

Christian Truth in an Age of Coronavirus Pandemic: Guarding the Contours of Catholicity in Zimbabwe

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Abstract: This article will argue that the church is the mystic body of Christ that believers must guard from purveyors bent on twisting the truth. There is no doubt that the Catholic social teaching on medical and moral matters has proven to be pertinent and applicable to the ever-changing circumstances of health care and its delivery. In response to today's challenges, these same moral principles of Catholic teaching provide the rationale and direction for the community of faith. In times of coronavirus characterized by falsehoods, the truth is a virtue the church must strive for: "... If you abide in My word, you are My disciples indeed. And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free." (John 8: 31-32). The truth is Christ; it is Christological. Christians must understand the clash of worldviews that is changing the face of Zimbabwean society. A worldview is simply the sum total of our beliefs about the world; Christianity is a worldview that directs our daily decisions and actions. Worldviews affect the way we think. A worldview is a well-reasoned framework of beliefs and convictions that gives a true and unified perspective on the meaning of human existence. To paraphrase from the book of First Samuel (16: 7) – to see as God sees and not how the world sees. Beliefs are not simple propositions held inside us which drive our outward behaviour in predictable ways, they are more of acts of commitment than anything else. There is no doubt that the future of Catholicism lies in the hands of the church's leadership and the believing Christians. Catholics look to their faith leaders for guidance on big decisions as regards COVID-19 issues. Conspiracy theories around COVID-19 deny that the COVID-19 pandemic is a biological virus. Catholics require direction from the Pope down to the episcopal leadership to chart the way forward. A worldview not only impacts how one understands and makes sense of the world but also influences how one expresses oneself in the world. The constellation of personal values, beliefs, assumptions, attitudes, and ideas that make up our worldview have an effect on our understanding of reality. Coronavirus has caused uncertainty among believers and confusion as to how to cope with the complex problems that arise in COVID-19 related issues. This article will aver that the nature of drawing the contours of catholicity regarding the biblical foundations of the health falls in the hands of orthodox Catholic teachings.

Keywords: Truth, Catholicity, Conspiracy Theories, Coronavirus Pandemic, Beliefs, Community of Faith, Worldview, Human Dignity, Common Good, Solidarity and Subsidiarity

1. Introduction

Since the emergence of COVID-19, social media and online newsfeeds are awash of conspiracy theories about the coronavirus pandemic and some of the conspiracies are Bible-based. It is not uncommon for myths to accompany the emergence of diseases. Roy Porter exposed medicine's evolution against the backdrop of the wider religious,

scientific, philosophical, political beliefs of the culture in which it develops, covering background from which the diseases of hunter-gathers to the more recent threats of HIV and AIDS and Ebola [15]. Many Christians are consumers of these conspiracy theories—and most of these theories are appealing to gullible believers. Christians are susceptible to misinformation and conspiracies about COVID-19. That is due, undoubtedly, to the way ideas are packaged in biblical narratives. False claims about the COVID-19 pandemic are

trending. Some Christian leaders fuelling falsehoods were reprimanded by government. As one example, the founder of United Family International Church, Prophet Emmanuel Makandiwa, assured his followers that they were protected from coronavirus and that the vaccines distorted people's DNA and the government had no kind words for such conspiracy theorizing and long-debunked claims [9]. Conspiracy theories are popular because they can fill in every gap and every unknown in the country. It is not easy to monitor conspiracy theories.

In the midst of coronavirus the Christian message based on the godhead, Christology, pneumatology, ecclesiology and the bible is largely redundant in Zimbabwe. A Jesuology of masking up, sanitization, social distance, vaccination and herd immunity that characterises the community of faith in the country is a negation of the fundamental pillars Christianity is built on. The coronavirus pandemic has consigned the faith to the scientific dustbin. The faith is now an appendage in the nation's discourse about the fight against the pandemic. The accommodation of the Christian faith to scientific developments of the time is regrettable.

The Catholic Church has theological principles that guide the Church's vision of health care and calls for all Catholics to share in the healing mission of the Church. During this time of coronavirus pandemic conspiracy theories, some based on biblical texts taken out of context, have continued to spread in Zimbabwe. The danger posed by false ideas is succinctly articulated by Gresham Machen:

False ideas are the greatest obstacles to the reception of the gospel. ... if we permit the whole collective thought of a nation or of the world to be controlled by ideas which by the resistless force of logic, prevent Christianity from being regarded as anything more than a harmless delusion [11].

