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The Implications of COVID-19 on Catholic Education at the Catholic University of Zimbabwe: The Case of Bulawayo Campus 2019–2023

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Abstract: The main aim of this article is to unravel the implications of the COVID-19 pandemic on Catholic education at the Catholic University of Zimbabwe (CUZ), Bulawayo campus. The research, qualitative in nature, has been guided by the importance of Catholic education nationally. It has interrogated the effects of COVID-19 on that educational system. It does emerge quite prominently that Catholic education is key, and it is important in the lives of many citizens. The researcher establishes that the distinctive features of Catholic education have been part of the Bulawayo campus community. It is also shown that the implications of COVID-19 have been at two extremes. The researcher has managed to establish problems that were created by the pandemic such as the disruption in liturgy, learning and living daily life in an environment inspired by Jesus Christ. Furthermore, the history of the Catholic presence in Zimbabwe has played an important role in developing citizens, from the colonial era to the present day. The practices rooted in the principles of the church have been lived and practiced by many. Post-COVID-19 life slowly returned, and the researcher has managed to unravel factors that previously affected the lives of students and members of staff. Respondents highlighted changes and improvements in their well-being following the easing of lockdown (since March 2023) in relation to the values of Catholic education. Life in the “new normal” has brought hope as worship through Mass and other platforms of human contact have led to the cross-fertilisation of ideas amongst members of the university. The Catholic education features that were affected by the pandemic have been restored. In that regard, it can be argued that the restoration of traditional ways of doing things—the post-COVID-19 era—has brought hope to the CUZ community in Bulawayo and that it will produce men and women who will be morally upright citizens. Such citizens will use their knowledge to better the world following the principles acquired from a Catholic Education. Recipients of Catholic education have expressed optimism in the importance of being part of the Catholic community in its multi-faceted dimensions.

Keywords: COVID-19; Catholic education; Catholic distinctiveness; spiritual capital; “new normal”



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1. Introduction

This research assesses the implications of COVID-19 and the resultant lockdowns (from 2019) on Catholic education in Zimbabwe with specific reference to the Catholic University of Zimbabwe’s Bulawayo campus. The institution’s mission and values aim at producing a holistic student within a Christian setting. The research, therefore, has focused on university education with a human touch. It investigates the impact of lockdowns on the university and implications of teaching online. It is key to note that the ever-changing world due to pandemics has affected different religions and educational systems worldwide; this fact necessitates the present investigation.

Problem Statement

Catholic education is central to the Zimbabwean education sector. It has a long and rich history in the country. As a result of academic excellence in Catholic institutions of learning,

the Catholic Church has carved a niche that has compelled even those of different Christian denominations to enrol their children into Catholic schools. This is because parents are interested in the holistic approach of this curriculum, which moulds holistic individuals who can thrive in various spheres of life. However, due to the COVID-19 pandemic (especially lockdowns in Zimbabwe), the education sector closed physical platforms of interaction, opening avenues for alternatives in the form of virtual and online platforms.

Although such moves helped move the education agenda through blended learning, they nonetheless failed to offer the truly holistic approach of “the past” Catholic education, especially the spiritual nourishment of students. An aspect such as Mass, central in developing the spiritual element within the educational campus of the Catholic University in Bulawayo, was gravely affected. [Grace \(2002\)](#) provides a formal definition of “spiritual capital” as “resources of faith and values derived from commitment to a religious tradition” (cited in [Lydon 2002](#), p. 236). Furthermore, networking opportunities in lockdown situations are, to some extent, taken away. These networking opportunities are critical in expanding the Catholic network among students in any Catholic institution.

Inevitably, the present research has explored to what extent students studying at a Catholic university coped with the demands of a lockdown during the pandemic and how it impacted their growth since they no longer had a “physical contact” Christian setting. Part of the aim of the research was to analyse challenges, impediments and limitations of existing forms of Catholic education as well as achievements and vision for further growth within the university’s Bulawayo campus.

