

COVID-19 PANDEMIC AND THE RESPONSE OF THE ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH IN GHANA

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***Abstract:** The outbreak of the coronavirus (COVID-19) in Ghana in early March 2020, barely three months after the World Health Organization had announced the first reported case in China, brought faith-based communities and religious groups to complement the efforts of the government of Ghana in responding to the pandemic. The multi-dimensional efforts by the faith-based groups played a significant role to curtail the spread of the virus and reduce the number of victims, thus averting a national disaster. This paper will make use of existing literature including media accounts on COVID-19. It will discuss the spread of the pandemic and its impact on the population of Ghana and then focus on the response of the Roman Catholic Church on the measures adopted to mitigate against the spread of the virus and alleviate the sufferings of affected persons. The article will specifically examine the theological, liturgical, and pastoral approaches of the Roman Catholic Church, and argue that the Church's intervention appeared to be largely driven by its teaching that the human person, who is the direct victim of COVID-19, is an *imago Dei*, a creature in the image of God.*

Key Words: Coronavirus; Ghana; Image of God; Roman Catholic Church; Theological-pastoral.

Introduction

Since the eruption of the coronavirus in Wuhan city of Hubei Province in China, the virus has spread to almost all parts of the world with its attendant havoc to individuals and nations. Coronavirus is largely spread through respiratory secretions of infected persons by coughing, sneezing and touching infected objects. This caused respiratory illnesses some of which were asymptomatic and ranged from mild to severe diseases and loss of lives.¹

In Ghana, the first two cases of coronavirus were reported on March 12, 2020, and by September 28, 2021, the total number had risen to

¹ World Health Organization, "Coronavirus Disease" March 17, 2020; <https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019>; [Accessed August 24, 2020].

127,016 of which 1,150 had died. Globally, 233,032,225 people were affected with 4,768,043 deaths.²

The threat of coronavirus to humanity's existence compelled some religious people to employ various methods to fight it. The reason is that "God's presence touches the whole person in the totality of the person's relationships not only with God but with all other persons, and with the whole cosmic order as well."³ Sacramentally, God is perceived "in the persons, events, and things we see."⁴ These epistemological categories seem to urge religious people to always try to make the world peaceful and joyous.

However, the apparent applicability of religious belief has been criticized from within. For example, Tillich and Bonhoeffer "rejected the Christian tendency to make religion a separate compartment of life."⁵ This criticism stems from the perception that religion is sometimes removed from day-to-day practical life. The African may agree with the standpoint of the two scholars. Generally, the African does not make a distinction between religion and existence, because "for Africans, it [religion] is an ontological phenomenon; it pertains to the question of existence or being."⁶ This is also the argument of Kwame Gyekye, for example, when he states that "The African lives in a religious universe: all actions and thoughts have a religious meaning and are inspired or influenced by a religious point of view."⁷

Thus it is argued that "it is no longer possible to claim that religion should be restricted to the private sphere and that it exists only to prepare souls for heaven."⁸ The religious person is admonished to show concern with what happens in the world, and give an appropriate response for the development of the human person.

² Cf. "Ghana," <https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/country/ghana/> [Accessed September 28, 2021].

³ Richard McBrien, *Catholicism* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 2008), 364.

⁴ McBrien, *Catholicism*, 364.

⁵ McBrien, *Catholicism*, 368.

⁶ J.S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (New York: Doubleday 1969), 181. Also see John S. Pobee, *Religion and Politics in Ghana* (Accra: Asempa Publishers, 1991), 10-11.

⁷ Kwame Gyekye, *African Cultural Values: An Introduction* (Accra: Sankofa Publishing Company, 2003), 3.

⁸ Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium* (Nairobi: Pauline Publications Africa, 2013), no. 182-183; see also Albert Nolan, *Jesus Before Christianity: The Gospel of Liberation* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1987), 97.

This article investigated some major challenges that the COVID-19 pandemic had on the population of Ghana, and how the Roman Catholic Church attempted to offer a practical response.

