

**“Comfort My People, Comfort Them” (ISAIAH 40:1):
A Pastoral Strategy under Coronavirus Pandemic**

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Abstract

The pandemic called Covid19 has indeed affected many aspects of life in society. Be it health, economics, education, sports – it has left some impacts that negatively affect society. The advancement of human welfare and dignity has been a prominent feature in the life of the Catholic Church through the ages. The joy and hope, the grief and anguish of the men of our time, especially those who are poor or afflicted in any way, are the joy and hope, the grief and anguish of the followers of Christ as well. All these and more are what gave impetus for this paper. Making use of participant observation as primary source and combining it with survey and analytical methods, we have found out that many people are suffering a great deal as a result of the pandemic and therefore the Churches should preach a gospel of love and practice the culture of mercy, among other things. We also suggest that agents of pastoral charity must build the image of a Church which shows that members are journeying or going together – a community of God’s people walking together in faith, hope and love, bringing to every part of society, the light of the Gospel, the embrace of the Church and the support of God’s mercy.

Key Words: Covid19. Coronavirus Pandemic, Comforters, the Church

Introduction

The advancement of human welfare and dignity has been a prominent feature in the life of the Catholic Church through the ages. The Second Vatican Council reaffirms the basic belief that the Church in every age is entrusted with the responsibility of discovering the “sign of time”¹ and interpreting them in the light of the gospel. It is from this background that the Church through her mission has assumed a unique role as teacher in the temporal order and comforter in moments of great challenges. Indeed, the opening lines of *Gaudium et Spes* make concrete this missionary task of the Church. “The joy and hope, the grief and anguish of the men of our time, especially those who are poor or afflicted in any way, are the joy and hope, the grief and anguish of the followers of Christ as well” (Flannery 2007: 1).

The Reality on the Ground

¹ It is a famous expression of Pope John XXIII, referring to the events – secular and sacred - characteristic of each epoch which reveal the action and will of God in history and peoples. It indicates the situation prevailing in the world at a given time seen in the light of Christian faith. Ultimately, as Christians we are called to pay attention to these signs.

The pandemic called Covid19 has indeed affected many aspects of life in society. Be it health, economics, education, sports, it has left some impacts that negatively affect society. This assertion is supported by a joint statement by ILO, FAO, IFAD and WHO on 13th October 2020.

Besides, the COVID-19 pandemic has led to a dramatic loss of human life worldwide and presents an unprecedented challenge to public health, food systems and the world of work. The economic and social disruption caused by the pandemic is overwhelming: tens of millions of people are at risk of falling into extreme poverty, while the number of undernourished people, currently estimated at nearly 690 million, could increase by up to 132 million by the end of the year.

The pandemic has been affecting the entire food system and has laid bare its fragility. Border closures, trade restrictions and confinement measures have been preventing farmers from accessing markets, including for buying inputs and selling their produce, and agricultural workers from harvesting crops, thus disrupting domestic and international food supply chains and reducing access to healthy, safe and diverse diets.

The enterprise of this paper is to highlight the challenges of Covid19 as issues in Public Health Delivery in Nigeria. The way to begin is to bring out Religion as a factor in the challenges faced by Health Care Delivery in our Public Health Care System.

Covid19 Skepticism and Conspiracy Theories

The greatest obstacle and challenges is lack of belief in the existence of what is called Covid19. In fact, some do not believe in the reality of its existence. Some belief that what is called Covid19 is a creation of Government and indeed a ploy by corrupt African governments to collect money from foreign powers for the enrichment of the pockets of corrupt government officials and politicians. This type of skepticism was further strengthened during the time government provided palliatives to the citizenry to cushion the effects of the suffering of the people during the period of lockdown. The palliatives as was widely reported did not go to those that needed them more but went into the wrong hands of government officials. Under the experience of such apparent deceit of the people by government, it is very difficult for the masses to believe in the existence of the so-called virus.

Such lack of trust and confidence in the government by the ordinary people make them to believe that they are being scammed by government and therefore there is no Covid19. How can a people who do not believe in the existence of any sickness approach any health providers or health centres to present themselves for a cure? This is one of the ways by which Covid19 becomes an issue in Public Health

The resultant effect of all this is the refusal of the people to submit themselves to the discipline of Covid19 by way of obeying the lockdown, wearing of face masks and social distancing, and so on.