2. Literature Review

[Gelfand \(1968\)](#) states that missionary and colonial educations have been extensively recorded and can be read in documents that escaped wars in Matabeleland. Some of the documents highlight the history, mission statements, vision and future of Catholic education. Such works can only shape the research through providing its fundamental composition. They have mostly shaped the thinking of the entire research on Catholic Education from Fr. Depelchin’s Empandeni Mission dating back to 1888. That somewhat broadens it, revealing the extent and depth of Catholic involvement in pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial Zimbabwean education. This indicates the role of the Catholic Church’s policies and contributions over past years in terms of improving education or providing it where government efforts would have been hampered or too insufficient to spread evenly throughout the country. For years, the general citizenry held the view that Catholic education bridged the education gap in most parts of the country where national programmes had not been possible to implement.

[Muderedzwa \(2021\)](#) notes that, to date, Zimbabwe has 90 Catholic primary schools, 80 Catholic secondary schools, 18 skills and technical training centres and a couple of tertiary institutions such as the Catholic University and Arrupe Jesuit College, among others. It can be noted that there has been a vertical progression in the growth of Catholic institutions, which in turn continue to grow the identity and nature of the education of the Catholic Church.

3. State of Catholic Education in Zimbabwe at the Turn of Millennium

History places Catholics in a unique position in Zimbabwe. It is important to note that Catholic education has been constant and original in showing unique contributions to entire national educational packages through primary, secondary and tertiary levels, especially for students who passed through their schools. [Zvobgo \(2015\)](#) notes that Catholic education was at the forefront of politics both before and after independence. In addition, he states the irony of Christian education, which during colonial rule was used as an instrument of sustaining power and consolidating White control in key positions in socioeconomic and political spheres. Free education, therefore, has been somewhat limited (Zvobgo); however, Catholic education was democratic even during the colonial period. Catholic education

never segregated anyone as the church continued to build more schools in Zimbabwe, opening doors to marginalised communities and giving them academic space.

Catholic education has evolved over the past century to match the fast-changing world order. Zinyemba (2017) notes that the Catholic bishops of Zimbabwe in 1998 came up with the idea of establishing a university in addition to the fact that they were running various formation and academic houses for priests. The then-president of Zimbabwe, Robert Mugabe, was approached to allow the opening of a private university in Harare. Seventh-Day Solusi University and the University of Zimbabwe were the only two universities countrywide. The Catholic University was given a charter or license after the bishops noted that a sufficient number of the top ten schools at ordinary and advanced level were Catholic schools and that those schools would provide consistent streams of first year students. Catholic schools and others have fulfilled that role. CUZ was then opened in August 1999 as the third University in the country.

Dube (2017) notes that education, in its widest sense, is at the crossroads of societal development and knowledge, dynamic change processes and capacities to make choices. The key to understanding the education situation is recognising that it is neither an isolated phenomenon nor a dependent one; it receives and contributes; it creates and is created. It is at its creative best when interwoven with the total social human knowledge environment because it helps and prepares students for a better society. Dube (2017) suggests that Catholic education involvement could be understood through a new model that the present research hopes to establish and use, especially during the COVID-19 era. That education system or model would place studies on Catholic education on a sound religious footing for its university campus in Bulawayo. In Zimbabwe, the university has grown more than ever before, especially with the establishment of a Catholic campus in 1998 and subsequent campuses in Mutare, Bulawayo, Gokwe, Masvingo and Hwange/Victoria Falls. Part of the fellowship would be to cement history by bringing it more into public notice and discussion.

Ndlovu (2018) notes that—Catholic education emphasises developing students in all aspects: academically, morally, socially, spiritually and physically. He further notes that the rate at which numbers were growing at the Catholic University in Zimbabwe was a sign of Catholic education manifesting itself across other religions, as most people enrolled between the period from 2013 to 2018 when numbers rose substantially from 238 to 3200 in five years. He argues that Catholic education has been a success in all Catholic schools ranging from primary to secondary schools. After its establishment in 1988, the institution should have expected greater numbers because, apart from academic success, the university would become a centre of human formation. Fullan and Langworthy (2014) compare “old and new pedagogies” and highlight old pedagogies that focus on technology use, pedagogical capacity and content knowledge to achieve the primary goal of content mastery (p. 3). In contrast, new pedagogies model lecturer–student partnerships in the learning process. New pedagogies are “used to discover and master content knowledge and to enable the deep learning goals of creating and using new knowledge in the world” (p. 3). For the purposes of this research and for Catholic education to remain relevant, it should have new pedagogies that will resonate with the students of this century, and the education should be delivered aided by technological devices. It should be noted that even though the electronic gadgets are smart and necessary for teaching and learning, they cannot perform all the duties and tasks that a human being can do, for example conducting a Mass.