Through a qualitative research approach, six informants were identified through purposive sampling techniques. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with five informants, and email correspondence with one informant. Those interviewed were a bishop and four priests from the four ecclesiastical provinces of the Church in Ghana, namely, Cape Coast, Accra, Kumasi, and Tamale. The email correspondence was with the executive secretary of Caritas-Ghana, the Catholic Church's humanitarian and development agency.

The article also made use of existing data, and media accounts on COVID-19. All the data from the interviews, email correspondences and documents were categorized into themes and discussed. The themes include the impact of COVID-19 on economic activities; source of COVID-19; closeness to the lay faithful; prayers and fasting; appropriation of social communications; and resource sharing.

Impact of the Coronavirus

COVID-19 affected numerous economic activities. For instance, the Ghana Statistical Service disclosed that in August 2020, about 85,000 Ghanaian businesses were still closed.⁹ Besides the devastating effects of COVID-19 on businesses, the most severely hit were low-income earners most of whom were in the informal sector such as street vendors, hairdressers, restaurant and drinking spot operators.¹⁰ While several workers lost their jobs, others had their wages reduced. The partial lockdown caused more than 45,000 workers to lose their jobs and over 770,000 had a reduction in their wages.¹¹

Amid these difficulties, prices of almost all major foodstuffs shot up far beyond the purchasing power of the poor. The post-partial lockdown period was no better as several businesses remained either

⁹ "Nearly 85,000 businesses in Ghana still closed due to COVID-19 – Statistical Service," August 5, 2020; <https://www.ghanabusinessnews.com/2020/08/05/nearly-85000-businesses-in-ghana-still-closed-due-to-covid-19-statistical-service/> [Accessed September 10, 2020]. This excluded foreign businesses. Altogether, the number of affected businesses ran into several thousands.

¹⁰ "Nearly 85,000 businesses in Ghana."

¹¹ "Nearly 85,000 businesses in Ghana."

temporarily or permanently closed.¹² The economic impact of COVID-19 also had its toll on the income of churches, a logical consequence of the effects on the earnings of some church members.

Spiritually, COVID-19 induced fears, including ‘apocalyptic’ fears as the impression was created that the end of the world was imminent. The belief of some people that the pandemic was part of Satan’s hidden agenda against humankind added to the anxiety.¹³

What is Pastoral Care?

Broadly, the concept of ‘pastoral care’ refers to the spiritual, material, and moral comfort given to the faithful.¹⁴ This includes the proclamation of the word of God, instructions of the truth, administering of the sacraments, and impartation of blessings.¹⁵ Pastoral care seeks not only the theoretical understanding of a given issue but the praxis of “the implications of faith for the actual situation of the Church.”¹⁶

It is “mostly a person-centred approach.”¹⁷ The human person and their well-being is the focus of pastoral care. This is understood against the backdrop that “the Church exists and is at work within history. She interacts with the society and culture of her time to fulfil her mission of announcing the newness of the Christian message to all people, in the concrete circumstances of their difficulties, struggles and challenges.”¹⁸ This points to the understanding that pastoral care and “pastoral priorities are never deduced from theological principles, but they are commanded by the real needs of the *People of God*. The priority responds not to the theological importance of the issue, but its urgency and relevance for the historical moment in which the local church finds itself.”¹⁹

¹² “Nearly 85,000 businesses in Ghana.”

¹³ J. Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu, “Dealing with a Spiritual Virus: Whither the Prophetic?,” *Religious Matters in an Entangled World*, April 13, 2020; www.religiousmatters.nl/dea [Accessed on August 8, 2020].

¹⁴ John Paul II, *Ecclesia in Africa* (Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 1995), no. 116.

¹⁵ Simon Kofi Appiah, *Laity Week Study Programme 2017 AD* (Accra: National Catholic Laity Council—Ghana), 22.

¹⁶ McBrien, *Catholicism*, 51.

¹⁷ Appiah, *Laity Week*, 22.

¹⁸ Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* (Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 2005), no. 524-5.

