

COVID-19 and Sunday worship in the wake of the pandemic at Our Lady of Loreto, South Africa

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Christians, and those of the Roman Catholic Church, have made significant adjustments to their participation in Sunday liturgy in the wake of the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic. This is especially the case for Catholic Christians at the 'Our Lady of Loreto' (OLL) Church in Kempton Park in South Africa. Sunday Church services that used to be compulsory for most Catholic families and community members, are now attended by few and in some cases none from staunch Catholic families and communities. However, this is not a new phenomenon in the Catholic Church. It signals the extent to which the COVID-19 pandemic has altered and continues to affect Christian families and their commitment to the Sunday liturgy. Drawing from qualitative interviews conducted with eight staunch Catholic community leaders of OLL Church in Kempton Park, Johannesburg, this paper explores the motivations for their continuous participation and/or non-participation in the Sunday liturgy in the wake of the pandemic. The findings reveal that certain behavioural patterns or activities associated with the COVID-19 pandemic motivate Catholic Christians and families to continue to participate and/or not participate in the Sunday liturgy.

Contribution: The article explored and examined the way in which COVID-19 has affected Catholic Christians' ability to attend Sunday liturgy. It discovered that while some Christians returned to church after the pandemic, others have continued to worship from home because of the influence of changes adopted during the pandemic.

Keywords: Catholic; COVID-19; pandemic; Kempton Park; Christians; explore.

Introduction

In many countries in sub-Saharan Africa and globally, the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic is believed to have been brought under control, but its impact on society is far from over. It is difficult to imagine an institution, association, church, community, or family that is still not suffering from the aftermath of the pandemic. While some families have adjusted their Christian calendar and lives, such as in the way and days they attend Sunday liturgy, others have simply walked away from the church, because 'working from home' is now the new normal. Research suggests that, while church activities were suspended during the pandemic, the Roman Catholic Church still carried out one of its major roles, the celebration of the Eucharist through social media and other modern technologies (Adichie 2021; Arasa et al. 2022). This was the case at Our Lady of Loreto (OLL) Catholic Church in Kempton Park, and some Christians seem to have become used to it to the extent that they now find it difficult to start going to church in the wake of the pandemic.

In an address to the nation on 04 April 2022, South African President, Cyril Ramaphosa, announced that the National State of Disaster (NSD) that had been in place for 750 days would be lifted from midnight. His announcement brought relief to the population, and in particular religious groups and churches, most of which had not opened their doors since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic and accompanying lockdown restrictions imposed in March 2020. In uplifting the NSD, the president noted that the requirement for an NSD to be declared could no longer be met and that the powers granted to the government under disaster legislation 'should be maintained only as long as they are absolutely necessary' (Daily Maverick 2022).

Reactions shortly after President Cyril Ramaphosa's announcement were swift. Christian denominations re-echoed President Ramaphosa's message and reminded their congregants that the doors of the church were going to be opened again and activities will operate on a full-scale

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the following Sunday. This was also the case at OLL, the church where this author worships. Our Lady of Loreto Catholic Church, Kempton Park, is an offshoot of the former English Medium Primary School that existed in the city in the 1950s. Research suggests that early in 1958, Mrs Helene Conolly visited the English Medium Primary School with the view to find out how many Catholics were registered there. Through her visit, she brought together the few Catholic families that were there, and this initial group formed the foundation of the Catholic Church in Kempton Park. Over the years, the small Catholic community attended Sunday liturgy in the staff room of the school, with the assistance of a priest from Germiston Parish who came every Sunday to lead Mass service.

However, the church hall soon became small and Helene Conolly started searching for vacant land to establish a permanent structure for the Catholic Church in Kempton Park. In 1967, she came across Mr Friedman, a man who had land in the area at the time, and he accepted to sell it to the bishop. Thereafter, the first church building was constructed, and Father Victor Kotze was appointed as the first Parish Priest of OLL. Since 1957, the church has grown both in terms of its population, diversity, and in terms of the activities, they perform on different days of the week.