Ilo (2018) argues that maintaining the Catholic mission in Catholic higher education has become even more challenging given the need to recover the evangelical ideal of a Catholic university imbued with a religious dimension rooted in faith. Pope Benedict XVI (2007) spoke of this in 2008 at the Catholic University of America when he said:

Education is central to the mission of the Church to proclaim the Good News. . . . Every Catholic educational institution is a place to encounter the living God who in Jesus Christ reveals his transforming love and truth (*Spe Salvi*, 4). This

relationship elicits a desire to grow in the knowledge and understanding of Christ and his teaching.

It is out of such realisation that the Pope's view requires a physical approach in institutions of learning so that the physical encounter that is love and truth could be tangible. Devices and gadgets cannot provide the deep understanding of Christ and his teachings.

In view of the Pope's sentiments, it is essential to note that institutions of higher learning such as the Catholic University of Zimbabwe should operate within the dictates where the central mission of the Church will be to provide a broad understanding of Christ and his teachings. Furthermore, this view further contributes to the understanding of how COVID-19 implications have had a bearing on Catholic education, resulting in students lacking adequate spiritual nourishment programmes that they shared from time to time when they were on pre-lockdown campuses.

It should be noted that the Catholic University of Zimbabwe in relation to its policy on recruitment is multi-denominational, as it has brought forth people of various religions who are non-Catholics. [Lang \(2012\)](#) argues that Catholic universities are centres where cultures and faith intersect, where there is a healthy and wholesome dialogue within the community of faith, the community of the academy and the wider community in the search for truth and in meeting the pressing challenges that are dominant within the intellectual, religious, political or scientific communities. Catholic universities offer the freedoms animated by the Holy Spirit to seek and pursue the truth to its very roots and to understand the movement of the Spirit within diverse cultural and intellectual histories. This was the ideal situation in the Bulawayo campus. However, the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted this, leading to students receiving little or no attention as far as their spiritual life was concerned.

4. Characteristics of Catholic Education

According to Archbishop [Miller \(2006\)](#), the former Secretary for the Vatican's Congregation for Catholic Education, there are five elements of a Catholic school that are necessary for maintaining and strengthening its identity. The five provide the fundamental purpose and mission of Catholic institutions. Miller first points out that a Catholic institution must be inspired by a supernatural vision. Education must be fully representative in terms of forming students and be more than an "instrument for the acquisition of information that will improve the chances of worldly success" ([Miller 2006](#), p. 178). Second, a Catholic school must be founded on a Christian anthropology and be worthy of the Catholic school mission; the gospel of Jesus Christ is "to inspire and guide the Catholic school in every dimension of its life and activity" ([Miller 2006](#), p. 178). It is important that CUZ was also founded on this principle whereby Jesus Christ inspires/guides operations. If the university had failed to uphold this principle, it would not meet the standards of offering a whole package of Catholic education. Miller acknowledges that many Catholic schools fall "into the trap of secular academic success" rather than emphasising Jesus Christ as the school's vital principle. Third, a Catholic institution must be inspired and directed by communion and emphasise school as a community. A Catholic school or college must be true to its identity and "express physically and visibly the external signs of Catholic culture" (*ibid*, p. 336). Additionally, prayer must be a normal part of the school day and acts of religion should be perceived in every school. Human, physical and external signs of the Catholic culture are important amongst the university population, who must portray a certain decorum and behaviour to the outside world. Fourth, a Catholic school should be imbued with a Catholic worldview and the "spirit of Catholicism should permeate the entire curriculum" (*ibid*, p. 336). A Catholic school must educate the whole person; therefore, all instruction, not just religion, must be authentically Catholic in content and methodology. Fifth, a Catholic school must be sustained by gospel witness—that is teachers and administrators are responsible for creating a Catholic climate. "Catholic educators are expected to be models for ... students by bearing transparent witness to Christ and to the beauty of gospel" (p. 478). The present research has utilized the above framework,

especially principles two to four, in trying to place the effects of COVID-19 when dealing with university students during the COVID-19 pandemic when looking at the structural and educational challenges posed by the coronavirus.