¹⁹ Rodrigo Mejia, “The Pastoral Priorities of the Local Church in Eastern Africa,” *African Ecclesial Review* 34, no. 6 (1992): 324-325.

In Christianity, to give pastoral care begins with Jesus' ways.²⁰ This requires the posing of a fundamental question: "How will Jesus attend to a particular issue that confronts an individual or a community?" Conceptualizing the question may lead to viable solutions devoid of personal preconceptions; it is to do pastoral ministry as Christ did for "he was a man of his time."²¹ Jesus sided

...with the poor and sufferers in whom He found the basic *human longing He could use*. From this standpoint among those who hungered for something better, he could point to His Father and His actions centred on service. There were no ambiguities in those actions, so much so that, when calling for conversion, He could say: 'Believe my actions.'²²

Thus pastoral care is dictated by the words and actions of Jesus. All Christ's faithful — bishops, priests, lay faithful — are agents of pastoral care and they exercise this ministry by virtue of their baptism. Every historic moment comes with its pastoral challenges which demand new zeal, techniques, and ways of conveying the message of the kingdom of God.²³ It is, therefore, important for pastoral agents to be cognizant of the persistent need to adopt methods appropriate to specific challenging times. Hence offering pastoral care is said to be inspired by "a new style of pastoral life."²⁴

Pastoral Care Approaches by the Ghanaian Catholic Church

In the paragraphs that follow, we discuss how the Roman Catholic Church lived the COVID-19 emergency as a challenge for the materialization of pastoral care in a new situation of urgency in Ghana. The discussion focuses especially on the approaches the Church employed in the fight against the coronavirus pandemic. The approaches included closeness with the lay faithful; prayer and fasting; media ministry; and resource sharing.

²⁰ Louis Oger, "Inculturation: To Evangelize as Christ Did, Can this Be Done without Compromising Ourselves?" *African Ecclesial Review* 36, no. 1 (1994), 25.

²¹ Oger, "Inculturation," 25.

²² Oger, "Inculturation," 26.

²³ John Paul II, *Pastores Dabo Vobis* (Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 1998), no. 18.

²⁴ John Paul II, *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, no. 18.

Closeness with the Lay Faithful

A major pastoral care approach was the intensification of modes of expressing the church's *closeness* with the lay faithful such as an increase in the frequency of phone calls by the clergy and other pastoral agents to homes, hospitals, and other locations where the lay faithful needed moral, psychological and spiritual support. A biblical analogy of this strategy may be found in Old Testament examples of how God was uniquely close to His People,²⁵ a closeness which culminated in the Incarnation by which Jesus came to dwell among His people. To be close to people is to follow the example of Jesus, the Good Shepherd who drew near to both the great and the small, to those close by and those physically far away.²⁶

After an emergency meeting²⁷ with the Priests' Council,²⁸ the Archbishop of Accra John Bonaventure Kwofie encouraged the priests to stay close to the lay faithful and suggested "little gestures such as phone calls and other appropriate means, and above all, through prayer."²⁹ In telephone interviews, three priests³⁰ from the ecclesiastical provinces of Cape Coast, Accra, and Kumasi, recounted how they and other priests in their dioceses and provinces spent quality time daily in reaching out to their church members. The priests sent daily written and audio recorded homilies, "words of exhortations/inspiration," brief biblical verses, and liturgical readings. Furthermore, the priests sent to their church members' vital information on COVID-

²⁵ In order to enable the Israelites travel in daytime and night during the exodus, God accompanied them in column of cloud in daytime, and gave them light in the night by column of fire (cf. Exod. 13: 21). Also, the statutes and decrees God gave his people were intended to show his closeness to them (cf. Deut. 6: 1-3).

²⁶ Examples of Jesus' closeness to people were the feeding of the crowds (cf. Matt. 14:13-21); and his healing on the Sabbath (cf. Luke 6:6-11).

²⁷ The meeting was held on April 24, 2020.

