

Worshipping God to Stay Alive and Staying Alive to Worship God: A Study of Roman Catholic Church's Response to COVID-19 Pandemic in Nsukka, Nigeria

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Abstract

This article examines the management of the COVID-19 pandemic by the Roman Catholic Church in Nsukka, Nigeria. By management, we mean how the Roman Catholic church in Nsukka makes sure that its congregations adhere to the COVID-19 protocols. A survey was carried out which covered both parishes in the rural areas and Nsukka town as well. Three each from the rural and three from Nsukka town, formed the population of the study. The study spanned from June 2020 to April 2021. The findings of the article showed that Roman Catholics in the rural areas cared less about maintaining COVID-19 protocols; their reason is based on the 'illusion' that the pandemic is not real after all. Those within the urban areas adhered more to the protocols given that provisions of washing hand basins and sanitisers were made. They also made use of their facemasks. These set of Roman Catholic members believe that the pandemic may be real and to be on the safe side, one has to protect oneself against any eventuality. Stricter measures were found out not to have been put in place in Roman Catholic parishes in the rural areas to ensure adherence to COVID-19 protocols.

Keywords: COVID 19, Roman Catholic Church, Nsukka, COVID-19 protocols

Introduction

'The dead do not worship God; it is only the living that do so' were the words Timothy (2020, personal communication), a Roman Catholic laity in Nsukka, a town in Enugu state, Nigeria, told us when the fear that COVID-19 has spread to Nigeria was nigh. Similarly, Ezech (2020, personal communication), a Roman Catholic from Nsukka told us that he would not go for Mass any time soon since it has been reported that the virus has spread to Nigeria; he would want to be alive and worship God after the pandemic has been contained. This tells us how these two Christians valued their lives and wanted to stay alive to worship God whenever the pandemic was contained. This view partly represents what most Christians thought about COVID-19 when a confirmed case of the virus was first reported in Nigeria on February 27, 2020. By March 3, 2020, the Federal Government of Nigeria had already begun to take serious actions to curtail the spread of the virus in the country as fear had gripped Nigerians about this deadly virus. Firstly, the federal government 'banned' social gatherings of any kind. Thus, Nigerian graduates who were camping for their mandatory National Youths Service Corps were hastily sent home from the orientation camps all over the country. This showed the seriousness of the federal government regarding the ban on gatherings. All religious gatherings, in whichever form, were also suspended in the country for the time being. In this context, the churches were shut down across all States of the country (Asadu, 2022; Chukwuma, 2021; Afolaranmi 2020). The enforcement of the suspension of religious gatherings, however, rested on state governments. Hence, by March 23, 2020, the state government of Enugu, which Nsukka is a part of, had banned all types of religious gatherings which included church services/Eucharistic celebrations pending when the situation improves.



Most of the churches in the state complied with this order. Uka, a Roman Catholic laity, told us that the leaders of churches in the state heeded the directive of the state because, “the church has the duty of protecting her members from the spread of the virus or any health crisis the much she can. The virus, as we are told, is deadly; the church has to take precautions to avoid the spread of the virus the much it can.” (2020, personal communication). For Charles (2020, personal communication) “the church had to comply with the directive of the suspension of religious gatherings in the state because the virus is deadly and if allowed to spread through church gatherings, then even the church would not have many members left to worship God.”

The Roman Catholic authority in Nsukka on her part did her best to adhere strictly to this suspension until it was safe to reopen worship centres in the state. The church believed that it was part of its mission to respond proactively to such a deadly virus and contribute its own quota towards curbing it. This was why the church took some proactive steps in curtailing the spread of the virus. Seen in this context, this article has as its aim, a study of the various ways that the Roman Catholic Church responded (and is still responding) to the COVID-19 crisis in Nsukka town of Enugu State in Nigeria. In other words, the article discusses the various measures which Roman Catholic churches in Nsukka employed to tackle the COVID-19 pandemic.