Furthermore, the research integrates the views of the [Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales \(1996\)](#), which have five key pillars that are central to understanding the values of Catholic education. These include the search for excellence, which is seen as an integral part of the spiritual quest. Christians are called to seek perfection in all aspects of their lives. In Catholic education, students are therefore given the opportunity to develop their talents. It can be noted that the CUZ has tried its level best under the pandemic to develop the talents of students to their maximum levels despite the obvious hindrances.

On the education for all (inclusive) pillar, the church states that no one should be segregated on any basis and that all students must be afforded opportunities on equal basis regardless of their tribe, race, gender, colour, creed or disability. The Catholic University has always followed this principle, hence the ever-growing student population. In terms of respect for the dignity of the individual, the Catholic tradition teaches that human dignity can be protected and a healthy community can be achieved only if human rights are protected and responsibilities are met. Therefore, every person has a fundamental right to life and a right to those things required for human decency. In that regard, the CUZ before and during the pandemic made sure that it conducted random checks on students and staff to see whether they had any problems.

On the fourth principle of holistic education and moral education, the relationship, ethos and climate for learning should be hinged on Catholic teachings. This goes beyond touching on factors such as assessment to make sure that students produced are of good quality and can function well in the society.

[D'Souza \(2016\)](#) argues that this distinctiveness of Catholic education is grounded in its theological anthropology and a universal Catholic philosophy of education. Catholic education operates from a classicist notion of common culture and common end that views the school as a site for evangelisation based on a shared worldview and a shared faith. D'Souza sees this goal of common culture as decisive, because by recognizing the dignity of each individual student, the Catholic school plays its part in moving beyond religious and cultural differences to qualities that bind a diverse student body as human persons marked by personal dignity and united by their common humanity, who contribute to society and are bound upon a common human journey.

In relation to the above view from D'Souza, [Pope John Paul II \(2002\)](#) states that the specific purpose of Catholic education is the formation of men and women who will be good citizens of this world, loving God and their neighbours and enriching society with the leaven of the gospel. Furthermore, they are expected to be citizens of the world to come, thus fulfilling their destiny to become saints.

The pressing challenge of clearly identifying the aims of Catholic education and applying its methods is to fully understand the educational enterprise. Thus, the enterprise of properly evaluating its content and transmitting the full truth concerning the human person, created in God's image and called to life, is clearly called for.

An emphasis on the inalienable dignity of the human person, above all on his or her spiritual dimension, is especially necessary today. Unfortunately, far too many in governments, businesses, the media and even the educational establishment perceive education to be merely an instrument for the acquisition of information that will improve chances of worldly success and a more comfortable standard of living. Such an impoverished vision of education is not Catholic.

The Catholic college is committed to the development of the whole man. This is rooted in the curriculum of the CUZ since in Christ, the perfect man, all human values find their fulfilment and unity. The CUZ is dedicated to the above view, and this has been achieved over the last couple of decades since the inception of the university. This is made possible through its core values and mission. The evidence of this is supported by the

ever-increasing numbers, good results and well-formed students, which can be seen as the specific Catholic character of a learning establishment.

The duty to cultivate human values in their own legitimate right in accordance with its particular mission to serve all men has its origin in the figure of Christ. He is the one who ennobles man and gives meaning to human life. This is the model that the Catholic education is following. In light of the above, Pope John Paul II believes that it is true that Catholic education should play a vital role in developing an individual.

Most institutions, including the Catholic University of Zimbabwe, are trying hard to balance the aspect of being knowledge factories that will produce citizens for the market and citizens for the world who would work enlightened by the supernatural vision and power of Christ.

