

## **The Church's Response in a Covid 19 Era**

*Lovemore Gutu. O.Carm.*

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic – direct and indirect have been grave to the Church and to the world. Millions of people have contracted the virus and millions also have died. Daily people's lives around the world have been radically altered. Physical distancing has reshaped human interaction in different ways including worship and religious observances. The Church has been unable to gather for months, even during special seasons of the Church such as Lent and Easter. African liturgy is full of joy, love and togetherness which is very evident during weddings, funerals and during the celebration of the sacraments particularly the Eucharist.<sup>1</sup> Many people have found solace, healing, faith, hope and love through the church gatherings. However, this Covid 19 era has made the mandate of the church of proclamation of the Gospel very difficult to achieve. Church buildings are deserted and some instances have become expensive monuments, difficult to maintain because our main source of income, the faithful and the Minister, are both under lockdown in their homes. Prayer meetings, Church gatherings, Sacraments and many other activities have been banned making it difficult for the Church to practice its mandate.

Some priests are having experiences whereby they have numerous calls and messages from distraught lay faithful who are yearning for the services of a priest. Some families have had unfortunate incidents in which they have encountered deaths. Most of our faithful had for a long time relied on the priest to conduct services for many gatherings but this has not been possible because of Covid 19. Furthermore, even some young men and women who had planned to marry had failed because of the pandemic, some eventually separated whereas others gave up on the Church's blessing and began living together without it. The thought of a priest in any celebration has become a wishful one for the faithful.

As a result, this pandemic has brought a new dimension to the love taught to us by Jesus Christ (John 13: 34). We see how Jesus Christ was not afraid of those suffering from leprosy, demons or any ailment (Mark 1:40-45). Jesus showed love to all. However, during this pandemic

the priest has found it very difficult to remain in contact with people for pastoral care.<sup>1</sup> The priest fails to fully help people face the stress of the pandemic even with digital resources to encourage and sustain the people's faith.

Churches and faith communities have to find ways to accompany the most vulnerable people and communities, as well as to be in solidarity with each other. In his encyclical, *Redemptoris Missio*, John Paul II says; "For missionary activity renews the Church, revitalizes faith and Christian identity, and offers fresh enthusiasm and new incentive. *Faith is strengthened when it is given to others!* It is in commitment to the Church's universal mission that the new evangelization of Christian peoples will find inspiration and support."<sup>2</sup>

Consequently, the Church cannot afford to be indifferent and be isolated in the face of glaring pandemic that is enveloping Zimbabwe and the world. This crisis should force the Church to awaken to the demands of the great ministry given to us by Jesus in ways that create new hope, possibilities and a new resolve for all people (Mt 28: 19:20). Our Lord Jesus Christ shows us this in his life, teachings and actions that have great concern, care and compassion that surpass all boundaries (Mark 1: 40- 45).

The Bishops of the Catholic Church in Zimbabwe once lamented the silence of the Church during an economic meltdown in 2008. They wrote; What happened to our Christian values of love, peace, justice, forgiveness, honesty, truthfulness? Where was the voice of the Church which is called upon to be the conscience of the nation? Clearly, we did not do enough as the Church of Christ to defend these values and to raise an alarm at the appropriate time. We too have often tended to look inward rather than outward and also ignore the wisdom from our Christian sisters and brothers outside Zimbabwe.... As the Church of Christ, we confess that we have failed the nation because we have not been able to speak with one voice. We have often not been the salt and the light that the Gospel calls us to be. We therefore confess our failure and ask for God's forgiveness.<sup>3</sup>

The above confession by the bishops, even though written for

an economic meltdown can be heard echoing during this time of the pandemic where the priest is under lockdown and the church is closed. The use of technology has become the norm in most parts of the world but in the developing world it has proved to be very expensive. Though this is a good initiative, there is a greater call to encourage people to use Small Christian Communities (SCC) of about 3 or 4 people to keep the fire of Christ burning. These Small Christian Communities can be observed between families or people of the same area observing Covid 19 measures which include social distancing, sanitizing and wearing of masks<sup>ii</sup>.

In some parts of Latin American, Catholics have focused on the ‘Basic Christian Community’ movement. The movement provides an alternative local Church’s structure to the normal Catholic parish, gathering believers into close-knit, self-directing religious communities. This style of evangelism has been very effective among the poor and uneducated of Latin America in recent years.<sup>4</sup>

Small Christian Communities can help people to gain access to necessary information and to strengthen each other with the word of God. This strategy would help to bring people together, to give advice to each other in particular toward the biggest stakeholders of such a process, namely the victims of violence and human rights abuses which have increased significantly during the lockdown.<sup>5</sup>

The SCC would engage each other to enhance:

- Bible sharing
- Testimonies
- Investigate and help each other in matters of the family
- Understand human rights abuses
- Understand state responsibilities
- Understand the actions of institutions including the Church, media and civil society.

To establish the Kingdom of God as preached by Jesus Christ, the Church must carry on the task of ministering to the faithful. Ministry

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<sup>ii</sup>The small Christian communities should not have more than 4 people to avoid big gatherings, as stipulated under covid 19 regulations.

to the people of God can be enhanced through SCCs, the smallest cells of God's family, where all boundaries of hate, racism and tribalism can be overcome. Through SCCs the work for faith, hope and love and even justice and peace, can be started and spread to the wider areas of the society.

The Church should continuously offer messages of hope and encouragement, sharing online resources not only to exchange information but also to support each other spiritually. Moreover, the use of Small Christian Communities should be utilized while observing covid 19 protocols. The Church's response to the crises in the world should support the most vulnerable and isolated. The hope to return to normally, 'the promised land' can be achieved if the Church does not become idle spectators. The Church should actively contribute to shaping the future of the world. This includes a sincere and open discussion at every level. This will give hope, that unites us and encourages people to share and contribute to a just world through our Christian traditions, teachings and appreciation of the value of human life.

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<sup>1</sup> Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, *Ecclesia in Africa*, Of the Holy Father John Paul II to the Bishops and Priest and Deacons Men and Women Religious and All the Lay Faithful on the Church in Africa and its evangelization mission Towards the Year 2000 no. 42.

<sup>2</sup> John Paul II *Redemptoris Missio*. On the permanent validity of the Church's missionary mandate, 1990, 1.

<sup>3</sup> Zimbabwe Catholic Bishops' Conference (ZCBC), *The Zimbabwe we want: Towards a National Vision*, Harare, 2008, 12.

<sup>4</sup> Regan, David. *Church for Liberation: A Pastoral portrait of the Church in Brazil* (Dublin: Dominican Publication: Fowler Wright Books LTD, 1987), p.21.

<sup>5</sup> Regan, *Church for Liberation: A Pastoral portrait of the Church in Brazil*, 155-56.