



**Examining the Impact of Covid-19 Pandemic on the Roman Catholic  
Church in Southeastern Nigeria**

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**Abstract**

The period, 2019 to 2020 has witnessed a halt in the world's events and the church is not left out. The paper aims to explore the activities and changes in the Roman Catholic Church because of the COVID 19 pandemic in the southeastern region of Nigeria. Qualitative methods were employed; interviews were thoroughly carried out and analyzed using a descriptive narrative approach. The study revealed that religious life, liturgy, faith, and Church economy were greatly affected by the pandemic. Even though church activities were suspended and modified, the Roman Catholic Church still carried out one of its major roles- the celebration of the Eucharist through social media and other modern technologies.

***Keywords: COVID 19, Pandemic, Roman Catholic, Church, Liturgy, Southeastern Nigeria***

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**INTRODUCTION**

Nigeria, a country multicultural with diverse religious beliefs and practices is dominated by two religions, Christianity, and Islam. The southern part of Nigeria is dominated by Christians while the northern part of Nigeria is dominated by Muslims. Approximately, 46.5% of the population in Nigeria is Christian while 46.1% of the population in Nigeria is Muslim (WCD 2018; WWR 2019). Nigeria has been reported to have the largest population in Africa (WWR 2019). Concerning the Christian population, it has been reported that the Roman Catholic Church in Nigeria is one of the largest Christian denominations with approximately 28.4% population (WCD 2018). Southeast Nigeria is considered as having the highest concentration of mainline churches particularly Catholic and Anglican churches. (Nwaka 2012). According to a study southeast, Nigeria comprising of the Igbo ethnic group is dominated by Roman Catholics. Catholicism is the dominant faith among the Igbo people in Southeast Nigeria. They are exceptionally vibrant and vital in their catholic lives. (Landy 2020). With the arrival of a pandemic that spreads rapidly through populations, one would begin to imagine how the Roman Catholic Church in southeast Nigeria is overcoming the challenges brought about by COVID-19.

The novel disease, COVID-19 was first identified in Wuhan China in December 2019. Since then, it has rapidly spread all over the globe within a few months after its discovery. Acute Respiratory Syndrome Corona Virus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) was identified as a new severe type of coronavirus that causes the disease, COVID-19 (Olapegba et al 2020). Up till now, COVID-19 has no immediate treatment and vaccine, and it has been declared a worldwide pandemic by the World Health Organization (WHO 2020). The transmission of the disease was initially linked to direct exposure to the Human Seafood Wholesale Market of Wuhan. It was presumed that the disease could be transmitted from animal to human. Subsequently, it was discovered that the disease can be transmitted from human to human. The transmission is believed to occur through respiratory droplets from coughing and sneezing and by touching infected surfaces. The disease has an incubation period of 2 to 14 days from the time of infection to symptoms. Therefore, isolation became the best way to contain the pandemic (Casella et al 2020). According to the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (2020), there have been a total number of 32289042 cases of COVID-19 and 984040 COVID-19 deaths in the world as of 25 September 2020. In Nigeria, it was reported that an Italian citizen was the first person to be diagnosed with COVID-19 on 27 February 2020 (Olapegba et al 2020). As of 25 September

2020, the Nigeria Centre for Disease Control has recorded 58062 confirmed cases of COVID-19 with 1103 COVID-19 deaths in Nigeria (NCDC 2020).

The NCDC confirmed the first case of coronavirus disease in Enugu southeast Nigeria on 28 March 2020. As of 26 September 2020, there has been a total number of 4011 cases of COVID-19 and 90 COVID-19 deaths in southeast Nigeria (NCDC 2020). The Catholic Church has lost a total of 115 catholic priests due to COVID-19 (Ognibene 2020). In response to the outbreak, catholic churches in southeast Nigeria announced precautionary measures that were adopted by parishes and parishioners across the region (Egwu 2020). The precautionary measures were announced by the archbishop and church members were encouraged to sanitize their hands. The shaking of hands during the time of the sign of peace was suspended. Besides, the mode of receiving Holy Communion was modified. Instead of receiving the Communion through tips of lips, it was received on the palm (Olatunji 2020).