The Christian truth known to us through the Bible becomes a means of deliverance from the absolutising tendency of all conspiracy theories. The biblical truth brought from the Bible must be interpreted in the light of God's disclosure of Himself in Christ. The compulsion towards Christian action in dealing with Coronavirus, derived from the Gospel, does not mean Christians have all the answers to solve the problems of Coronavirus. This compulsion shows Christian dependence on Jesus Christ. John 18: 37 attests that Jesus Christ is the truth:

Pilate therefore said to Him, "Are You a king then?" Jesus answered, "You say rightly that I am a king. For this cause I was born, and for this cause I have come into the world, that I should bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth hears My voice."

The truth is what is. It is that which is real. Jesus is the spiritual reality. The reality of Christ is revealed in the Bible. The Bible is the word of God that communicates inspired truth for all generations. The Bible is authoritative and determines what is true Christian faith and practice.

The Catholic social teachings afford humanity an opportunity to help build a just society. The teachings appeal to four fundamental principles: human dignity, common good,

solidarity, and subsidiarity [4, 13]. These principles are in essence the expression of the whole truth about people known by reason and faith. The precepts of human dignity, common good, solidarity, and subsidiarity are at the centre of the Catholic healthcare system in Zimbabwe; they serve as a foundation upon which to improve the medical care of the sick. Catholic social teaching gives guidelines for action and provides a remedy. The precept of the dignity of the human person attests to defend human life, from conception until natural death, and embodies the inalienable moral obligation to respect the dignity of every person as a child of God. Genesis 1: 27 says that "God created mankind in his image; in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them" (Gn 1: 27). Human life is sacrosanct and must not be taken away willy nilly. The second precept recognizes the communities we form as human, and social and must be protected and promoted to attain their full potential. Solidarity, the third principle, reflects Christ's command to "love your neighbour as yourself" (Mk 12: 31) and the obligation to seek the good of others. Catholics are obligated to cater for the needy, vulnerable and disadvantaged in society. It shows that human beings are social by nature. The fourth precept is that of subsidiarity. It encourages the ordering of institutions within society. Pope Saint John Paul II, in the 1991 encyclical *Centesimus annus*, noted that the precept of subsidiarity prohibits a community of a higher order from interfering in the internal life of a community of a lower order [13]. Instead, the interests of a community of lower order must be promoted.

In the context of Zimbabwe, it is a truism that the Catholic Church accepts scientifically developed medicines and faith to promote human health. The Catholic Church believes and teaches that Jesus can heal us of bodily ailments. There are 31 individual healings and eleven mass healings that Jesus performed during his three years of ministry. To show that the Kingdom of God is close at hand Jesus had to demonstrate the power not only to heal, but also to forgive sins; he has come to heal the whole person, soul and body.

2. Methodological Considerations

Methodologies are necessary in organizing and guiding a paper for an efficient and reliable output. The study used the library research methodology in which available documentary materials published on various websites, articles, newspapers, magazines and books explain how on the Catholic Church and COVID-19 interacted in Zimbabwe. Bryman views documentary review as the use of written texts and documents as source material [1]. To that end, the study utilized secondary sources of data. Documentary analysis is the primary source of information since the documents were available and easily accessible. Documentary analysis gives the researcher enough room to critically examine and analyse the contemporary situation experienced by the writer. The knowledge of this background is very critical to the development of this research; documentary analysis gives the

investigator a chance to look into the real situation experienced by the writer during the period the document was written. This method was ideal for the study because it is premised on the understanding of social reality as grounded in people's experiences.

3. Catholic Understanding of Sickness and Healing

The Catholic Church is the largest non-government provider of health care services in Zimbabwe. It has established many of the modern hospitals in the country. The Catholic Church has 25 out of the 66 hospitals owned by non-government actors in the country [10]. The church is active in the fight against COVID-19. For example, the church distributed medical supplies donated by Pope Francis through the Nunciature in Harare on April 2020 [10]. The distribution to 25 Catholic hospitals was facilitated by the Zimbabwe Catholic Bishops' Conference's Health Commission. The donated items included gloves, sanitisers and disinfectants that necessary to help in protecting mission health workers from coronavirus and disinfect hospitals and premises. The donation was an expression of Pope Francis' proximity in the context of the COVID-19 emergency. Catholics believe in healing; natural healing through medicines compliments supernatural healing.