Religious Fanaticism

Apart from skepticism, some Christian denominations, especially some of the Evangelicals and Pentecostals believe that the blood of Jesus is thicker than the blood of Covid19; the belief in Jesus Christ is more healing than social distancing, wearing of face masks, shaking of hands, embracing and washing of hands too often. All that the people need

to do is to believe in Jesus Christ and pray and nothing will happen to them. Some even tell the congregation that for Christians to resort to the prescribed Covid19 observances is to display a lack of faith in Jesus who has the power to heal. Because of all these followers refused to comply and it is business as usual for them.

The Churches of these denominations refused to comply with the lockdown discipline. In fact some of them were filled up when they were expected to stay at home to avoid the spread of the virus. Of course all these compliance go a long way to accelerate the spread of the virus. This contributes to the numerous contemporary challenges that are facing public health system in Nigeria and make Covid19 an issue in this regard.

The loss of Human Capital

In almost all countries of the world, human capital has been tremendously reduced by death through corona virus pandemic. Not only ordinary non-health workers but also public health and other health workers died even in the process of rendering health services to COVID-19 patients. This dramatic loss of Human life throughout the world to Covid19 pandemic presents an unparalleled challenge to public health. Allied to this, the overwhelming and unprecedented loss of life has also affected production of food and human labour throughout the world. There is no denying the fact that death caused by the Covid19 pandemic has become a real issue in the provision of realistic public health.

The loss of human capital caused by Covid19 has tremendously affected the economic systems of the countries so affected. The inevitable outcome of this is social disruption caused by the pandemic which is devastating, when “tens of millions of people are at risk of falling into extreme poverty, while the number of undernourished people, currently estimated at nearly 690 million, could increase by up to 132 million by the end of the year,” according to the joint statement. Poverty and disease often go together. The outbreak of diseases as a result of extreme poverty which is the result Covid19 constitutes a serious issue in public health.

The Imperative of Comforters in Our World Today

In a world highly traumatized by the current universal enemy, the Coronavirus pandemic, the world is most in need of comforters, of volunteers and of people who can offer hope to the people struck by overwhelming fear and despair. Within the context of our present situation, the clergy, religious and all the baptized are called to be witnesses of strength, courage, and faith. In this precarious situation, the words of Prophet Isaiah become much more eloquent and challenging in the exercise of our priestly ministry: “comfort my people, comfort them” (Isaiah 40:1).

In the second part of his Book, Isaiah addresses this *message of hope to the people*: “Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that her warfare is ended, that her iniquity is pardoned....

‘A voice cries: In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord; make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh

shall see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken” (Isaiah 40:1-2, 3-5).

The Exile was a tensed moment in the history of Israel, when the people had lost everything. The people had lost their homeland, freedom, dignity, and even trust in God. They felt abandoned and hopeless” (Pope Francis 2016). Within the past few months people have relived these desert experiences because of the present pandemic. As noted by Pope Francis, *The desert* is a place in which it is difficult to live, but precisely there, one can now walk in order to *return not only to the homeland, but return to God, and return to hoping and smiling* (Pope Francis 2016). When we are in darkness, in difficulty, we do not smile, and it is precisely hope which teaches us to smile in order to find the path that leads to God.

In times of suffering, it is comforting to know that our God is great yet gentle, mighty yet meek, majestic yet merciful, powerful yet patient, immeasurably strong yet immutably a shepherd, holy yet humble, creator of the cosmos yet compassionate toward all he has made, sovereign ruler yet saviour redeemer, immortal yet inviting, invisible spirit yet he became incarnate, indescribably wise yet inexpressibly willing to aid those who wait for him and that he is all-knowing, incomparable, unsearchable yet he can be sought and known! What a mighty, mysterious and great God that we have! And what a comforting feeling we all have when that is the case! It is the comfort that we have had from him in this experience of him that we are expected to give it back to the people who are frustrated, disappointed and sad in life. In order to comfort these people entrusted to our care, we need to develop a very compassionate heart. We need to assist our people to realize and feel concretely in life this love and the mercy of our God.