Dioceses and parishes have been severely affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. After the announcement of the lockdown by the government, many catholic Christians in southeast Nigeria began to lose their faith. The weakness of faith was majorly prompted by restrictions from participating in parish activities because of the lockdown. However, some Catholic's faith became stronger. There were some faithful who still believe that being more prayerful and clinging to God will save the world from such a calamitous situation. Also, the church economy was heavily affected. The various means where incomes come into the church were suspended. The pandemic disrupted liturgical activities in the church. Church buildings were closed to the entire public. Some of the faithful were only able to participate in liturgical celebrations through various social media platforms.

The Roman Catholic Church, despite the effect of COVID-19 and the lockdown on its economy, has been supporting the government and raising awareness on safety measures to combat the virus. In the diocese of Enugu, in southeast Nigeria, it was reported that Bishop Callistus Onaga supported the poor in his diocese by distributing relief and food parcels to over 52 local parishes and deaneries in the state. In Nsukka diocese, another diocese in southeast Nigeria, it was reported that Bishop Godfrey Onah provided relief and food parcels that were distributed to the poor among them. The catholic diocese of Awka reportedly did the same by providing relief materials to those in dire need. Even with the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on the Catholic Church, the church did not stop in rendering help and support to the government in the health sector and other sectors (Egwu 2020). Therefore, the paper aimed to critically examine the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the liturgical practices and other activities of the Roman Catholic Church in southeast Nigeria.

**CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK**

The novel coronavirus causing COVID-19 is said to have originated from severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus-2 (SARS-CoV-2) (WHO 2020). COVID-19 stands for coronavirus disease in 2019 because started in the year 2019. Coronaviruses belong to the coronaviridae family in the Nidovirales order. Corona represents crown-like spikes on the outer surface of the virus, which brought about the name coronavirus (Shereen et al 2020). The virus is a contagious respiratory illness that can be contaminated through the eyes, nose, and mouth and droplets from cough and sneezes. It can also be transmitted through close contact with infected persons and surfaces. Cough, fever, and shortness of breath are the known symptoms of the virus. The virus could also lead to severe respiratory problems or death. (Sauer 2020).

One of the major ways of containing the coronavirus disease apart from practicing good hygiene is by isolating and social distancing. Social distancing means to quarantine which brings about a radical change in contacts between people (Sulkowski and Ignatowski 2020). 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 around the world (Hawker 2005; Crowther 1998). A contemporary definition of pandemic described it as an epidemic that occurs and covers over a very wide area which could include a region, country, continent, or the globe and usually affecting a large proportion of the population. 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, Folkers and Fauci 2009). Drawing from the above definitions of a pandemic, it is quite clear that a pandemic is described as a widespread disease that affects a vast area or the globe and numerous populations.

Liturgy is a major part of Catholicism. According to part II of the catechism, liturgy comes from a Greek term meaning "public work" or "a service on behalf of the people". In the church world, liturgy is the participation of the people of God in the work of God. Liturgy involves all the Catholic Church activities; "it is the fountain from which all her powers flow". The Roman Catholic Church is one of the largest Christian denominations in the world. The church began in Rome and has the pope as its supreme leader. The church believes in one true church and upholds both the oral and written tradition (Gingerich 2020). The Christian church as stated by Itulua-Abumere (2013) "is the assembly or association of followers of Jesus Christ". From this assertion, the term "church" is not limited to a word that is used to describe a place of worship

but that which also describes the gathering of the faithful. That is why when church buildings were closed during the COVID-19 lockdown, liturgical practices continued.

Southeast Nigeria is known as the Igbo land. It is one of Nigeria's geopolitical zones; a region where the Igbo ethnic group resides. The region is made up of five (5) states namely – Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu, and Imo. The region is made up of two ecclesiastical provinces known as the ecclesiastical province of Onitsha and the ecclesiastical province of Owerri. The ecclesiastical province of Onitsha consists of seven (7) dioceses which are: the diocese of Abakaliki, Awgu, Awka, Enugu, Nnewi, Nsukka, and Ekwulobia. The ecclesiastical province of Owerri consists of five (5) dioceses namely- diocese of Aba, Ahiara, Okigwe, Orlu, and Umuahia.