²⁸ This is an ecclesiastical structure in the Catholic Church. It is a college of priests which represents the presbyterium of the Archdiocese. It can appropriately be known as the senate of the Bishop. Per church law the Archbishop is under obligation to consult the council of priests in significant matters. See Francis Adoboli, "Charismaticism in the Roman Catholic Church: A Study of the Charismatic Renewal Movement in the Archdiocese of Accra" (PhD. Thesis, University of Ghana, Legon, 2018), 67.

²⁹ John Bonaventure Kwofie, Archbishop of Accra, Email letter to all priests, April 30, 2020.

³⁰ Interviews granted the researcher on 10 and 11 November 2020. Those interviewed were Frs. Bonaventure Annan, Vicar General (Cape Coast); Joseph Nsiah, Vicar General and Cathedral Administrator (Jasikan); Louis Kofi Tuffour, Vicar General and Principal of Christ The Teacher College of Education (Appiadu; Kumasi); and Gabriel Atidoo Agambire, Parish Priest and former Vicar General (Navrongo-Bolgatanga).

19 protocols like handwashing with soap under running water, use of nose masks, and keeping to prescribed social distance.

The mode of communication was mostly via social media, particularly WhatsApp, Facebook, and YouTube. Besides, others indicated their closeness by making use of online radios, diocesan, and community FM stations. For instance, in a telephone interview, a priest³¹ from the Tamale Province explained how he encouraged his parishioners to listen to Ghana Broadcasting Corporation of the Upper Region (GBC URA) Radio, where his pre-recorded homilies were aired. The presumption of this care strategy of being close to people, especially during calamities, has the potential of giving hope to people.

Prayers and Fasting

Prayer as a tool of pastoral care is a common practice that has continued throughout many Catholic Churches in Ghana during the coronavirus pandemic. Individual, ecclesial, and national prayers (sometimes with fasting) were intensified. This is not surprising because in Christian ethos prayer is seen as a catalyst that speeds up God's response to one's request.³² Roman Catholic Church representatives participated in a breakfast prayer meeting³³ on March 19, 2020, called by president Nana Addo Dankwa Akufo-Addo at the seat of the presidency. The aim was 'to seek the face of God' for protection and healing of the country from the pandemic, the most important issue confronting the world at the time. It was believed prayers for government officials and leaders, including those in the health sector, would help them take critical decisions and measures for the well-being of the citizenry. In Christian religious hermeneutics the one who prays "attempts to express in words the person's deepest needs and feeling,"³⁴ and it "always presupposes efforts"³⁵ on the part of those who engage in it.

³¹ Rev. Fr. Gabriel Atidoo Agambire, a former Vicar General of Navrongo-Bolgatanga Diocese, interview granted the researcher on November 11, 2020.

³² Adoboli, "Charismaticism," 193.

³³ Many Christian leaders of mainline and pentecostal-charismatic churches were present. Getrude Ankrh Nyavi, "No government official will die of Coronavirus – Duncan-Williams's prayer" March 19, 2020; <https://www.graphic.com.gh/news/general-news/no-government-official-will-die-of-coronavirus-duncan-williams-s-prayer.html> [Accessed on July 25 2020].

³⁴ Michael E. Imediedu "Personal Growth through Prayer and the Sacraments," *African Ecclesial Review* 15, no. 6 (1993), 368.

³⁵ John Paul II, *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1994), no. 2725.

Furthermore, the church took part in a National Day of Prayer and Fasting on March 25, 2020.³⁶ On the same day, Pope Francis called on Christians to recite the “Our Father,” which the Ghana Catholic Bishops’ Conference (GCBC) recommended should be said at noon. The prayer intention was the same: to seek God’s intervention to end the coronavirus pandemic.

In the spirit of ecumenism, the GCBC asked all Catholics to join other Christians from the Christian Council of Ghana, the Pentecostal and Charismatic Council, and the National Association of Charismatic and Christian Churches to embark on a three-day national prayer and fasting from Friday, April 24 to Sunday, April 26, 2020, with the theme “O God Heal our Land” (2 Chronicle 7:14). The national spiritual call was the initiative of the chairperson of the Church of Pentecost.