This article becomes important since, to the best of our knowledge, there is no research that focused on how the Roman Catholic Church responded to the COVID-19 pandemic in Nsukka. While a study like that of Wildwood, Grant, Adedibu, Barnard, Ojore & Way (2020) gave some churches’ approach to forestalling the spread of the virus, its focus was mostly on Pentecostal churches in other Nigerian context. Hence, the present article will contribute to the literature by providing information on the role of the Roman Catholic Church played in the fight against the COVID-19 crisis in Enugu State, and in Nsukka particularly.

Methodology

This is a qualitative fieldwork-based research which began in May 2020 and concluded in April 2021. This period covered the initial time churches were reopened in Enugu State in May 2020 after the lockdown and subsequent months that followed the reopening of churches in April 2021. April 2021 was when the findings of the research were concluded. As a field-work-based research, the methodologies adopted for the study were oral interviews and personal observations. These were our sources of data collection.

We selected, purposefully, twenty (20) informants for oral interview. Ten (10) informants attend Masses at the four Roman Catholic churches that form our study population (see population of the study below). The other ten (10) informants were Christians from various church denominations in Nsukka. These included Anglican, Methodist, African Initiated Churches (AICS) and Pentecostal churches which operate in the area. These informants were given pseudonyms to protect their identity. The main purpose of our interview with them was to provide us with their perceptions of COVID-19 either as real or unreal in Nsukka and by extension the entire Nigeria.

The selection of these informants was random, and interview questions were semi-structured. The semi-structured interview is usually open and allows new set of ideas to be brought in during the interview as determined by the responses of the interviewees (Edwards & Holland, 2013). We adopted this method of interview to enable us explore related ideas to the general themes of interview questions that guided the interview based on the responses of the interviewees.

Added to this, personal observations were made from the parishes that were surveyed. As members of the Roman Catholic Church, we availed ourselves the opportunity of attending Sunday Masses at the parishes that we surveyed. This was in a bid to witness things first-hand for ourselves. Information from relevant literature on COVID-19 in Nigeria and especially, a letter from the Catholic Bishops Conference of Nigeria (CBCN) dealing with COVID-19 and how Roman

Catholic parishes are to conduct Masses and church activities, were drawn upon. Data from these sources will be presented descriptively in the article.

Population of the Study

The study population included four (4) Roman Catholic Parishes within the Nsukka Catholic Diocese. The term, Nsukka has multiple connotations. However, in the context of this study, Nsukka refers to Nsukka's main town otherwise called Nsukka Asadu Ideke people. Nsukka's main town is made up of three communities, namely Nru, Ihe n' Owerri and Nkpunanor (Uwaegbute, 2021). According to the information from the Catholic Diocese of Nsukka, there are 22 parishes in Nsukka main town which the diocese categorises as Nsukka deanery (<https://www.nsukkacatholicdiocese.org/nsukka-deanery>). This also includes St Theresa's Cathedral which is the diocesan headquarters. From this deanery, four parishes were randomly selected as our study population. Two factors determined our selection of the churches: urbanity and rurality. We define urbanity in this study as :

a set of distinctive social characteristics, regardless of geographical location. Diversity of people, beliefs, and histories is the most important of these characteristics. Whether it is celebrated, commercialized, tolerated, or oppressed, diversity is a trait of urbanity that is very different from rurality (which is often associated with homogeneity). Other related characteristics of urbanity are speed, flows of people, information, and goods, and mobility, as well as concentration and density (Encyclopedia.com,2018).

On the other hand, rurality is defined in the study as 'land-spaces with culturally defined identity; situated within a place statutorily recognised as non-urban; and occupied by settlers predominantly depending on primary sources of labour for their livelihood'(Chigbu, 2013, 815). Hence, St Theresa's Cathedral and St Peters Chaplaincy, University of Nigeria, Nsukka represented parishes drawn from the urban areas in

Nsukka while Holy Redeemers Parish Nru and St James Parish Umakashi represented parishes drawn from the rural areas in Nsukka. This was done to find out the difference (if any) in the response to the COVID-19 crisis among parishes in urban and rural areas in Nsukka Catholic Diocese.