## **MATERIAL AND METHOD**

The paper studied the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on liturgical practices and activities of the Roman Catholic Church. The study was limited to the southeastern part of Nigeria. The scope was determined by the dominance of Catholic members and clergy in southeast Nigeria. A qualitative method was adopted in the research. Catholic Church leaders and members were interviewed. The Catholic Church leaders and members who were interviewed were purposively selected from the five (5) states in the southeastern region of Nigeria. Data were collected using the Key Informant Interview (KII). The KII was done in both oral and written forms. The former was carried out in person directly, over the phone, through audio recording and social media namely – WhatsApp while the latter was done by emails and WhatsApp. Due to the lockdown, COVID-19, social distancing and an outrageous increase in transport fare, the researcher was not able to travel all the five (5) states in southeast Nigeria for the research. However, the researcher ensured consistent and efficient communication during an interview with participants. The data collected in person and electronically were concrete and authentic. 24 participants were recruited for the interview, but 18 participants were able to respond to the questions. Therefore, a total of 6 participants were not able to respond to the interview questions. 4 out of these participants did not respond because of their tight schedule while the remaining two refute online and telephone interview, insisting on a face to face interview. All the participants in the research were Roman Catholics residing in southeast Nigeria. A priest, 2 reverend sisters, parish organizational leaders, and a member of the Catholic Church in southeast Nigeria were the group of people recruited for the interview in the research.

Participants' full consents were granted. During the interview, participants expressed themselves freely. There was room for a choice of language. Up to 9 participants responded to interview questions in their dialect – Igbo which was later translated and transcribed by the researcher. The interview started when the COVID-19 lockdown began to ease gradually. It was conducted from 29 August to 27 September 2020. The table below shows the details of the participants in the study.

The researcher ensured that at least one participant comes from a diocese in the southeastern region. All the 12 dioceses in the region were equally represented. From the table above, participants were selected from the five states that make up the southeast. 4 participants were selected from Enugu, 6 from Anambra, 3 from Imo, 3 from Abia, and 2 from Ebonyi. 8 females and 10 males were successfully interviewed. The following research questions formed the scope of the interview:

S/N	Name	Sex	Position	Diocese	State
1	Rev.fr.Dr. Ejimbeonwu Gerald Kc	m	Dean faculty of Arts, social Science and management science, legacy University Okija	Catholic diocese of Nnewi	Anambra
2	Mary Jerome Obiora IHM	f	Lecturer at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka	Catholic diocese of Nsukka	Enugu
3	Rev.sis. Anizoba Grace	f	Reverend Sister at St. Michael Cathedral Church Nawgu	Catholic diocese of Ekwulobia	Anambra
4	Tochukwu Kingsley	m	Member, St. Augustine Catholic Church, Oko	Catholic diocese of Ekwulobia	Anambra
5	Joseph Jenifer	f	Member, St. Peter's Catholic Church Ojoto	Catholic diocese of Nnewi	Anambra

6	Onyemauche Chinedu	m	President of Marian society, St. Joseph the worker Catholic Church, Onitsha	Catholic archdiocese of Onitsha	Anambra
7	Ozioko Chidimma	f	Member, St. Peter's Chaplaincy, UNN	Catholic diocese of Nsukka	Enugu
8	Juliet Ogadinma	f	Vice president, National association of Catholic Corp member, Ishiagu	Catholic diocese of Abakaliki	Ebonyi
9	Esther Ebere	f	Liturgical, National association of catholic Corp member, Ishiagu	Catholic diocese of Abakaliki	Ebonyi
10	Ezeh Mary	f	Member, St. Michael Archangel parish, Awgu	Catholic diocese of Awgu	Enugu
11	Ike Matthew	m	Member, St. Gall Catholic Church, Itungwa	Catholic diocese of Aba	Abia
12	Chioma Lilian	f	Rector, St. Mary's Catholic Church, Okigwe	Catholic diocese of Okigwe	Imo
13	Chinenye Jenifer	f	Rector, St. Michael Catholic Church, Umuahia	Catholic diocese of Umuahia	Abia
14	Chidi Amaechi	m	Member, St. Brigid's Catholic Church	Catholic diocese of Ahiara	Imo
15	Ebuka Lawrence	m	Member, St. Peter's Parish, Ikpa Urualla	Catholic diocese of Orlu	Imo