Fasting and prayers are a common feature in the pastoral ministry in Catholicism; it is a part of the Church’s days of penance.³⁷ In times of diseases and calamities, church members have prayed and fasted. Similarly, many other Christians have adopted the same practices. For example, Omenyo explains that most adherents of Charismatic-Pentecostal Christianity “believe that praying for a major crisis must go hand in hand with fasting to make the prayer more effective.”³⁸ Although prayer and fasting form an important component of the pastoral ministry of the Catholic Church, the laws of the church exclude some members from fasting. The church’s code of canon law states that “The law of fasting binds those who have attained their majority, until the beginning of their sixtieth year.”³⁹ However, it is observed that in crisis times like the coronavirus pandemic, the exclusive law is not evoked as everyone is asked to pray and fast.

³⁶ The day is marked in Catholicism as the Solemnity of the Annunciation of the Lord.

³⁷ John Paul II, *The Code of Canon Law* (London: Collins Liturgical Publications, 1984), 1249-1253.

³⁸ Cephas Narh Omenyo, *Pentecost outside Pentecostalism: A Study of the Development of Charismatic Renewal in the Mainline Churches in Ghana* (Zoetermeer: Boekencentrum Publishing House, 2006), 214; See also Adoboli, “Charismaticism,” 193.

³⁹ *The Code of Canon Law*, 1252.

One prayer widely used in many Catholic churches in Ghana was titled “Prayer for the end of the Virus.”⁴⁰

Almighty and merciful Father,
 who show your love to all your creation,
 we come before you asking for a quick control
 of the Coronavirus currently ravaging our world.

Hear graciously the prayers we make for those
 affected by the virus in various parts of the world.
 Grant healing to the sick, eternal life to the dead
 and consolation to the bereaved families.

We pray that an effective medicine to combat
 the sickness be speedily found.
 We pray for the relevant Governments and
 Health authorities that they take appropriate
 steps for the good of the people.

Look upon us in your mercy
 and forgive us our failings.
 We ask this through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

An analysis of the prayer reveals the following salient issues: God is acknowledged as the Creator; God holds the key to the end of the coronavirus; the coronavirus has caused sufferings the world over; prayers can help restore victims to health; there is hope for the quick end of the pandemic, and there is the need to seek God’s mercy and forgiveness. Thus, the prayer avoids a narrow understanding of the concept of health. With the help of the biblical vision of creation and salvation history, the concept of health is understood holistically.⁴¹ This takes “into account the bodily, psychic, spiritual and religious dimensions of”⁴² the human person. The prayer, therefore, addresses the holistic view of health and faith in God’s restoring powers.

⁴⁰ It was prepared by the standing committee of the Symposium of the Episcopal Conferences of Bishops of Africa and Madagascar (SECAM) at their meeting in Nairobi, Kenya (March 4-7, 2020).

⁴¹ Bernard Haring, *Free and Faithful in Christ* (Middlegreen: St. Paul Publications, 1981): III, 47.

⁴² Haring, *Free and Faithful in Christ*, III: 47.

It is observed that seeking God's intervention runs through almost all the prayer requests: divine healing, restoration, and protection. Divine intervention in this context is not only for healing for those affected by COVID-19 but also for the eradication of the virus. The active involvement of the church in praying against COVID-19 is instructive because "A Church which is not interested in healing and the total health of the whole human person and the human community at large is not the Church of Christ."⁴³ In Jesus' ministry "healing the sick is more urgent than the literal observance of the Sabbath."⁴⁴

Using Social Communications to Respond to Claims and Fears

Social communications have become for many people the major channel of information, education, guidance, inspiration⁴⁵ and entertainment. It is argued that "The first Aeropagus of the modern age is the world of communications, which is unifying humanity and turning it into what is known as a 'global village.'⁴⁶ The church's pastoral care ministry employed Social communication tools to fight COVID-19. *The Catholic Standard* is one *such* tool as it provided weekly educative information on the pandemic. Some of these took the form of articles, news reports, and editorials. Because no vaccine or medicine was yet discovered for cure of COVID-19, some Ghanaians, in a state of apparent fear and panic, employed herbs and other indigenous medical practices ostensibly for protection against, and cure of the coronavirus.