The Culture of Mercy

The proclamation of the Gospel becomes insufficient when it is not concretized this way in praxis. In our contemporary society, the Church is judged more by its deeds than by its words. Thus, the Church’s message of hope and comfort must have an effect on its concrete praxis and result in a culture of mercy in the entire life of the Church. Pope Francis has succinctly illustrated this point thus:

I see clearly that the thing the Church needs most today is the ability to heal wounds and to warm the hearts of the faithful; it needs nearness, proximity. I see the Church as a field hospital after battle. It is useless to ask a seriously injured person if he has high cholesterol and about the level of his blood sugars! You have to heal his wounds. Then we can talk about everything else. Heal the wounds, heal the wounds...And you have to start from the ground up (Pope Francis 2013,).

This powerful message of Pope Francis plunges the Church right into the midst of human sufferings, emphasizing the healing ministry of Jesus as the foundation for the Church’s mission.

Renewed by divine mercy, conformed to Christ through the Holy Spirit, Christians are called to live up to the gift they have received by serving their brothers and sisters – especially through works of mercy... Through the Father’s mercy,

Christians receive not only the forgiveness of sin, but also, in Jesus Christ and through the Holy Spirit, new life: a life of kindness, conversion, forgiveness, justice, of mercy given to others because it has been received from God (Pontifical Commission for the promotion of the New Evangelisation).

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The Christian culture of mercy should be characterized with an environment that provides human care, an environment that listens to the plight of others and providing comfort to the sorrowful. As Kasper (2014: 226) avers, “a culture of mercy cannot confine itself to material assistance for others only; compassionate interactions with one another are also necessary.” Landry (2017), commenting on Pope Francis’ thoughts on Mercy puts forward that the Lord wants us to belong to a Church that knows how to open her arms and welcome everyone; a Church that is not a house for the few, but a home for everyone, where all can be renewed, transformed, sanctified by his love, the strongest and the weakest, sinners, the indifferent, those who feel discouraged or lost. What this means is that we are to build a Church that communicates the word of God to us, the Church that gives us the opportunity to live in charity and in the love of God for all.

What type of a church are we insinuating then? The atmosphere under the situation of the Coronavirus pandemic (Covid 19) and even after it, calls for “a Church that gives courage, It calls for a church that provides hope, it calls for a Church that is not closed in on herself. What this in essence implies is that all ministers of the Gospel and all those who are involved in whatever religious apostolate should, as a matter of urgency “reach out to everyone, bringing to them all the tenderness and love of God. Pope Francis speaks of the ‘balm of mercy,’ reaching everyone, both those who are believers and those who are distant from the Church, showing that the Kingdom of God is already present in our midst (Macdatd 2015).”

Our Duty

Agents of pastoral charity, must build the image of a Church which shows that members are journeying or going together – a community of God’s people walking together in faith, hope and love, bringing to every part of our Parish, Deanery, Diocese as a whole and even to every community and every situation, the light of the Gospel, the embrace of the Church and the support of God’s mercy (Serrao 2017).” For those who are terminally ill and close to death, pastoral agents we have a duty to accompany them, assisting them as they are gradually moving closer to their Creator and Saviour for their eternal reward. Consequently, the message of hope is integral to the evangelizing mission of the Church. In fact, it is indispensable and mandatory. In this mission, “each Christian and every community is called to be an instrument of God for the liberation and promotion of the poor, and for enabling them to be fully a part of society (Pope Francis 2013).”

This new ecclesial mind-set of the Church as a “field hospital” that goes out to meet the wounded on the battlefield of life has defined all the more the Church making it much more attractive. With this new mind-set, the Church will always be full of new members and there will not be any losing of our members especially our youth to the secular and cultic groups around us. In fact, we need “a Church which is bruised, hurting and dirty because it has been out on the streets, rather than a Church which is unhealthy from being confined and from clinging to its own security (Pope Francis 2013: 4)” This means. According to the Pope, that we need, a Church “that knows how to open her arms and welcome everyone.