COVID-19 affected the Catholic experience with students, as most of them, especially the first years who joined university community life online, failed to understand the teachings of the Church due to physical indulgence with the environment.

5. Challenges of COVID-19 on African Education

According to the Human Rights Watch 35th ordinary session Children Learning Less through Distance Education, students frequently studied fewer topics or less content through distance learning (between 2019 and 2023). They argue that many students echoed struggling with online learning in South Africa, among other southern African nations, due to a range of access issues, whereas in countries such as Kenya the Internet was available but the money to buy credit (airtime) was not available. Although some colleges in Morocco offered online classes, others faced difficulties, [Human Rights Watch \(2020\)](#): “Sometimes we don’t hear from a teacher for the whole day.” Students pointed out. These experiences were not unique to other countries; they occurred even in Zimbabwe and particularly at the CUZ across its campuses.

This research builds on the achievements and outcomes of Catholic education and teachings in its institutions and beyond, showing problems and impediments that have occurred as a result of the pandemic. Part of the aims of this research was an analysis of the challenges, impediments and limitations of existing forms of Catholic education as well as achievements and a vision for further growth within the university’s Bulawayo campus. [Johnson \(2016\)](#) notes that intellectual institutions (universities, colleges, research institutions, etc.) have increasingly crucial roles in societal development as knowledge generators.

6. Methodology

Primary data was collected about the implications of COVID-19 on Catholic education at the CUZ (Bulawayo Campus); data collected from students, members of staff, nuns and the priest. This section is based on in-depth interviews, where 10 participants were interviewed face-to-face and others were contacted online. The sample size was twelve initially but only ten responded; six respondents were interviewed face-to-face, whereas the other interviews were conducted online. The sample was a mixture of five Catholics and five non-Catholics, giving a total of 10.

This research employed a qualitative approach. The researcher employed a qualitative technique that allowed the researcher to analyse the different views of individuals because of the subjectivity of some of the information. It should be noted that the information from key respondents follows different views. According to [Deacon et al. \(1999, p. 40\)](#), “sampling issues involve all kinds of areas, most commonly people, social groups, events, activities institutions and texts”. These are referred to as the population of interest, and in this case, the population is an institution, the Catholic University of Zimbabwe. The research used a purposive sample, which was comprised of staff members, students, nuns and the priest. The idea was to deal with people who are part of the Catholic University who have an understanding and an appreciation of what Catholic education is all about. Ten people were interviewed. Respondents were asked semi-structured questions to allow for follow-up questions that would seek clarity where respondents would have not understood.

Kerlinger in Raj (2005, p. 21) observes that the interview is “perhaps the most ubiquitous method of obtaining information from the people”. The present researcher relied on face-to-face interviews and Internet interviews. Jupp (2006, p. 157) says the following on types of interviews: most commonly, interviews are conducted on a face-to-face basis and they can take a variety of forms. They can range from informal, unstructured and naturalistic, in-depth discussions through to very structured formats with answers offered from a prescribed list in a questionnaire or a standardized interview schedule. It should be noted that this research used semi-structured interviews and that the sample was drawn within the university. It was purposive in nature, whereby all the chosen participants had knowledge about the functions of the university under study. Furthermore, the information gathered was analysed according to major themes.

The study was motivated primarily by the need to collect qualitative data in response to research questions enquiring about whether Catholic education has contributed to the lives of the Zimbabwean citizenry.

7. Data Presentation and Analysis

Section 7 presents data that were drawn from different sources and responses from respondents. The views were deciphered and further broken down into themes after a rigorous data analysis. This section further integrates the findings with various scholarly views to elaborate on what was obtained at the CUZ (Bulawayo campus). The data and evidence of the research are presented under the themes below.

- **Respondent One, a Student Studying towards a Degree in Development Studies, Said:**

... when I joined CUZ from high school I was coming from a non-Catholic school but I knew that Catholic universities and their schools are known for good education that is supported by proper infrastructure and all their activities are rooted in Christianity. This is the experience I came here for, but now due to COVID-19, learning and acclimatizing to this institution has been a bit difficult because learning and worshipping were reduced online.