We find ourselves in a world that is both sustaining and threatening. It is a world we only understand in part. Catholicism is one of our responses to the human situation; a way of trying to find meaning of our life. The fundamental question is how does Catholicism understand and respond to coronavirus. Christians turn to God for protection and help in the presence of inescapable adversities and threats such as coronavirus. Truth comes from God:

In Christianity the truth of man's search for God is seen in relation to the even more important truth of God's search for man. Christian faith insists that the final word about man and the world is not a word of condemnation and despair but a word of grace and hope. The Christian message proclaims that life is of God, the God discerned in the wonders of creation, in the moral order declared by the prophets, and in the redeeming, life-giving love made known in Jesus Christ [14].

The Christian truth, the good news, is the new life of faith, hope and love in a community of faith. The Catholic healthcare system is rooted in values that respect human dignity, protect human life, respect the principle of subsidiarity, and meets the needs of all classes of people.

Catholics believe the world is God's creation and appreciate that life is gift. They also believe God is creatively present in the world. Even in the midst of coronavirus pandemic, God is at work. At the centre of Catholicism is the Mass (the communion service), along with six other sacraments: baptism, confirmation, penance (or reconciliation), ordination, marriage and the anointing of the sick (extreme unction). Of significance in this article is the

Eucharist and anointing of the sick. Catholics understand the importance of the communion table in relation to health. 1 Corinthians 10:16 says,

The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not the communion of the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not the communion of the body of Christ?

St Paul is stressing the wonder-working power in the communion. When Catholics partake of the communion they live healthy like Jesus. In the same vein the efficacy of the anointing oil as part of the mysterious power of God is critical. The sacred anointing of the sick was instituted by Christ our Lord as a true and proper sacrament of the church. Anointing the body with the oil is transformative and disempowers the devil. It was the practice of Jesus and the letter James advised to anoint the sick:

Is any sick among you? Let him call for the elders of the church; and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord (James 5: 14).

Thus, the anointing oil is the truth of God. The instrumentality of anointing oil communicates the power of God. The intent of the anointing of the sick sacrament is to bring about in the individual spiritual and even physical strength as one endures illness.

John 10:10 clearly states that one of the cardinal missions of the devil is destruction. The devil is the cause of sickness. Oyedepo points out that Job attributing evil to God is a misnomer:

But that is not God at all! He is not the author of calamity, He does not devise mischief against His people, and He does not use sickness or disease to teach them a lesson. Why? He is not the enemy of man! God is too faithful to fail; He is dependable; He is reliable, and He is more than enough [12].

Does God cause illness? The general truth of the Church is that God does not give anyone a disease. God is not the author of evil and suffering. Sickness is one manifestation of the two broad types of evil—moral and natural. Moral evil is a person's inhumanity to another person. Natural evil consists of things like natural disasters and physical Condition.

The same verse, John 10:10, attests that Jesus is out to give life in abundance. The word of God is medicine: he sent his word, and healed them, and delivered them from their destructions (Psalms 107: 20). Catholics thank God for hospitals, medicines, doctors, modern medicinal equipments and know-how. At the end it is God who actually heals. Deliverance and rescue from coronavirus only comes from God.

4. Religious-Based Conspiracy Theories About COVID-19 Pandemic

The pandemic has generated myths and speculations related to end time events and misinterpretations of the Bible. Conspiracy theories about COVID-19 Pandemic have changed how the Bible is being understood among some

Christians in Zimbabwe. A number of religious-based conspiracy theories about the COVID-19 are trending in religious circles. Conspiracy theories have been connected to religion from the very beginning. They often refer to Christian themes regarding the devil and the apocalyptic scenarios. From the end of 2019 onwards understandings of the Bible in some churches have crystallized around a number of themes concerning the cataclysmic end of the world. Apocalypticism teachings dominates religious space. Conspiracy theories are often most potent when they are fused with religious ideas. Religion is highly exploitable. Religion is at the centre of meaning of life. With no conclusive scientific and medical explanations of the novel Coronavirus there were lacunae for conspiracy theories. Many believers have fallen victim to conspiracy theories. Coronavirus was also stigmatized as punishment for moral decadence.