16	Ijeoma Eze	f	Chorister, St. Paul Catholic Church, Eke	Catholic diocese of Enugu	Enugu
17	Ezeh IK	m	Member, St. Anthony Catholic Church, Ifite Awka	Catholic diocese of Awka	Anambra
18	Ndubuisi Amadi	M	Member, St Michael Parish	Catholic diocese of Umuahia	Abia

Source: produced by the researcher during fieldwork

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1. How has the COVID-19 pandemic affected the organization of the Catholic Church in southeastern Nigeria, in terms of organization of religious life and liturgy?
2. How has the pandemic affected the Catholic Church economy and the poor?
3. How has the pandemic affected the faith of believers?
4. Did the Roman Catholic Church in southeastern Nigeria lost any priest, church worker, or member due to COVID-19?
5. How has the pandemic affected or changed the doctrines of the Church?
6. How was the Church able to preach the gospel and celebrate masses during the pandemic?

## FINDINGS

The study disclosed that liturgical practices and organization of religious life in the Catholic Church were modified because of the pandemic. Obiora stated thus:



Yes, the pandemic led to some alterations in the liturgical celebrations. When it was at its peak, all public prayers were suspended. Parishes who could afford it embarked on online celebrations. The faithful followed some TV and radio stations for Masses and other celebrations.

In the same view, Joseph pointed:

In late March this year, the pandemic affected the gathering of the believers and they resorted to virtual services for celebrating masses. It affected the Holy Week and Easter celebration. The Holy week is a crucial festival that strengthens the Catholic faith and union in Christ. Though the festival was physically avoided, prayer sessions were held live on television and radios.

In the words of Ejimbeonwu:

The pandemic affected the organization of religious life and liturgy. During the upsurge, the church through the CBCN urged all Catholics to stay away from any form of religious gatherings like a celebration of Mass, various prayer groups, and meetings. The mass was celebrated online and on major television and radio stations. Even when the ban was lifted, times for these celebrations were very much limited. The church leaders took these measures to mitigate the spread of covid-19 among the faithful.

Kingsley and Ozioko shared the same view that during the pandemic, many church members did not put on their face masks willingly. Many were forced to put on their masks and wearing face masks became a criterion for entering the church. Members sit far apart in church during service; it wasn't like that before the Advent of the virus. In terms of organization, the time for masses is now different, masses that take up to two hours to end now end in an hour to observe social distancing.

When asked if the pandemic affected the church economy in southeast Nigeria, all the respondents were of the same view that the pandemic has affected the Catholic Church economy. In a conversation with Onyemauche, he stated the pandemic severely affected the Church. According to him, offertories were suspended. In his church, St. Joseph the Worker Parish Enekwasumpu, palliatives that were shared among the poor were gotten from the privileged ones in the church. Thus, he stated that the church is the richest as well as the poorest institute in the world. Money that comes into the church is determinant on the church members. Similarly, Anizoba responded that the pandemic affected the Church's economy indirectly. For

her, it is the financial status of the group of people that make up the church that determines the economy of the church. Ogadimma stated that the pandemic ate deep into the economy of the Catholic Church, but there is still much income from believers, as churches tend to stand in where the government could not cover. Most Catholic churches in the southeast, during this pandemic, have distributed alms to the less privileged and supply medication in health care centers for the faithful and non-faithful. Daily contribution and offerings flow remain intact but were mostly spent on assisting the faithful. Obiora responded "Most projects, especially schools, were closed. Again, because there were no public liturgical services, collections were also not made; even though some very generous ones supported their parish priests in so many ways". Ejimbeonwu recounted:

The economy was affected. Once the people stopped coming for liturgical celebrations, the free-will donations, and offerings spontaneously giving stopped. Again, the church spent much money on providing palliatives to Christ's faithful and the less privileged. So, to that extent, the purse of the church was depleted making the church begin to source more funds to take care of her needs and those of Christ's faithful.