Setting the Scene: The Emergence of COVID-19 as a Health Crisis in Nigeria

As of December 2019, Nigerians only heard about a virus called corona (also called COVID-19) as a disease rampaging a country called China. In fact, those who got the hint of the existence of this virus and its threat, were through the media, particularly, Cable News channels. However, by February 27, 2020, after much fear and anxiety, Nigeria confirmed her first case of COVID-19 which was declared a pandemic by the World Health Organization on March 11, 2020 (World Health Organisation,2020). According to the Nigeria Centre for Disease Control (NCDC), this case was an Italian national living in Nigeria(Kalu,2020). Thus, a virus earlier thought to be very distant and far away from Nigeria, became a reality.

The Federal Ministry of Health and the NCDC had as of January 2020 assured Nigerians of their preparedness to contain the spread of the virus as arrangements have been made in anticipation of that. Even with these promises and arrangements, it was clear by March 2020, that Nigeria already had a health crisis occasioned by the spread of COVID-19. Confirmed cases, as of that time, were many and it was believed that more cases would still be confirmed if drastic measures were not taken to check the spread of the virus. In response to this, the Nigerian government set up a Presidential Task Force (PTF) headed by the secretary of the federation, Mr Boss Mustapha.

Part of the extreme measures recommended by the PTF was the banning of interstate travel, closure of schools, both public and private, worship centres, and markets with the exception of those dealing with foodstuff and other essentials like medical supplies; transportation, both within the state was also banned with the exception of those on essential duty like the

health workers. All-important mechanisms were put in place by the federal government and it was part of the duty of state governments to ensure compliance. At this stage, there was a total lockdown in all states in Nigeria. The lockdown as Asadu (2022), Chukwuma (2021) and Ezechimere, Ogunode & Jegede (2021) have shown, affected the church in many ways. Suspension of sacrament and corporate worship and suspension of rural evangelism among others were negative ways the lockdown affected the church (Ezechimere, Ogunode & Jegede, 2021).

This notwithstanding, as months wore on, and even with the lockdown, more cases of the virus were confirmed particularly in Lagos, Ogun and Abuja which were states said to have been the epicentre of the spread of the virus (Nzeadibe & Ejike-Alieji, 2020). By June 2020 for example, Nigeria's COVID-19 cases have reached 15,500 (Allafricanews, 2020). This led the NCDC to advocate for the establishment of more testing and quarantine centres as part of the effort to contain the spread of the virus. The NCDC also took the war against COVID-19 to social media, constantly updating the Nigerian public, on its website, through Short Message Services (SMS), Twitter, YouTube etc. on issues relating to the virus. As of August 2020, the interstate travel ban had been lifted as many Nigerians groaned about the hardship brought about by the lockdown.

Equally, there were some feelers among Nigerians that it was not morally right for the Federal government to impose a lockdown without putting adequate measures in place to cushion the effect of the lockdown. These agitations, backed up by the violation of the lockdown by some desperate Nigerians in a bid to survive, may have triggered the federal government's lifting of the interstate lockdown in June 2020. Alongside the lifting of the interstate travel ban came agitations from Nigerians for worship centres to be reopened in the whole country. In this month also, the federal government relaxed the ban on religious gatherings in the country. It was also within this time that the NCDC protocols

on religious gatherings were formulated. The protocols were to guide the relaxation of the ban on religious gatherings in the country and were as follows:

- A) There should be no entry without face masks. All attendees and religious leaders must wear a face mask.
- B) People who are sick should not go to places of worship. There should be temporary screening on entry.
- C) Hand washing facilities and hand sanitisers should be provided at strategic points
- D) Attendance at religious settings should not exceed 1/3 of the sitting capacity
- E) Religious centres should be clearly marked such that people sit and maintain two metres distance from one another
- F) There should be no form of direct contact practices such as handshakes as peace sign is discouraged
- G) Practices that require the sharing of material should be limited. For example, ablution should be performed at home.
- H) Religious centres should be disinfected routinely, before and after worship (NCDC,2020).