This pandemic may take a longer time and the situation can be boring or is already very boring. However, we have a duty of helping others, especially the elderly, disabled, poor, isolated and our teeming population of youth that seem to have no future ahead of them. It is wise to take the necessary precautions in doing this. In doing it, we should not be reckless in the exercise thereby risking the spread of the disease itself. Moreover, as priests and religious, we should not also forget our fundamental Christian duty to help others: “I was sick, and you came to visit me,” (Mt 25). This Christian act reminds us that Jesus lived at a time when people had no access to even the most rudimentary medical care, and so visiting the sick was just as dangerous, if not more, than it is today. Thus, it is part of our Christian tradition to care for the sick, even at some personal cost. In doing this, it is very important not to close our hearts to the poor and those who have no or limited healthcare. These people may be those who suffer the effect of this pandemic even more than the general population. Thus, it is necessary that we keep our hearts open to all these people who are in need of care and comfort. It is true that Covid19 is highly infectious. It is on the increase and very frightening especially to healthcare workers and pastors of souls. However, we should not allow our conscience to be infected, too, making us fail in our pastoral duty of giving hope and comfort to our people.

The New Spirit in the Church

We have a duty of renewing our zeal for Evangelization. In the words of Pope Francis, “I invite all Christians, everywhere, at this very moment, to a renewed personal encounter with Jesus Christ, or at least an openness to letting him encounter them; I ask all of you to do this unfaithfully each day (Pope Francis 2013).” This encounter with God’s love is the foundation of the Church’s activity in the world. We as Pastors should not close in on ourselves, but should always come out of ourselves, out of our problems, structures, and bureaucracies. We should “go out to others, seek those who have fallen away, stand at the crossroads, and welcome the outcast (Pope Francis 2013).” This means that our Church in the contemporary situation needs pastors with compassionate heart which enable them to touch the hearts of so many Christians and even non-Christians. As the potent for peace, the church must be heard at all times; for it is her duty to speak when everyone is silence (Oko, 2018:40).

The Church and her pastors have to provide a listening ear to the stories of those suffering in our society. “By listening to the suffering of others and without judging, the Priest will come to understand the plight of his members and also identify with them in their plight (Ilo 2015: 13).” The church’s resources are people and its message (Oko, 2018). This teaches us that compassionate listening can help the Christian community avoid the spiral of violence and indifference. In the final analysis, it helps us to develop a degree of forgiveness, reconciliation, comfort, wholeness and healing.

At this time of our human history, we need to build a Church that is like a mother with an open heart, a Church that takes seriously the social dimension of evangelization and combines confession of faith with commitment to society in serving the people. If people are leaving the Catholic Church for other faith communities today, it is sometimes because of the lack of pastoral care for the poor, the failure of our ecclesial institutions to be welcoming to people, and of course because of our difficulty in restoring a mystical adherence to the faith (Pope Francis 2013). In fact, the commitment to the care of the poor is what purifies our Church of a worldly mentality and corruption.

Conclusion

The Coronavirus has come and it is obvious to us that after it, the Church and the entire world will not be the same. We need to change our vision of human life in general. This change will include dropping of all old stereotyped and outdated methods of evangelization of our people. The apostolate from the pulpit alone has become very insufficient in the present situation. In order to cope with the current situation many Pastors have evolved many pastoral strategies of reaching out to the people entrusted to their care. Some have used the social media very effectively and the results are obvious. There are those especially in the rural areas who while using the ethical standard for curbing the spread of the virus have conducted door to door visitation of the poor thereby getting closer to the flock especially to the most vulnerable and comforting them. The creativity and imaginative innovations of these priests are praiseworthy and they are the people that the Prophet Isaiah is talking about using these words: “Comfort, Comfort my people” נַחֲמֵנוּ (na·ḥă·mū) נַחֲמֵנוּ (na·ḥă·mū) עֲמִי (‘am·mî) (Isaiah 40:1).

The strategies used so far seem to differ from one parish to another and from one priest to another, is there a way we can coordinate these and make them authentic means of evangelization for our people in this new situation? This is our major preoccupation in the new situation. It is very urgent as the situation even after Covid19 will not be the same again.

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