Also, Chioma expressed that the pandemic has affected the economy of the Catholic church in such a way that the only collection made in the church by members is the main offering, other collections have been slashed till further notice and this has made the church not been able to carry out some projects due to financial situation. Anizoba narrated that where she works in a missionary school in St. Michael Catholic Church Nawgu, the pandemic has seriously affected the church's economy. She further narrated that the teachers in their missionary school have not been paid their salaries for about 5 months now because of the effect of the pandemic on the church economy.

Without expressing any doubt, Ebere replied that the pandemic has not affected the faith of Catholic Christians in the Southeast in any way. She further added that Christians have seen worse times and have passed through many crises in earlier years. Believers have witnessed many plaques yet remained unshaken. The pandemic is the right time for believers to pray, seeking their faith, do some penance, and get spiritual reassurance from spiritual directors. Believers rather see this pandemic as a spiritual challenge to grow in the love of God and their human relationship with fellow believers. In the same view, Obiora stated "I do not think it affected their faith. Many of them held fast to their belief and longed for the time the crisis would be over. Some understood that their families are domestic churches. They prayed more

with their family members". Ejimbeonwu shared a similar view by replying that the pandemic brought stronger trust and faith in God whom the believers hoped as their only source of the problem. The faithful prayed more asking and believing that God would answer and heal the world of this disease. God answered the prayers because the enthusiasm with which the people worshipped God when the lockdown was lifted showed their absolute trust in God.

On the contrary, other participants were of the view that the pandemic weakened the faith of Catholic believers. Mary responded:

The faith of some believers have weaned down because some activities to keep the faith of the believer up we're slashed like Bible study, morning and evening masses and others and also during the lockdown masses did not hold and because believers were not going to church their faith went down and even after churches opened they felt reluctant going to church because they have become used to staying at home

In the same vein, Matthew pointed out that the pandemic made those who were weak in faith to become weaker. He further recounted that after the lockdown, the Catholic Church in the southeast through societies and organizations began to preach and bring back members who have lost their faith. He concluded that so many members who were weak in faith saw it as an opportunity to stop participating in church activities.

During the interview, many of the participants did not know if the Catholic Church in the southeast lost any of its members or clergy because of the COVID-19 pandemic. However, Obiora informed that very few priests contracted the disease and died. Onyemauche narrated that he has no idea about any church member or clergy who has died because of the pandemic. But he further narrated that many church members have died in his parish because of hunger and hopelessness due to the lockdown.

Regarding the question on the changes of the doctrine, Obiora and Ejimbeonwu responded that doctrine of the church never changed. It remains intact. What changed was the system and modalities in teaching and administration. The expressions of the doctrine were adjusted because of the lockdown. Chioma and Chinenye stated that the part of the Catholic Eucharist celebration which involves sharing the sign of peace by body contact and handshaking was overruled. The normal kissing of the holy book by the priest at the altar was replaced by a bow. All physical objects such as prayer books and Missal were removed to avoid object contact. Receiving of Holy Communion which was normally placed on the tip of the tongue by the

priest was replaced by placing the communion safely on the palms of the recipients. The normal sick calls and sacrament of anointing the sick got restricted and can only be conducted by declarations or, if the victim is fortunate, a medical practitioner who is a catholic priest will carry it out.

During the lockdown, the Roman Catholic Church did not cease to carry out its major roles. The Church diverted completely to celebrating the Holy Eucharist through modern technologies. Ndubuisi and Ezeh IK informed that the church had used live stream videos, broadcasting, and social media to conduct services during the early outbreak of the pandemic. Later, places of worship reopened but some churches have moved completely online. Ijeoma, Ebuka, and Chidi in the same view responded that churches were able to preach the gospel and celebrate masses online and on the media like television, radio stations, and other social media platforms like Facebook. Ijeoma specifically pointed out that the radio station called Radio Sapientia was the most popular medium through which the faithful participated actively in Eucharistic celebrations and other liturgies in the southeastern region.