Some states had earlier reopened worship centres even before the relaxation of the ban on religious gatherings in Nigeria by the federal government; these worship centres were mandated to abide by COVID-19 protocols. Enugu was among these states that reopened worship centres before the country-wide lifting of the ban on religious gatherings. Thus, by May 10 2020 churches reopened in the state with specific guidelines on how worship would be conducted (DailyTimes,2020), and Christians became free to attend churches for the first time after two months of the initial closure of religious gatherings in the state.

COVID-19: A Reality or a Myth in Christians' Perception in Nsukka?

The perception of COVID-19 in Nsukka is deemed important since it would help us understand the degree of care taken to forestall the spread of the virus by Roman Catholics in the area. With the report of the coming of the virus to Nigeria, backed up by the caution of the federal ministry of health on how deadly the virus is, most Nigerians took the virus very seriously. This included the people of Nsukka. It is in this context that part of the interactions we had with Christians in the course of our fieldwork revealed that some Christians believed that the virus was a dangerous reality. Thus, in the words of Ugwu (2020, personal communication), a civil servant, "there is no need to doubt the reality of the virus. It is a fact that we have to live with it, at least, in the meantime. After seeing how the virus took many lives in other countries, particularly in China and other Western countries like Italy at the initial stage of its outbreak, I would be a fool to doubt its reality in Nigeria"

A related belief was shown by Maud (2020, personal communication), who told us that "COVID-19 is real. I do not have to doubt that. When the virus was reported to have come to Nigeria, and when the lockdown was put into effect, I did not even allow my children to go beyond my gate. They are children and one cannot be too careful in protecting oneself from the virus. Even now when it seems that the fear of the virus has died down a little, my family and I take safety measures whenever we are in public or mix with the crowd."

For Kings (2020, personal communication), he believed that "the pandemic is real. We have seen and read how it spreads and takes people's lives even in our country. I would be a fool not to believe that it is real" And Sandy (2022, personal communication) told us that "the virus is real. In Nigeria, it exists and from what we know, it has taken some people's lives. That many Nigerians doubt the reality of COVID-19 does not mean that the virus does not exist in Nigeria. We all have to play safe." In the same manner UG (2020, personal

communication) stresses that "only a person without his right senses will doubt the reality of the pandemic in Nigeria. For me, it exists. Period."

However, there are still many Christians who have great doubts as to whether the virus is real. In fact, for many of such Christians, particularly the ones in the rural areas and the youth, COVID-19 is not real. To them, the existence of the virus in Nsukka is nothing but a 'myth.' According to Regina, a woman who sells foodstuff at Nsukka's main market popularly called Ogige market, "there was never anything like COVID-19 in Nsukka. If it existed how come I have not seen any of its victims? We only hear about those infected or killed; we have not seen the real victims of the virus. I think our government knows the politics they are playing with the pandemic. My worry is the hardship this has brought on us. Someone like me who is a local trader could not provide for my family owing to the closure of our markets during the lockdown" (2022, personal communication).

A similar thought by Nwanyi, another market woman, shows that "there is something fishy about our own COVID-19 here in Nigeria. Neither my friends nor I have seen anyone infected with the virus. And believe me, if the virus existed in Nsukka, we would not get it. Our land, Nsukka, is pure and would not allow such evil to befall us"(2022, personal communication). In a related response, Oka (2020, personal communication) argues that "We are told to wash our hands and wear face masks and as a matter of fact we do these things but where is the virus? Has anyone confirmed or seen anyone suffering from the pandemic here? All we do is to keep on washing hands all the time" Another interviewee, Kass (2020, personal communication), corroborates this view by saying that "many of our people here in Nru do not take the virus seriously as they do not believe that it is real"