The use of herbs to prevent/cure COVID-19 brought in its wake divergent arguments in the public space. Noting that the new information technologies "can offer either a service or a disservice,"⁴⁷ the electronic edition of *The Catholic Standard*, within the public discourse, highlighted reports by the Centre for Plant Medicine Research (CPMR) that sought to inform and educate Ghanaians that no herbal drugs had yet been found for a cure for the coronavirus. Analysing a

⁴³ McBrien, *Catholicism*, p. 848.

⁴⁴ Bernard Haring, *Free and Faithful in Christ* (Middlegreen: St. Paul Publications, 1981), III: 42.

⁴⁵ John Paul II, *Ecclesia in Africa*, no. 71.

⁴⁶ John Paul II, *Ecclesia in Africa*, no. 71; see also John Paul II, *Redemptoris Mission* (Vatican City: Vatican Press, 1990), no. 37.

⁴⁷ Benedict XVI, *Africae Munus*, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation (November 19, 2011), no. 143; https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_ben-xvi_exh_20111119_africae-munus.html; see Bernard Haring, *Free And Faithful In Christ* (Middlegreen: St. Paul Publications, 1979): II, 180-181.

product for potency involves processes like safety and hygienic profiles, chemical constituents, and a viral test. The close to 200 products submitted to the Centre for analysis had all failed the scientific “potency test for the treatment of coronavirus patients.”⁴⁸ This information, coming through the internet and its offshoots like Social Media, had the “ability to connect thousands and millions in a short space,”⁴⁹ thus alerting others on claims by some indigenous medicine practitioners on the coronavirus.

The source of COVID-19 was another major issue that occupied the Ghanaian religious space to which the church tried to respond pastorally. The issue bordered on statements that one found ordinarily in public discourse like: “the coronavirus was unleashed by demons on the world;” or “It is a punishment from God for the sins of human beings.” Other divergent media discourses argued that the coronavirus was purely a health issue, that is, a biomedical disease. Those who associated COVID-19 with demons suggested that “spiritual warfare” must be waged against it. These views contributed to instilling fear and panic among some Ghanaians.

Waging spiritual warfare against demons is popular among Ghanaian Christians, notably Charismatic-Pentecostals. This stream of Christianity appears to “take into serious consideration indigenous worldview”⁵⁰ on diseases and suffering, and attributes almost every misfortune, including diseases and sicknesses to malevolent forces.⁵¹ This belief has given rise to the formation⁵² of “deliverance teams” who are the front-liners in the spiritual battle against demons. In the divergent views on the source of coronavirus, the scientific medical practitioners would rely on scientific methods, that is, the virus-source theory as a curative means for a pandemic which they believed to have

⁴⁸ *The Catholic Standard*, Electronic Edition, Sunday, August 9 – Saturday, August 15, 2020, p. 8.

⁴⁹ Kenneth Ashigbey, “The New Evangelization and Social Communication in the Ghanaian Context,” *Acts of the 2014 National Pastoral Congress* (Accra: Ghana Catholic Bishops’ Conference, 2016), 167.

⁵⁰ Francis Adoboli, “Investigating the Relationship between Priests and Lay-Ministers in the Healing and Deliverance Ministry in the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Accra” (Mphil. Thesis, University of Ghana, 2013), 66.

⁵¹ Wilfred Asampambila Agana, “*Succeed Here and in Eternity: The Prosperity Gospel in Ghana* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2016), 140.