Students decried the situation and noted that they lost out a lot in terms of spiritual development. Although education continued online, other Christian values that they receive from other platforms within the campus were not attained. Educators, priests and nuns bemoaned the situation, saying many spiritual and human development sessions premised on Catholic Education that they had started with students in an effort to impart Catholic values in their multi-faceted manner were seriously affected. These activities included counselling and mentoring sessions for students, preparing for Mass (choir practices and those who would do readings), morning and evening rosary prayers and meeting other Catholic students from nearby universities. This created a challenge in helping students to be fully trained in Catholic education, as those practices rooted in Christ were seriously compromised.

The evidence below is ordered according to the challenges faced:

- **Respondent Two, a Priest and Lecturer in the Theology Department, Said:**

COVID-19 has taken away the traditional ways of worshipping and the time to nurture our students to be responsible adults. I feel sorry for them as the university is now operating online.

- **Respondent Eight, a Nun and a Lecturer, Noted That:**

The good mentorship programme that we started has been greatly affected. This helped the university form students so that they would become upright citizens who would use education to better the world. The process of mentorship always allowed students to fit well into the new learning environment as we shared with them the values of Catholic Education.

The university mentorship programme was designed to help students fit well in the Catholic community beyond their educational studies. Ethical behaviour, spirituality and collegiality were key factors of the mentoring process. Students were allocated to different members of staff who would assist them with their socio-spiritual needs. This was conducted in line with the university visions and mission, which state that the Catholic University of Zimbabwe provides holistic education in a Christian environment in its teaching, research and service programmes to all, irrespective of religion, nationality or any other designation. In that regard, this was largely affected by the pandemic. As a result, the smooth process of educating students might have seemed to be functional through online teaching, but the distinct features and feelings that occur in the supernatural were lost.

Furthermore, the animations of buildings and the halls of residence for students have images of the church and crucifixes. Students would also interact with the well-animated environment, which they did not get in their homes. The decorations were put in all rooms. Even those who are non-Catholic ended up understanding the importance of prayer.

- **Respondent Three, a Student, Said:**

The area is conducive for learning and accommodation but what is outstanding for me where the images placed on the of walls of our rooms and in our classrooms.

- **Respondent Four, a Student:**

Learning from home was a tough exercise during the pandemic; online learning detached (separated) me from the spiritually conducive environments, which the Catholic University of Zimbabwe (Bulawayo Campus) offers.

These distinctive attributes of the Catholic University in Bulawayo are to ensure that it is not “self-serving”. Rather, Catholic education serves the whole society, enriching the lives of people everywhere. Through its unique nature, the Bulawayo campus continues to benefit us all.

From the data gathered and analysed, it emerged with prominence that COVID-19 affected the Catholic experience, especially Catholic education. Respondents, both Catholic and non-Catholic, highlighted that the prolonged closure, which brought about the interruption in learning and worshipping within the campus, brought challenges, as it affected their spiritual growth and education in general. Catholic education is therefore distinct, and anyone, in any way, cannot substitute it. It is useful to note that from the pool of respondents there were non-Catholics. This was to measure what they understood about being in a Catholic University and what is it that they understood about Catholic education.

8. Broader Curriculum

“Broader curriculum” is a broad and balanced curriculum that provides learners with the skills, knowledge and understanding they need to develop into well-rounded, informed individuals.

It is useful to note that the values underpinning Catholic education were affected to a certain extent because of the failure to live and practice them within the Catholic University community. This was a due to the fact that Catholic education, as a multi-pronged approach, has principles of its philosophy engraved through the inspiring features that are found on Catholic campuses. For example, respondents noted that being away from the physical structure of the classes, which are decorated with crucifixes and other religious paraphernalia, resulted in difficulties in terms of concentration when it came to their schoolwork.

- **Respondent Six Said**

The animations and decorations on our walls make our learning environment attractive and conducive for learning. It gives a good feeling that we are protected and the crucifixes have an underlying effect, which I cannot explain, but the feeling is supernatural.