For a youth named Keith (2020, personal communication) COVID-19 was not real in Nigeria. In his words, "My problem with this whole COVID-19 thing is that I have not seen anybody infected with the virus. I have not gone to any

hospital and see a COVID-19 patient. All I hear is the number of dead and infected persons. Initially, I tended to believe its reality in Nigeria but after observing what I just told you, I began to have doubts about its reality in the country. And no one will blame me for holding such a view after seeing the way the virus is being handled in Nigeria.” Another youth, Emy (2020, personal communication), argues thus: “Are we sure what we have here are not malaria cases. The possibilities are that people are mistaking the malaria epidemic for the COVID-19 epidemic in Nsukka and Nigeria at large. I am more inclined to believe that malaria is likely to be what we call COVID-19 here.”

Our findings corroborate the finding of Ossai (2021) and Nche, Agbo & Okwueze (2024) on the perception of the virus in Nsukka, and Nigeria. In these works, we read of great disbelief in the existence of COVID-19 among Christians in the area and Nigeria generally. Ossai’s (2021) interviewees doubted the reality of the virus in Nsukka based on their distrust of politicians and how they handled the COVID-19 crisis in Nsukka. Most of those he interviewed claimed that the politicians are using the COVID-19 crisis to their advantage as such they seriously doubt the reality of the virus in Nsukka. What we make of Ossai’s findings is that many people who doubt the existence of the virus in Nsukka anchored their belief on the premise that politicians are using the COVID-19 crisis to make money.

What we see from these interviews is a kind of polarisation in the belief in the reality of COVID-19 in Nsukka. Those who doubted the reality of the virus from our fieldwork can be mostly categorised as the rural, poor and uneducated people whose arguments were mostly based on not having seen people infected with the virus. And as such, they did not see the virus as a reality in Nigeria or Nsukka. All they see was the negative impact of COVID-19 on their lives, occasioned by its resultant lockdown.

Having interacted with some of these rural poor during the course of this research, we do say that they were more worried

about the problem of hunger and hardship that the virus has brought in Nsukka than believing in the reality of the virus. This corroborates Kalu’s (2020) assertion that “for many Nigerians, the war against COVID-19 is a war against hunger.” Kalu did show how hardship became the lots of many Nigerians with the imposition of the lockdown in all states across Nigeria.

While we may empathise with these poor rural people regarding COVID-19 and the attendant hunger that the lockdown brought on the people of Nsukka generally, this does not mean that COVID-19 was not real in Nsukka or Nigeria. On the other hand, it seemed that most of the educated people, or those in the civil service, believed that the virus was real in Nsukka. Their argument was mostly based on what they saw on television or read in newspapers with regard to the deadly nature of the virus. Equally, they believed that the virus did not ‘show on the face’, as such, one had to be careful when interacting with people. As we shall see, these beliefs played out well among the Roman Catholic parishes surveyed during this research work.

Patterns of response to the COVID-19 crisis by Roman Catholic Parishes in Nsukka

From our fieldwork within the Roman Catholic parishes in Nsukka, two patterns of responses were observed. These responses are discussed below:

Enforcement and Adherence to COVID-19 Protocols

First, we note that the Roman Catholic authorities in Nigeria took COVID-19 seriously. Thus, when the pandemic broke out in Nigeria, the Catholic Bishops Conference of Nigeria (CBCN) took immediate action towards making sure that the virus did not spread through Masses and other Roman Catholic Church activities which demanded the gathering of the people. This was why, as early as March 21, 2020, the CBCN had issued guidelines on how Roman Catholic Masses and other related rituals are to be conducted until normalcy returns. Most of these guidelines aligned with the COVID-19 protocols developed by the NCDC as it relates to religious gatherings in

Nigeria as seen above. It shows that the Roman Catholic church was willing to make the needed adjustments as regards the conduct of Masses and other church activities in the face of the COVID-19 crisis which is similar to what others have done in other contexts (Sulkowski & Ignatowski, 2020).