As with all Catholic churches and parishes, Sunday liturgy was an important part of OLL's weekly church programme and has remained so. A large and diverse population, including South Africans, Cameroonians, Nigerians, Ghanaians, Indians, Congolese, Zimbabweans, Malawians, and others, attend Sunday liturgy at OLL Church. Prior to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, Christians attended Sunday liturgy for different reasons. Sunday Mass to most Catholics fulfils God's Law. That is, the 'Third Commandment' which says, 'Remember to keep holy the Sabbath day' (Ex 20:8; Dt 5:12). Catholic doctrine holds that the Christian Sabbath is Sunday, and Catholics keep the Sabbath holy by fulfilling the obligation to attend mass (Catechism of the Catholic Church, No. 2174-2178).

However, the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic and accompanying lockdown restrictions disrupted the entire foundation of OLL making it difficult for the church authorities and members to meet and worship on Sundays as before. The pandemic and its impact on the church made OLL to rethink its weekly and Sunday Mass calendar, and a new way of dealing with the congregants. Similarly, some Christians of OLL adjusted to the newly imposed lockdown restrictions and the new church calendar of virtual worshipping on Sundays, while others simply gave up, and have not adjusted since the upliftment of the NSD. Drawing from qualitative interviews conducted with eight staunch Catholic families of OLL Church, this paper explores the motivations for their continuous participation and/or non-participation in the Sunday liturgy in the wake of the pandemic.

Theoretical framework and literature review

The paper is framed by Morens, Folkers and Fauci's (2009) notion of a pandemic and how it affects societies, in which they point out that, pandemic includes 'extensively epidemic', 'epidemic... over a very wide area and usually affecting a large proportion of the population', and 'distributed or occurring widely throughout a region, country, continent or globally' (Morens et al. 2009:1018). A pandemic could be a serious infectious disease that spreads rapidly between people and occurs at the same time not only in one country but also around the world (Adichie 2021; ed. Crowther 1998; Hawker 2005). However, the definition of a pandemic as an extensive epidemic has been highly disputed by scholars explaining thus that a virus may exist in a wide area but may not affect a larger proportion of the population (Morens et al. 2009). However, this was not the case with the COVID-19 pandemic. It was a widespread disease that affected a vast majority of the population globally and in some cases forced people to adapt to new ways (Tsironis 2022) of doing things in the wake of the pandemic, and that is the interpretation adopted in this article.

Research suggests that the COVID-19 pandemic started in China in 2019 (Adichie 2021; Arasa et al. 2022). On 31 December 2019, the Chinese government warned the World Health Organization (WHO) of an abnormal pneumonia found in 27 patients, with a first outbreak in the city of Wuhan in the Hubei region (Arasa et al. 2022). Following the Chinese government's warning, the WHO sent a team of experts to Wuhan from 20 January 2020 to 21 January 2020, but their findings were not definitive (WHO 2021).

From its early beginning, the virus spread far and wide but the WHO did not consider it as a pandemic until March 2020, long after the Chinese authorities had decided to declare a lockdown, and when the virus had crossed national, regional, continental, and international borders into other areas and countries (ed. Campbell 2020, 2021; Egwu 2020). By 18 November 2021, the WHO notes, there were over 254 847 068 confirmed cases of COVID-19, including 5 120 712 deaths (Arasa et al. 2022; WHO 2021).

The rising number of COVID-19 infections and deaths prompted governments across the world to impose different forms of restrictions as a means of bringing the pandemic under control. For the Roman Catholic Church, Pope Francis and the Congregation for the Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacrament – the Vatican Dicastery in charge – provided guidelines for liturgical celebrations. The guidelines included, among others, the use of sanitisers before entering the church, and church attendance was restricted to a population of 50 members in-doors. In Catholic dioceses and parishes, the Sunday Mass was conducted virtually (Adichie 2021; Arasa et al. 2022; Onyekachi 2021). According to Arasa et al. (2022), Pope Francis did not only give guidance to the global Catholic community, but he led by example.

Moreover, the Pope also visited the Roman Basilica of Santa Maria Maggiore on 15 March 2020 to pray to the Virgin, and again on foot, he went to the Church of San Marcello al Corso, to pray in front of the miraculous Crucifix that was carried in procession in 1522 during the Great Plague (Rome Reports 2020). But unlike in 1522, the Pope's visit and prayer failed to bring the COVID-19 pandemic to an end. However, it highlighted the extent to which the Catholic Church went to create awareness about the pandemic and to promote the guidelines of virtual services and social distance at the time. The Pope's guidelines were closely implemented in churches, including OLL church, and although they were important at the time, they directly or indirectly contributed to the declining number of Christians at OLL church in the wake of the pandemic.