Indeed, Catholic teachings that were meant to permeate across the curriculum as a whole, such as Masses and counselling sessions, could not be lived and practiced due to COVID-19. It is therefore not in question that the current curriculum should begin to go back to the pre-COVID era so that the university produces men and women who are guided by the Spirit of God. This view is corroborated by Miller (2006), who states that Catholic education is “intentionally directed to the growth of the whole person”.

An integral education aims at gradually developing every capability of every student: his or her intellectual, physical, psychological, moral and religious capacities. Vatican documents speak of an education that responds to all needs of the human person. It can therefore be noted that COVID-19 indeed disrupted the envisaged visions and goals of Catholic education. For example, the intellectual capacity was achieved through online learning, whereas the physical aspects through sports and manual work were not covered (these duties were performed so that students would live a healthy lifestyle). “Also little if none was done to help us on our moral and religious needs so this affected our spiritual sustenance”, according to respondents 1, 6 and 7.

Furthermore, the mentorship programme of the Catholic University was affected, hence students who joined the university when COVID-19 restrictions were in force could not be oriented fully. As a result, the university is now currently trying to assist and help these students to understand life on campus, which is permeated with Catholic rigor.

9. Liturgy and Communion

The Catholic University of Zimbabwe, Bulawayo Campus values the aspects of liturgy and communion amongst its community. It should be noted that liturgy was affected in various ways during the pandemic and that there have been improvements of late, with post-pandemic relaxations and easing of regulations at a national level leading to the new normal.

Ilo (2018) defines the word liturgy as “work of the people”, whereas within the Catholic Church it is used to describe all the public acts of worship that take place, as it draws the people towards God. Liturgy is in many ways the public face or shopfront of the Church; it is through the liturgy that people engage with the faith and deepen their relationship with God.

Liturgy is the divine worship of the Church and includes the celebration of Mass, the celebration of the Sacraments and the Divine Office or Daily Prayer of the Church. The celebration of the Eucharist is the source and summit of the Catholic faith and so all other liturgies flow from and to the celebration of Mass.

The Holy Eucharist refers to Christ’s body and blood appearing as a consecrated host on the altar, and Catholics believe that the consecrated bread and wine are actually the body and blood and soul and divinity of Christ. For Catholics, the presence of Christ in the Holy Eucharist is not just symbolic; it is real.

When one receives Holy Communion, he or she is intimately united with Jesus Christ as he literally becomes part of you. Additionally, by taking Holy Communion, one expresses union with all Catholics who believe the same doctrines, obey the same laws and follow the same leaders.

Respondents echoed similar views about how COVID-19 affected the liturgy and communion. This is what they had to say:

9.1. Respondent One, a Student in Department of Development Studies

We missed the good times we had for our choir practice in preparation for our Wednesday afternoon mass, where we would physically meet with Christ through the liturgy of the sacrament.

9.2. Respondent Six, a Student in the Department of Business Management

Church is fantastic. I miss having Holy Communion. It rejuvenates my spirit and it keeps me on track as I take stock of my life. Now I have gone for months without eating the body of Christ. This makes me weak. I feel empty.

Smyth et al. (2013) state that it is Catholic to educate the whole child, addressing the requirements of his or her natural and supernatural perfection. It is Catholic because it provides an education in the intellectual and moral virtues. It is Catholic because it prepares for a fully human life at the service of others and for the life of the world to come. All instructions, therefore, must be authentically Catholic in content and methodology across the entire programme of studies. It can be noted that the way Masses were conducted in the Catholic University of Zimbabwe, Bulawayo campus during the pandemic was no longer authentic. Praising and worshipping was affected, as indicated by respondents who noted that they would feel empty if they went for more than one week without going to church. Even non-Catholic students said they enjoyed being part of the mass proceedings, even though they did not receive communion. They highlighted that being part of the group that was worshiping gave them a different dimension towards understanding God in a Catholic manner. Most of them noted the balanced way that the church gives through preaching and holy sacraments, among other teachings, which were shared among the students (such as abstinence) and relevant to them and their future.