The Defence Minister, Oppah Muchinguri, torched a fierce diplomatic storm when she claimed that the deadly novel Coronavirus that has wreaked havoc worldwide was part of God's punishment on Western countries particularly the United States of America for moral decadence and "paralyzing" Zimbabwe's economy through sanctions [6]. Muchinguri 'spiritualised' the virus:

This Coronavirus that has come are sanctions against the countries that have imposed sanctions on us. God is now punishing them now and they are staying indoors now while their economy is screaming like what they did to ours by imposing sanctions on us. (US President Donald) Trump should know that he is not God. They (US) must face the consequences of Coronavirus so that they also feel the pain [6].

The state media propaganda could not undo the damage of this false and misleading information. It made the task of educating communities about the danger of COVID-19 very difficult.

Many Christians believe that the COVID-19 vaccines and masks herald the "mark of the beast." Vaccine and mask resisters in Zimbabwe have been galvanized by the idea that the jabs are the Antichrist; the Book of Revelation suggests that the Antichrist will test Christians by forcing them to put a mark on their bodies as the "mark of the beast." The biblical term "mark of the beast" is drawn from Revelation 13: 16-18. It is apocalyptic and cataclysmic. The biblical "mark of the beast" is used as a benchmark for some conspiracy theories in Zimbabwe. The book of Revelation describes two beasts that John saw:

I saw the beast, the kings of the earth, and their armies, gathered together to make war against Him who sat on the horse and against His army.

Then the beast was captured, and with him the false prophet who worked signs in his presence, by which he deceived those who received the mark of the beast and those who worshiped his image. These two were cast alive into the lake of fire burning with brimstone (Rev 19: 19-20).

The first beast that John saw had features of a leopard and

it came out of the sea. Its feet looked like those of a bear, a mouth that looked like a lion, seven heads and ten horns. The other beast had two horns like a lamb. Of significance is the fact the beast forced people from all over the world to receive a mark on their right hand or on their forehead, so forceful was this beast with horns that no one could buy or sell unless they had this mark. The number 666 represents this beast with two horns. The gamut of this mark of the beast conspiracy theory is that what is happening in the world is the work of the beast and not COVID-19 pandemic. Once people accept here is danger they automatically obey, follow and worship the beast. The beast would then introduce a mark on people under the guise of a vaccine thereby enabling the beast to control us. Consequently, the whole world would be ruled by one ruler.

According to the Apostle John, a pair of beasts will rule the Earth with cruelty. For the beasts to be activated they require all people who engage in commerce to wear the mark of the beast. The Apostle John did not identify what the mark looks like, although some theologians translate Scripture to associate the number "666" with it. Some Christians believe COVID-19 vaccines are "the mark of the beast" and think the world is in what the Bible calls "the last days." Revelation 14 is packaged to look like Bible prophecy that whoever takes the COVID-19 vaccine jab has the mark of a beast. Revelation 14 reveals that someone identified as the 'Antichrist' will require people have a 'mark' that people will get as loyalty to the devil. The mark will be a pledge of loyalty to the Antichrist, the figure 666. Despite scientists endorsing COVID-19 vaccine doses provide protection against the virus and was effective against hospitalization and death the "mark of a beast" is one of the reasons people refused to be vaccinated.

The major weakness of this conspiracy theory is that it has no answer as to why people who had not been injected COVID-19 vaccines fell sick and some of them died since emergence of the pandemic. Nor does it explain why we do not see a physical mark of the number 666.

5. Catholic Church Provides Biblically-Based Guidance and Theologically-Coherent Direction

The study has confirmed that almost all Catholic churches undertook some modifications in their worship practice and reduced their religious practices. The Catholic Church has a very important presence throughout society and is respected. The Catholic Church has countered false teachings and conspiracy theories realising that a major feature of epidemics is the massive amounts of misinformation and uncertainty. The church became authoritative by providing reliable and accurate sources of information it spoke the truth with authority. They provided pastoral care centred on issues of fear, confusion, suspicion, and hopelessness. The Catholic Church is concerned for truthfulness as instructed by the Bible; the church is averse

to distortion of truth. God warned Isaiah “Do not call conspiracy all that this people calls conspiracy, and do not fear what they fear, nor be in dread,” (Isaiah 8: 12). The church is averse to distortion of the truth and consumption of conspiracy theories. Catholics are required to discern the truthfulness of the claims being made.