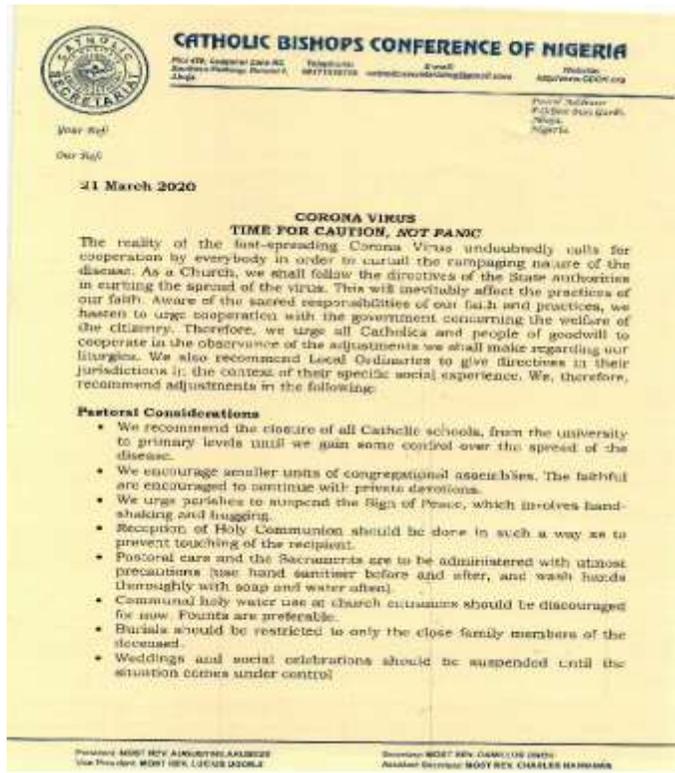


Figure 1: A letter from the Catholic Bishops Conference of Nigeria on how Masses and other church activities will be conducted at the height of the COVID-19 crisis in Nigeria, particularly during the nation-wide lockdown. (Source: <https://csnigeria.org/docs/g48.pdf>).

In the four parishes that we surveyed, there were varied levels of maintenance and enforcement of the COVID-19 protocols. Within St Peters Chaplaincy, University of Nigeria Nsukka, there seemed to have been a high level of adherence to the COVID-19 protocols. According to AI (2020, personal communication), a student who attends Masses at the Chaplaincy, “there is a high level of adherence to the COVID-19 protocols here,

especially during Masses. You can see the hand washing facilities at almost every entrance of the church. During Masses, congregants must wear face masks to be allowed into the church. I really commended the chaplaincy authorities in this regard”

A similar thought was expressed by OK (2020, personal communication), a lecturer who attends Masses at the chaplaincy. According to him, “This is a university community and you would not expect low adherence to the COVID-19 protocols in the chaplaincy. The hand washing facilities are always here. Face masks must be worn during Mass and social distance is highly maintained in sitting arrangements during Masses. The enforcement of the protocols is high here and is a positive thing in my own opinion.” Another member of the chaplaincy, PC(2020 personal communication), told us that “the level of adherence to the protocols is great.

Most of the guidelines on religious gatherings by NCDC are maintained here. From hand washing facilities, the use of face masks to social distancing during Masses, these are maintained. While the hand washing facilities are always seen within the chaplaincy, there are warnings at entrances to the church that wearing face masks during Masses is compulsory.”

Our observations corroborate these expressed thoughts above. For example, hand-washing facilities were always seen around the chaplaincy, and warnings about the use of face masks during Masses were clearly written on cardboard sheets placed at the entrances and other strategic places in the chaplaincy. Social distancing during Masses was also maintained.

At any time, there is noncompliance with the protocols, the chaplain would announce such during Masses and advise congregants on the need not to drop their guard in the fight against the spread of the virus. Thus, he always stressed the need for the COVID-19 protocols to be maintained by the congregants during Masses.



