until life itself is destroyed. It means that we should feel a deep interest in the welfare of all the members of the body of Christ. If one part of the body of Christ is afflicted, the other members should feel it, and bear one another’s burdens to fulfill Christ’s law (Cf. 1 Cor.

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<sup>158</sup> M. F. Czerny, ed., *African Jesuit AIDS Network: AIDS and the Church in Africa*, Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 2005, p. 16.

<sup>159</sup> E. A. Orobator, ed., *Reconciliation, Justice, and Peace: The Second African Synod*, Nairobi: Acton Publishers, 2011, p. 195.

<sup>160</sup> Virgilius Kawama. *Pastoral Approach to our Modern Pandemics: HIV/AIDS and Covid-19*, Beau Basin: Lambert Academic Publishing, 2020, p. 93.

<sup>161</sup> E. Opongo – A. Orobator, *Faith Doing Justice: A Manual for Social Analysis, Catholic Social Teachings and Social Justice*, Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 2008, p. 36.

12:12-26). There is a need for all peoples to take up their responsibilities to heal the suffering part. We are to proclaim that “being kind, having faith, and working for the common good are great life goals that need courage and vigor”<sup>162</sup>.

### **Sessions on Covid-19 pandemic impacts and responses**

The book of Revelation reads, “See, I am making all things new” (Rev. 21:5). Through Covid-19 pandemic, God is making all things new to people of faith. To discover the new things God is making, the Church is to look for different ways in which God is speaking to us. One way is to follow sessions on Covid-19 pandemic impacts and responses so as to develop professional, pastoral and psychological counseling skills proper to the current pandemic. Pastoral agents are to learn on how to understand the emotional, social and spiritual needs of the sufferers and their families. They should learn how to give wise counsel to the bereaved, orphans, widows, and the family at large. They should deepen their empathy, understanding of a disease and be able to develop new strategies to deal with its effects. This will help in “the accompaniment of people with closeness, compassion, and solidarity, particularly for the weakest members of society”<sup>163</sup>. Consequently, with their total determination, the pastoral ministers will be transforming the current situation, changing the way the world looks at suffering and consider it more in the light of the suffering of our Lord Jesus Christ.

The Covid-19 pandemic challenges the pastoral agents to acquire full knowledge and awareness of the disease and become strongly motivated to face this struggle with an affective spiritual, moral and curative approach. According to the Catholic Bishops of Africa and Madagascar, “pastoral ministers are to bring about a total change of attitude towards people infected and affected with the disease by developing a Christian spirit of open ears and arms for them. Their efforts must be directed to eradicate stigma and discrimination, to associate with the sufferers, to facilitate counseling, to reduce their pain and depression, to provide services and comfort”<sup>164</sup>. The pastoral praxis should encourage people suffering to “become actively involved in our local communities as resource persons in the struggle against the pandemic, instructs and gives support to the practice of the virtues of compassion, love, healing, reconciliation and hope”<sup>165</sup>.

Through sessions on Covid-19 pandemic, the pastoral ministers will discover that their pastoral praxis include “preaching, teaching, celebrating, organizing, and providing

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<sup>162</sup> Pope Francis. *Let Us Dream: The Path to a Better Future*, London: Simon & Schuster, 2020, p. 6.

<sup>163</sup> Agbonkhianmeghe E. Orobator. *The Pope and The Pandemic: Lessons in Leadership in a Time of Crisis*, New York: Orbis Books, 2021, p. 111.

<sup>164</sup> Catholic Bishops of Africa and Madagascar, *Speak Out on HIV & AIDS: Our Prayer is always full of Hope*, 146.

<sup>165</sup> Catholic Bishops of Africa and Madagascar, *Speak Out on HIV & AIDS: Our Prayer is always full of Hope*, 147.

individual pastoral care”<sup>166</sup>. That their pastoral approach should “humanly, materially and spiritually bring consolation to the orphans, widowers and widows, grandparents and whole families”<sup>167</sup>. And that their “service and social justice are integral to the Church’s mission that combine pastoral ministry, medical care, compassion and advocacy, personal morality, social ethics and education”<sup>168</sup>.

The Bishops of Kenya realized that “associating with people undergoing great misfortune requires strength and maturity. One needs to confront one’s fears and prejudices before one can be of assistance to others. Such fears may include fear of getting infected, fear of watching someone suffer, fear of death or the dying”<sup>169</sup>. This requires proper training of pastoral ministers for them to be able to feel comfortable before the challenges imposed by Covid-19 pandemic. Pastoral ministers are to be trained in such a way that they are able to “support the family in its difficulties and sufferings, caring for its members and helping them to see their lives in the light of the Gospel”<sup>170</sup>. The pastoral minister is a “servant called to visit families and look after the sick; to foster relationships of respect and charity, to offer teaching and counseling, to put forth simple and cordial hospitality”<sup>171</sup>. He is to understand and respect the fact that the many examples which can be placed across to elaborate a little further on hope and its role in raising the banners of awareness, are basically from people who have experienced this moment of Covid-19, as victims or as sharers in the suffering of the victims<sup>172</sup>.

## **Conclusion**

Covid-19 pandemic has continued clustering in our families, killing the adults and the children, killing the rich and the poor, killing the non-Africans and Africans. The suffering and death resulting from Covid-19 stand in contrast to God’s intention of abundant life. This pandemic confronts us with spiritual, physical, psychological, and

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<sup>166</sup>Vatican II. Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*, (November 21, 1964) Bandra Bombay: St. Paul’s Publications, 1983, no. 1.

<sup>167</sup>Benezet Bujo & Michael F. Czerny (Eds.).*AIDS in Africa: Theological Reflections*, Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 2007, p. 58.

<sup>168</sup>Benezet Bujo & Michael F. Czerny (Eds.).*AIDS in Africa: Theological Reflections*, Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 2007, p. 62.

<sup>169</sup>KENYA EPISCOPAL CONFERENCE, *HIV/AIDS: Manual for Facilitators/Trainers*, Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 2005, p. 54.

<sup>170</sup>Pope John Paul II. *Apostolic Exhortation, Familiaris Consortio: The Family in the Modern World*, Nairobi: Catholic Bookshop Publications, 1982, p. 73.

<sup>171</sup>Pope John Paul II. *Apostolic Exhortation, Familiaris Consortio: The Family in the Modern World*, Nairobi: Catholic Bookshop Publications, 1982, p. 74.

<sup>172</sup>Cf. John C. Lennox. *Where is God in a Coronavirus World?*, New Zealand: The Good Book Company, 2020, p. 23.

scientific challenges. It also raises for Christ's Church a series of pastoral praxis lessons that goes on seeking for new remedies to new pandemics, that makes a pandemic situation part of the heart and soul of the ministry. This article, '*COVID-19 Pandemic: Challenges and Lessons for Pastoral Praxis in Nigeria*', has found out that the more dynamic the pastoral praxis becomes, the more it becomes meaningful to people suffering from this pandemic. Through our compassion and solidarity, faith and love, we can make God present to those who suffer in a pandemic situation.

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