## **DISCUSSION**

The Christian communities do not see the coronavirus as a punishment for sins, but rather as a call to obey government directives and stay at home; a sign of the times that cannot be read and a call to help the sick and lonely. Churches refrained from looking for those guilty of the pandemic, as was the case in medieval Europe, where Jewish communities were accused of plague pandemic decimating Europe (Poliakov 2003; Prager and Telushkin 2003; Supple 2005; Slavicek 2008; Sulkowski and Ignatowski 2020). According to Onaiyekan (2020) "the COVID-19 pandemic has descended on humanity like a massive deadly attack from an unknown invisible enemy" The study showed that the Catholic Church in the southeast suspended church activities during the lockdown, but they did not close their buildings and prevented the public from coming in in small groups or individually whenever they wanted to pray. It should be noted that according to the government directives, church buildings were closed and limited to certain numbers of people, but the heart of the church doctrine did not in any way changed. The Catholic Church in the southeast did not see the pandemic as a sign of the wrath of God upon the world but as a time of trial when one needs to reach out to the lonely, the sick, and the poor. The church saw the pandemic era as a time for intense prayers.

In response to the Coronavirus outbreak, churches and other public places in Nigeria were locked down in late March 2020 for 6 weeks. After the lockdown was announced, it took some

months before church buildings and other public places began to reopen gradually. Church leaders with the cooperation of their church members began to seek alternative ways of worship and carrying out church activities (Afolaranmi 2020). The COVID-19 lockdown explored the importance of the internet in the church. The internet became an essential means for liturgical celebration. Priests were able to celebrate masses through social media platforms like Facebook, YouTube, etc. The lockdown showed how the Roman Catholic Church has accepted modern technology as one of the means of celebrating the Holy Eucharist. In Southeast Nigeria, the popular radio Sapiencia became a paramount medium used by many Catholics to participate in liturgical activities.

The Catholic Church in the southeast witnessed a great impact on its economy and the faith of its members because of the pandemic. Notwithstanding, the church took it upon itself to go into the field and gather its lost sheep. After the lockdown, Catholic societies like Marian society, the Legion of Mary, the Charismatic movement, St. Anthony of Padua, etc. began to move from door post to door post to bring back those who have lost their faith in Christ through the pandemic. Catholic Church members in southeast Nigeria, especially those who make earnings from missionary schools were affected financially. Catholic Christians whose sources of livelihood come from Church projects were left with less income to feed. The study also revealed that the Catholic Church in the southeast played a significant role in supporting the government and the less privileged despite the economic effect of the pandemic. The church provided face masks, hand sanitizers, and other relief materials to the poor.

In the diocese of Abakaliki for instance, Grey (2020) stated that the pastor of St. Patrick's parish and two mission churches in the diocese supported the poor by distributing bags of food and soap provided by the San Francisco based Mother of Mercy Charitable Foundation. The pastor of the parish stated that there was an increase in fear, anxiety, and a sense of hopelessness among the Catholic members and their faith. According to him, "when there is any disaster or calamity, the people of God run to the church and ask God for forgiveness, but with COVID-19, the case was not the same" (Grey 2020).

The study showed the connection between faith and science. There is a need to integrate faith and science in eradicating physical and unknown diseases. The pandemic became an eye-opener to Catholic Church leaders and members on ethical and hygienic practices. The church has begun to look beyond just the matter of faith and has also enforced hygienic teachings and obligation of government's rules and regulations in their teachings.

**CONCLUSION**

The pandemic, COVID-19 has a great impact on the Roman Catholic Church in south east Nigeria. Liturgical activities were slightly modified. The church adhered to the government's rules and regulations to curtail the spread of the virus. Catholic Christians were heavily affected financially due to the COVID-19 lockdown and this, in turn, affected the church's economy. Many Catholic Christians, who were not strong in faith, totally lost their faith while most of the faithful saw the period as a time of trial and a time to draw closer to God. The Catholic Church experienced a novel era of introducing modern technology as a major means through which the faithful participate in the Holy Eucharistic celebration. Externally, the pandemic greatly affected the Catholic Church in the southeast, but the heart of the liturgy remained unchanged.

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