Figure 2: A warning at St Peters Chaplaincy University of Nigeria, Nsukka showing that wearing a face mask is mandatory for entrance into the chaplaincy. Source: Authors fieldwork, 2020



Figure 3: A hand washing facility placed at one of the entrances to St Peters Chaplaincy, University of Nigeria, Nsukka. Source: Authors fieldwork, 2020

The above situation was almost witnessed at St Theresa's Cathedral, the diocesan headquarters. Our interviewers showed that there is some level of enforcement of the protocols in the cathedral. In the words of AG (2021, personal

communication). "Here at the Cathedral, the COVID-19 protocols are being maintained to some level. When the churches reopened by May 2020, there was a high degree of adherence to the COVID-19 protocols by congregants. Hand washing facilities were also put in place and social distancing was also maintained." Similarly, another congregant, EZ(2020, personal communication) corroborates that "there has been a level of adherence to the COVID-19 protocols here. At the initial time, which was at the height of the fear of COVID-19, the protocols were strictly maintained. Our people here do their best in maintaining and adhering to the protocols; they still wear masks to masses which to me is a positive development.'

While these opinions are true, particularly with regard to the wearing of face masks during Masses, our observation shows that as of April 2021, hand washing facilities are not seen in the Cathedral again. However, other protocols like social distancing and the wearing of face masks during Masses are clearly maintained in the cathedral. This in itself shows that the cathedral authorities in Nsukka Roman Catholic Churches partially enforce COVID-19 protocols.

In Holy Redeemer Parish Nru, a different scenario played out. With the reopening of churches in May 2020, the church authority there began to have a hard time getting the parishioners to abide by the COVID-19 protocols. Only a few voluntarily wore face masks to Masses; social distance was scarcely maintained and using the hand washing facilities provided by the parish was a problem to many of the parishioners. This is why Kings (2020, personal communication), the church warden in charge of enforcing hand washing in the parish had a hard time doing his job. He bemoaned their attitude thus: "I do not understand our people's attitude to this whole COVID-19 thing. When I call them to make use of the hand-washing facilities in the church, many of them will tell me that they washed their hands at home before coming for the Mass. That is annoying, to say the least.'

Having witnessed this scenario many times in the parish, we agreed with Kings. Many of the parishioners would come to Masses and would not voluntarily make use of the hand-washing facilities provided by the parish authority. They would walk straight to partake in the Mass, unless Kings, the warden in charge of the hand-washing facilities, called them to wash their hands. The parish authority did its own part by making the necessary provisions; however, abiding by the protocols was very difficult for many of the parishioners. To show the effort of the parish priest in making sure that the protocols are maintained, he took the pains of making sure that the catechists announced the need for the parishioners to adhere to the protocols during Masses since the virus is still among the people of Nsukka. This measure was applied and maintained up till August/September 2020. Maybe the hard time the church authority had with getting the parishioners to adhere to the protocols led to the removal of the hand washing facilities within the church premises by August 2020. From this time up to March 2021, there were no signs of the hand washing facility usually placed just after the gate to the church, in front of the old church hall.

Equally, from that time to March 2021, a few parishioners wore masks to Masses or maintained social distancing during the Masses. Maybe the belief that the virus was a 'myth' or a 'scam' in Nigeria got the better of many of these parishioners. The problem could not have been said to be from the parish authority in Nru but the perception of the virus by many of the parishioners there. As we have shown, within the rural areas in Nsukka, the belief that the virus is not real is high. The parish authority provided the necessary protocols but the parishioners were mostly not willing to make use of or maintain them.

At St James Catholic parish Umakashi, another rural parish, the situation was worse. We began our observation at the parish from March 2021 up to April 2021. Within this period, there was no sign of provision of COVID-19 protocols in the parish. No hand washing facility was provided within the

church premises. During Masses, no one cared about social distancing. A few persons who were conscious of the virus and probably wanted to play safe observed the wearing of facemasks. And there were no announcements to create awareness about the COVID-19 pandemic or the need to observe its protocols. This tells, probably, the level of the parishioners' belief that COVID-19, after all, does not exist in Nsukka.