The influence of the Catholic leadership on public health messaging is immense. Religious leaders can actively advocate for members to receive or reject COVID-19 vaccines. The church is not a spectator of the havoc caused by the Coronavirus pandemic. It is inevitably deeply involved helping humanity in its fight against the virus. COVID-19 has caused pain and deaths to many families including believers. Christians have become conscious of their calling to help humanity. Coronavirus has forced Christians to think anew above the role of the church in society. The Catholic Church leaders are working intensively across The Communion to teach effective church responses and share guidelines about COVID-19 conscious that the church has faced very difficult times in the past and come through them.

Catholics acknowledge that COVID-19 is a real biological disease that requires containment measures such as social distancing, regular washing of hands with soap, sanitizing surfaces, use of personal protective equipment, screening, testing, isolation of suspected cases, quarantine of cases, treatment of cases, and immediate and strictly controlled burial of deceased cases. To debunk the “mark of the beast” conspiracy idea was fake with no scientific backing that risked damaging the emergency response to the outbreak, Catholic leaders led by example. Tawanda Mukwenga, a Catholic, welcomed his vaccination as a means of allowing him to worship properly: “Getting vaccinated has turned out to be a smart idea.” [5]. At the cathedral in the capital, Harare, Rev Mukwenga attended his first in-person Sunday Mass on 5 September 2021 in 10 months after the pandemic closed churches and forced services online. Zimbabwe has reopened places of worship, though worshipers must be vaccinated to enter. He debunked the spreading unproven conspiracies which is tantamount to bearing false witness which is regarded as a sin in the Bible.

The Zimbabwe Catholic Bishops' Conference in its 16 July 2020 pastoral letter urged that Catholic faithfuls in Zimbabwe have had to find ways “to sustain each other in faith through praying together as families, encouraging each other through social media and accompanying one another in both sickness and death” [8]. It was an opportunity for the church to rediscover herself. In the same vein, Fr. Frederick Chiromba, the conference's secretary general, said:

The issue of coronavirus disruptions being an opportunity for the church to redefine itself is in reference to the new way of worshipping we are adopting as a domestic church. It is an encouragement for families to get together and to read Scriptures together and for the faithful to redefine other possibilities so that we manage to continue with worship and other practices [7].

6. Catholicism: Road Map of Reality

Catholicism is an accurate road map of reality in a country wrecked by coronavirus. Catholics who understand biblical truth and have the courage to live it appreciate that Catholicism as a worldview is more consistent than any other belief. It provides credible answers to challenges associated with coronavirus. Catholicism is immensely practical and ameliorates the way we live our life and positively influences the world around us. Catholics must not mirror COVID-19 conspiracy theorists understanding of reality. The falsehoods of conspiracy theories are rebellion against God. Yet these theories must not blind to the fact that Catholicism is a universal worldview. In the words of Colson and Pearcey, we must stand “ready to respond as people grow disillusioned with false beliefs and values and as they begin to seek real answers.” [3]. The Catholic view accepts the complementary role of scientific facts and hence allows members to be treated in hospitals and, above all, believe Christ is a healer. And just as we have to live in accord with medical science, so, too, we must learn to live in accord with the lordship of Christ through communion. The truth humanity seeks is found in scripture.

This point must be pressed, Catholics in Zimbabwe should not be complacent relativists to think that conspiracy theories can be a path to salvation. They must not compromise the truth of Christianity due to the misery caused by coronavirus. Coronavirus must be understood within the framework of the one perfect truth provided by divine revelation. Christians must focus on Jesus Christ. That is true Jesuology. The world is crying for Christians like Justin Martyr who, under persecution, insisted that “whatever things were rightly said by any man belongs to as Christians.” [2]. Catholics must find in Christ a source of strengths to help them endure the vagaries of COVID-19. It is incumbent for Catholics to build a culture informed by a biblical worldview. There is need for spiritual regeneration.

7. Conclusion

God's activity in the world gives direction to all creation. God is disclosed in the real experiences of life such as in coronavirus times. Many Catholics have discovered that in the dark nights of the soul, in hours of recovery, in moments of communion, in experiences of Extreme Atonement, they are not alone; God is with them. The assuring words of the psalmist reveal an undeniable truth for many Catholics in all generation: “Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil, for thou art with me.” (Psalms 23.4). Catholics are using the same words in describing their own experience. The God of life urges Catholics to guard catholicity in the midst of coronavirus pandemic. It is the Christian conviction that God has been present in past events and so is God a part of the new events of our contemporary history. The endeavours of Catholics to keep the faith in the midst of adversity shows the presence of the Holy Spirit in their lives.

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