Research design and methods

This small-scale study explores the motivations for the continuous participation or non-participation of Christians in the Sunday liturgy in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. Key informant interviews were conducted with a purposive sample of Catholic community leaders or representatives who, together with their members, were staunch Catholics and regular Sunday liturgy members before the pandemic. Purposive sampling was deemed appropriate because of its ability to unpack the information required (Johnson & Sabin 2010).

However, most of the participants were people known to the researcher because he was a leader of one of the church communities from 2016 to 2022. During this period, the researcher served as Parish Pastoral Council (PPC) member and represented his community in PPC meetings, and Sunday liturgy with other community leaders. He therefore had 'insiders' knowledge of all the communities and activities of OLL Church both before and in the wake of the pandemic.

The sample involved eight leaders or representatives of OLL Catholic Church communities and four participants from Catholic families attending the same church. Out of the 12 participants who accepted to participate in the interviews, two family members and two community leaders declined, saying it was because of reasons beyond their control.

Interviews were conducted between August and December 2022. Interviews were conducted face-to-face and were preceded by reading and signing of a consent form to ensure that the participant was happy to participate in the study. Among some of the questions asked were: Can you briefly explain if all your community members were attending Sunday liturgy at OLL Church before the outbreak of the pandemic? What are the motivations for their continuous participation or non-participation in the Sunday liturgy in the wake of the pandemic?

Interviews were conducted in English, Pidgin English, French, and IsiZulu with the assistance of an interpreter or translator in cases where the researcher or interviewee did not understand the language. Using these four languages was crucial and relevant in that it allowed the eight participants to speak in the language they felt comfortable with. However, it also reflected the language diversity at OLL Church. The recordings were later transcribed by the researcher and analysed.

Results

Our Lady of Loreto Catholic Christians' Church attendance before and in the wake of COVID-19

Table 1 shows church attendance at OLL church in Kempton Park by the different communities before and after the COVID-19 pandemic.

The results from Table 1 indicate that 112 Catholic Christians from the selected church communities consulted were attending OLL church before the pandemic. However, the figures dropped to 61 members in the wake of the pandemic, and then increased to 68 following an additional 7 new members who joined the OLL church communities. This shows a decrease of over 40% in the number of Catholic Christians who were attending OLL church before the pandemic. While the decline in the number of Christians attending Sunday liturgy at OLL church in the wake of the pandemic has implications for the church's activities, my interest is on the motivations.

Motivations for attending or not attending Sunday liturgy at Our Lady of Loreto Church

The responses to the questions provided a snapshot of the situation at OLL Church in the wake of the pandemic.

TABLE 1: Showing Our Lady of Loreto Catholic church community groups, their membership before and after COVID-19.

Community or family leader	Members attending before COVID-19	Members who returned after COVID-19	Members missing after COVID-19	New Members after COVID-19	Total old plus new members attending after COVID-19
Community A	14	8	6	2	10
Family Head A	7	3	4	0	3
Community B	18	7	11	1	8
Community C	40	18	22	4	22
Community D	15	14	1	0	14
Community E	10	6	4	0	6
Community F	8	5	3	0	5
Total numbers	112	61	51	7	68

COVID-19, coronavirus disease 2019.

Participants noted that Sunday liturgy activities at OLL have been altered by the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. Ayola, leader of one of the communities in the church, 'community A' noted that:

'We had a very active and growing community in 2018 when I was elected to lead this group. All our members were regular attendees at Sunday liturgy at OLL. Few members attended the 5pm mass on Saturday afternoons ...' (Interview, community A leader, August 2022)

In a similar tune, another community leader of 'community C' pointed out that her group was a well-known group especially when it came to leading the choir during Sunday liturgy at OLL Church. However, since the outbreak of the pandemic and even now that the ban has been suspended, church activities have not fully resumed for all our members. You would recall that:

'We were only few of us during the 2022 Heritage Day fundraising, which took place at OLL. This tells you the extent to which the pandemic has impacted our group. During the same fundraising in 2018, we were over 40 in number and were expecting the number to increase in 2022 instead of declining.' (Interview, community C leader, August 2022)

On how communities and families were affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, participants noted that the effects were wide and varied. According to the leader of 'community E':

'Some of my community members lost their jobs because of lockdown; some lost their sources of income because of lockdown; those who were working for the church, lost their sources of income because the church and church activities were suspended and the church was also struggling; some lost their loved ones, some of whom were breadwinners and were left with no one to look up to.' (Interview, community E leader, August 2022)

Another participant, 'family head A', echoed the above. According to her:

'Many Christians in our church and family were forced to wear facemasks before entering the church premises and the church itself. This was done regardless of their specific health conditions, and this had a negative effect on some of them especially those suffering from asthma and related ailments ...' (Interview, family head A, September 2022)

On the questions whether all members of the different communities of OLL Church returned to church after the upliftment of lockdown restrictions, and their motivations, participants were unanimous. According to one of the community leaders, 'community F':

'Not all members of my community have returned to OLL Church. Those who have not returned to the church and Sunday liturgy have noted that, they have adjusted to a new way of life and Sunday mass time is no longer free in their program and calendar ...' (Interview, community F leader, November 2022)

Community F leader's perspective was supported by 'family head A', who pointed out that the concept of virtual mass service introduced during the COVID-19 lockdown has

affected the routine of some catholic Christians. According to her:

'... some of her members have become so used to working from home and doing things from home that they find it difficult to attend Sunday liturgy at OLL Catholic Church in the wake of the pandemic' (Interview, family head A, November 2022).

Similarly, another participant, the leader of 'community B' noted that some of his members have embraced the notion of the family as a 'domestic Church' and now prefer to pray with family members at home on Sundays (Interview, community B leader, November 2022).

However, while some members of the communities of OLL Church have not returned to the Sunday liturgy in the wake of the pandemic, others have done so. This was the view expressed by the leader of 'community D'. According to her:

'We are different and I think all catholic Christians are different in one way or the other. We survived the pandemic as one of the communities in this church and must continue to worship as such else the church will collapse ...' (Interview, community D leader, November 2022)

Her view was supported by another catholic community leader, whose group was unfortunately not part of the sample. According to her, the priest, and the church leadership, as well as Christians stood as one during the pandemic and it is important that they stand as one in its wake.

'The priest alone cannot run the church, if Christians worship from home like some are doing. I am grateful that almost all my members returned to OLL church in the wake of the pandemic.' (Informant, December 2022)

Discussion

The study showed that religious faith for Catholic Christians has been affected in terms of both those who attend Sunday liturgy, and those who worship from home. On the one hand, church community leaders at OLL church noted that they have witnessed a decline in the number of members attending Sunday liturgy in the wake of the pandemic (community A and community C). On the other hand, some leaders indicated that some of their members have remained committed to Sunday liturgy in the wake of the pandemic. The aforementioned is supported by statistics from 'Table 1', which shows that most members from 'community D' have remained committed to Sunday liturgy at OLL church. One fundamental lesson learnt during the COVID-19 pandemic, and which seems to have continued in its wake is that many people turned to religion and religious groups, family, friends and co-workers or social networks for support (Pew Research Institute 2021). A Pew Research Center survey conducted in the summer of 2020 revealed that more Americans than people in other economically developed countries said the pandemic bolstered their religious faith. In Nigeria, some Christians, both during and in the wake of the pandemic, noted that they understood it as a call to repentance and sincere commitment to God (Onyekachi 2021). Thus, it

bolstered their faith, and most have continued to attend Sunday liturgy in its wake. Nevertheless, there has also been noticeable decline in the number of Christians attending Sunday liturgy in the wake of the pandemic in the same country. In South Africa, and especially at OLL church, Christians share the same sentiment, but most of them have adopted the system of worshipping from home, which is one of the methods the church used to curtail the spread of the pandemic from 2020 to 2022.