⁵² Opoku Onyinah, “Deliverance as a Way of Confronting Witchcraft in Modern Africa: Ghana As a Case History,” *Asian Journal of Pentecostal Studies* 5, no. 1 (2002), 122.

natural causation.⁵³ On the other hand, the demon-source theory seeks a supernatural means to control or end the pandemic.⁵⁴

Using digital technology, some clergymen attempted to allay the fears of Ghanaians by stating what orthodox medical professionals had severally claimed: that COVID-19 was a biomedical disease devoid of supernatural causes. For instance, Archbishop Charles Palmer-Buckle of Cape Coast argued that God could not be responsible for the outbreak of the coronavirus; neither was it intended as a punishment by God to bring humans to conversion. Similarly, Cardinal Peter Appiah Turkson, a Ghanaian prelate in the Vatican also indicated that the pandemic was not a castigation of humans by God.

In a telephone interview, Archbishop Palmer-Buckle re-stated the position of orthodox medical practitioners: that it is a scientific/health issue with natural causation.⁵⁵ These explanations ruled out the demon-origin theory, implying that knowledge on COVID-19 should be kept in the domain of biomedical disease, and not ‘spiritualize.’ However, this observation is contrary to the findings of recent research in Nigeria on respondents’ knowledge of the source of coronavirus. The research showed that a reasonable percentage of the citizens identified sins and unbelief of human beings as responsible for the emergence of COVID-19.⁵⁶

Organic Pastoral Solidarity: Sharing Resources

This section examines some organic pastoral interventions of the church as part of its pastoral care response to the coronavirus. Specifically, it examines donations to the needy and poor, and some institutions, and differentiates these interventions from other philanthropic initiatives.

The gospels testify that Christ became poor and was close to the poor.⁵⁷ He asked his disciples to share their possession with the poor

⁵³ P.A. Twumasi, *Medical Systems in Ghana: A Study in Medical Sociology* (Accra-Tema: Ghana Publishing Corporation, 1975), 9-10.

⁵⁴ Twumasi, *Medical Systems in Ghana*, 10.

⁵⁵ Archbishop Palmer-Buckle, telephone interview granted the researcher, November 1, 2020.

⁵⁶ Peter O. Olapegba, et al, “A Preliminary Assessment of Novel Coronavirus (COVID-19) Knowledge and Perception in Nigeria,” https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=358440 [accessed 27/7/2020].

⁵⁷ Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, Apostolic Exhortation on the Proclamation of the Gospel in Today’s World, November 24, 2013, no. 186;

and his community attracted the admiration of the society for its commitment to the poor (Acts 2:47). The biblical evidence provides the foundation for resource sharing. Sharing the world's resources is to enable the poor and marginalized to remain an integral part of society.⁵⁸ A lack of solidarity with the needs of the poor directly affects one's relationship with God.⁵⁹

Pastoral care to the needy and vulnerable took the form of presentation of food items to 750 households in Accra. The items included rice, cooking oil, tuna, tomato paste and noodles. The donated items were obtained through the collaboration of the International Help of Missionaries (IHM) Inc. in New York, U.S. and the Accra Caritas Office. A priest of the Accra Archdiocese, Rev. Fr. Cletus Forson, facilitated the collaboration. The "sharing of resources, and care of those in need, are essential Christian virtues,"⁶⁰ but some persons who are "wealthy forget about the need for equitable distribution of resources."⁶¹ Though the wealthy have obligations to the poor, organic pastoral sharing does not mean that only the rich should share their resources with the poor. The poor also have something to share because "No particular Church, not even the poorest, can ever be dispensed from the obligation of sharing its personnel as well as its spiritual and temporal resources with other particular Churches and with the universal Church (cf. Acts 2:44-45)."⁶²

The recognition of the important role of health facilities and security services in the COVID-19 fight might have necessitated the church's pastoral care to these institutions. First, chaplains to these institutions and laypersons continued to offer pastoral care to the sick and inmates. Aside from the spiritual, pastoral care in the form of material donations were made to institutions that were in the front lines of the fight against the pandemic. For example, the Wiawso Diocese, though a less endowed diocese as compared to Accra Archdiocese, donated

https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html#Star_of_the_new_evangelization

⁵⁸ Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, no. 187.

⁵⁹ Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, no. 187.

⁶⁰ Kwame Donkoh Fordwor, *Harnessing Resources for the Sustainable Development of a Self-Reliant Church in Ghana* (Takoradi: St. Francis Press, 2005), 58.