Within all the four parishes we surveyed, there was a visible suspension of the traditional handshake of peace. Equally, the Holy Communion, traditionally given directly to the mouth in Nsukka, had to be given on the communicants' outstretched palms. Equally, communal Holy Water which was usually placed at the entrance to some of the churches we surveyed, was removed. All these measures are to make sure that human-to-human contact is mostly minimised. They also showed adherence to the COVID-19 protocols by the parish authorities in the churches we surveyed.

Response through prayers

The beginning of COVID-19 saw the Roman Catholic Pontiff, Pope Francis, articulated a prayer to be said by all Roman Catholics all over the world. This became known as Pope Francis' prayer against COVID-19. This was to be said in all Roman Catholic parishes worldwide. This prayer showed the Roman Catholic Church's belief that part of its pastoral duties is to pray for the sick and afflicted of society. It also showed love and compassion for the afflicted of society by the Roman Catholic Church. And in such a critical time like that of the worldwide COVID-19 crisis, the Roman Catholic Church took praying for the sick and the afflicted by the virus seriously. In all Roman Catholic Churches, in Nsukka, Pope Francis' prayer against COVID-19 was said in the four parishes we surveyed.

With the reopening of churches in Enugu State, the prayer took effect in all parishes in Nsukka. It was said immediately after the Holy Communion prayer. In Holy Redeemer Parish Nru, for example, the parish priest made sure that the parishioners learnt the prayer by heart as much as they could. One of the

parishioners, EJ (2021, personal communication), points out that “the prayer of Pope Francis is being taken seriously at the parish. That is why the prayer is said after prayer for Holy Communion in the parish.” The prayer was, however, taken more seriously when the churches were immediately reopened in the state. Our observation shows that as of April 2021, the prayer was not being said again in the parish. Just as some of the COVID-19 protocols have been abandoned at the parish in recent months, Pope Francis' prayer against COVID-19 has been abandoned in the parish too. A similar observation was made at St James Parish Umakashi. In this church, the prayer has also been abandoned quite recently. In fact, as of March 2021, the prayer was no longer said at the parish. At St Peters Chaplaincy, University of Nigeria, Nsukka, this seemed to be the case quite recently also. Those interviewed said that the prayer has recently been abandoned.

Conclusion

The article sought to study the different responses of the Roman Catholic Church in Nsukka, Nigeria. Four parishes within the Nsukka deanery were surveyed in this fieldwork-based research. The result of the survey revealed interesting facts. First, Christians in Nsukka were polarised as regards whether COVID-19 existed in Nigeria or not. Some Christians believed that the virus was real while some claimed that it was a ‘myth’ or a ‘scam’ perpetuated by politicians for their selfish aim. Second, our survey indicated that the Roman Catholic authority took COVID-19 seriously and that was why its pattern of response to the pandemic in Nsukka is insistence that COVID-19 protocols be maintained in the parishes. This was the case in the four parishes that we surveyed. However, adherence to COVID-19 protocols was not on a par in all the four parishes. The parishes within the rural areas showed a low level of adherence to the protocols occasioned by their perception of the virus as a scam or unreal. On the other hand, parishes within the urban centres took adherence to the protocols seriously. In these parishes, adherence to the protocols was on a high degree. Equally, our study showed that

prayer was also a way through which the Roman Catholic Church responded to the COVID-19 crisis. Pope Francis' prayer against COVID-19 was said routinely in the four parishes we studied. However, as of April 2021, the prayer was not being said in these parishes again.

What we make of these findings is that religious communities were also responding to the COVID-19 pandemic in various capacities. Our findings cast the Roman Catholic Church in a positive light in Nsukka for contributing to the fight against the virus. However, more care was not taken by the parish authorities in the rural areas where we found out that maintenance of the COVID-19 protocols by the parishioners was poor. Mechanisms that should have made these rural parishioners maintain the protocols were lacking so as to forestall further spread of the virus within the communities. This was one of the undoings of the church as regards its fight against the virus in Nsukka.

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