According to 'family head A', most Christians have not returned to Sunday liturgy at OLL church for health reasons. This is because, they were forced to wear facemasks in church during the COVID-19 pandemic, regardless of their individual health conditions and this had a negative effect on their health. Thus, health reasons, which were a fundamental consideration for church attendance during the COVID-19 pandemic, have continued to guide Christian choices about church attendance in the wake of the pandemic. The issue of health as a motivation is also highlighted by Schmid (2002:39) in her master's degree dissertation on the Church's response to the HIV and/or AIDS pandemic in which she points out that 'most Christians withdraw from society the moment they discover that they are positive', and this is essentially because of health than stigma-related reasons (Padovano 2001; Pillay 2003; Schmid 2002).

Another motivation is the introduction of virtual mass service and the concept of working from home introduced during the pandemic. During the COVID-19 pandemic, daily masses, and especially the Sunday liturgy, were streamed on Facebook for Christians of OLL church. This practice continued for 750 days in South Africa and most Christians seemed to have become used to it in the wake of the pandemic (Interview, family head A, September 2022). Moreover, some Christians choose to pray as a family from home instead of continuing to attend Sunday liturgy in the wake of the pandemic. However, while those who have not returned to Sunday liturgy at OLL church may be blamed for being 'ungodly', praying from home is not new in the Catholic doctrine. If anything, it is new in the sense that it is happening in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. In pre-COVID-19 era, Catholic Christians, especially the elderly, people with disabilities, or the sick, used to, and are still worshipping from home. Catholic priests visit them occasionally to offer mass, pray with them and administer Holy Communion, and we may say, their absence from Sunday liturgy is hardly noticed. The Global Sisters Report on the 'virtual mass as the real presence of Christ amid pandemic' echoes this in one of their reports. As the report notes:

I believe that Jesus cannot be confined in a structure or any place. God is present everywhere, especially in the heart of a believer. We can experience God anywhere, including the place we least expect God to be – like the virtual space! And we can experience God any time if we focus our hearts and minds and listen to God's words and receive Jesus. It is how we value our relationship with God through the sacrament that matters most, whether we participate virtually or are physically present at Mass. (Global Sister's Report 2021:3)

Conclusion

The paper has explored some of the motivations behind the continuous attendance or non-attendance of Sunday liturgy at OLL church in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. The paper has argued that the reasons that prevented Christians from attending Sunday liturgy during the COVID-19 pandemic are the same that are motivating them from not attending in the wake of the pandemic. The study demonstrated that religious faith for Catholic Christians has been affected in terms of both those who attend Sunday liturgy and those who worship from home. It revealed that, while some church community leaders at OLL church accepted that they have witnessed a decline in the number of members attending Sunday liturgy, others indicated that most of their members have remained committed to Sunday liturgy as was the case before the outbreak of COVID-19. However, despite the findings, the study was limited by the fact that some of the communities attending Sunday liturgy at OLL church were not included in the sample. Hence, the results reflect only the experiences of those who participated. Nevertheless, the findings reflect upon a trend that is applicable to most churches in the wake of the pandemic. As a result, the findings herein are therefore relevant in similar contexts in South Africa and Africa.

Thus, while COVID-19 may be gone, its impact is still being felt and will continue to be around in years to come. Dealing with the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic may require the Catholic Church and OLL in particular to consider extending the same services that were rendered to Christians during the pandemic to those who have not returned to church in the wake of the pandemic. It would be important for the Catholic Church to consider regularising virtual services used during the pandemic for Christians who are unable to, or who no longer attend Sunday liturgy. This certainly has implications for the church and its activities because the church needs the physical presence of its members to be fully functional. Nevertheless, the NSD that was in place for 750 days was lifted just a year ago, and some Christians are still living in fear of another outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic. In the words of the leader of 'community B', such Christians have embraced the notion of the family as a 'domestic Church' and now prefer to pray with family members at home on Sundays than go to church. They remain strong Catholic Christians at heart and the pandemic seems to have brought stronger trust and faith in God regardless of where they worship. Thus, the best the church can do is to support such Christians in their endeavour to find God away from the normal Sunday worship at OLL church.

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The author declares that they have no financial or personal relationship(s) that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

Author's contributions

M.F.A. declares that they are the sole author of this research article.

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