⁶¹ Donkoh Fordwor, *Harnessing Resources*, 58.

⁶² John Paul II, *Ecclesia in Africa*, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation on the Church in Africa and its Evangelizing Mission Towards the Year 2000, September 14, 1995, no. 129; https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp_ii_exh_14091995_ecclesia-in-africa.html.

personal protection equipment (PPE) like thermometer guns, hand sanitisers, veronica buckets with stands, liquid soap and tissue papers to six institutions, namely, St. John of God Hospital, Asafo; the Bibiani Government Hospital; Enchi Government Hospital; Bibiani Security Services; Wiawso Regional Police Command, and the Ghana Prisons Service. The prisons donation was in “solidarity with the inmates in the various prisons in the country.”⁶³

Explaining the relevance of the donations, the Executive Secretary of *Caritas-Ghana*, Samuel Zan Akologo,⁶⁴ said the pastoral care interventions⁶⁵ were meant to reach out to the poor and needy.⁶⁶ But the question is: How different were these Church donations in comparison to several others made by the government, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), companies, and individuals? This aspect of the pastoral care of the Church, the Body of Christ,⁶⁷ tried to make “the sign of *charity*, [known as] an important sign of the mercy of God which is especially necessary today,”⁶⁸ and to open everyone’s “eyes to the needs of those who are poor and excluded.”⁶⁹ In a word, it is not only to give “genuine witness”⁷⁰ to the Church’s mission of evangelization but also invite all to practice the virtue of charity.

Conclusion

Religion is described as a source of hope,⁷¹ especially in challenging moments such as threats to human lives and property. Though the church’s pastoral interventions during the COVID-19 pandemic might have benefitted only a small percentage of the population, it would nonetheless, seem that an important function of religion as providing a source of social support,⁷² especially in times of disasters,

⁶³ Samuel Zan Akologo, interview granted the researcher through email; October 20, 2020.

⁶⁴ Samuel Zan Akologo, interview granted the researcher through email; October 20, 2020.

⁶⁵ The donations were made possible through about 100,000 euros the GCBC received from *Caritas Internationalis* and the Vatican Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development. It is part of the Universal Church’s solidarity.

⁶⁶ *The Catholic Standard* Abridged Electronic Version Sunday, April 5 – Saturday, April 11, 2020, p. 1.

⁶⁷ Avery Dulles, *Models of the Church* (New York: Doubleday, 2002), 131.

⁶⁸ John Paul II, *Journeying Towards the Third Millennium* (Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 1998), no. 12.

⁶⁹ John Paul II, *Journeying Towards the Third Millennium*, no. 12.

⁷⁰ John Paul II, *Ecclesia in Africa*, no. 77.

⁷¹ John Paul II, *Ecclesia in Africa*, no. 277.

⁷² Cheryl L. Holt and Stephanie M. McClure, “Perceptions of the Religion-Health Connection Among African American Church Members,” *Qual Health Res* 16, no. 2 (2006), 269.

was fulfilled. This fulfilment can bring inner peace and tranquillity to the beneficiaries.⁷³ Giving hope is an indication that the Christian religion cannot be reduced to the keeping or observance of “a system of unchanging formulae or as an ideology.”⁷⁴ The pastoral care intervention of the church, as discussed in this paper, re-echoes the theme that the Christian religion must continue to emphasize the doctrines of orthodoxy and orthopraxy: one of which is that hope, as against fears, doom and destruction, is the very definition of Christian existence.⁷⁵ Belief in Jesus must go hand in hand with a pragmatic approach in tackling the world’s problems. This is significant because the Christian is called to live in hope that is backed by praxis.

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⁷³ Holt and McClure, “Perceptions of the Religion-Health Connection,” 275.

⁷⁴ Haring, *Free and Faithful*, II: 382.

⁷⁵ Thomas Pazhayampallil, *Pastoral Guide: Fundamental Moral Theology and Virtues* (4th rev. ed.; Bangalore: Kristu Jyoti Publications, 2004), I: 693.