9.3. Respondent Seven, a Student in the Theology Department

Taking part in Catholic masses as a non-Catholic has taught me that God exists and this helps me to be responsible citizen, as I would go to mass twice a week on Wednesday and Friday. The teachings, which were shared by the priests, gave my colleagues and I a different view about life and being a responsible citizen. However, during the pandemic, that feeling was affected but it helped me to remain in prayer and abstain from drugs which flourished and became the order of the day in my neighborhood.

Moreover, the pandemic came with economic challenges, with some students considering withdrawing from their studies. It also emerged that, in an effort to search for excellence in the COVID-19 period, most affected students were starting their first years. The students in question had their orientation online and, as a result, they could not be informed and taught how the entire university operated. Furthermore, those who were non-Catholics admitted that it was difficult to cope because they were new to the Catholic life but wanted the unique programmes found in the university in their quest to obtain requisite qualifications. It was realised that in the quest for excellence they were told that the Catholic University was the best alternative.

All respondents were of the same view that the Catholic experience and its distinctiveness was affected by the pandemic. Now, the university management is trying to help students and lecturers to go back to the traditional ways—having Mass twice a week, on Wednesday and Sundays. The priests have timetabled sessions for students who need counselling services. Liturgical life came to a standstill in the first months when the resident priests were not comfortable with conducting Mass online. Baptized Catholics, understanding the importance of having the Holy Communion during Mass, were finding difficulties carrying on during that period. Other Catholics said they suffered depression because the philosophical teaching given earlier in life about the role of communion in the Catholic Church could no longer be enjoyed. Those who were non-Catholic argued that even without receiving communion during the liturgical episodes, they felt vulnerable because the spiritual guidance they had previously received was then missing. Christian values, especially Catholic ones, were somewhat evaporated during the pandemic. It is therefore not in question that COVID-19 affected Catholic uniqueness. To a larger extent, the belief system inculcated in the faithful following Catholic education and teaching still remained the same. On the whole, even those who were part of other congregations admitted that

the experience of Catholic education is unique and that the values of holistic education are important to any individual.

In terms of liturgy, priests resorted to sending various spiritual teachings through WhatsApp (social media site) and Zoom (video conferencing) when COVID-19 began. One priest notes that it was difficult at first to keep the faithful spiritually nourished, as he believed online forms of worshipping were too deficient to champion the role of Catholic education considering that some aspects of community life and liturgy had already been highly compromised.

10. Experiencing and Living Catholic Education in the New Normal

Present research established that the opening of space from lockdowns brought hope to all members of the Catholic University. Most respondents admitted that their life during the pandemic had been negatively affected. In May 2023, there are some improvements in the way Catholics operate following the easing of COVID-19 restrictions.

10.1. Respondents Two, Four and Seven Concurred That:

It is good to be back at college day to interact with the environment on campus. It is awesome as it allows us to share ideas that are good for us.

Being away from college drained me. I could not manage without prayer, the engaging environment and sharing views with colleagues on a daily basis. I almost suffered from depression, but thanks to Catholic teachings I know that life is sacred and it must be valued.

10.2. Respondent Nine, a Lecturer, Said the Easing of Lock down Allows Effective Teaching

While these students learnt online, not all of them managed to learn effectively. We are happy that they are back physically on campus. This will go a long way in assisting them to be fully-fledged students who are well developed, both intellectually and spiritually. The physical environment makes them get the real feel of the Catholic distinctiveness features.

Pope Francis (2008) states that Catholic education is “intentionally directed to the growth of the whole person”. An integral part of education aims at gradually developing every capability of every student: his or her intellectual, physical, psychological, moral and religious capacities. *Gravissimum Educationis* speaks of an education that responds to all needs of the human person.

Since the relaxation of the COVID-19 laws and protocols, the nature of Catholic distinctiveness and Catholic experience have begun to improve.

10.3. Respondent Five, a Student in the Department Information Technology, Said:

I am happy to back at college. This will go a long way in our lives as students especially with regards liturgy and education for us.

The respondent noted that having gone for a two-year “break”, now they are slowly getting spiritually nourished in a holistic environment that is bringing new dimensions in the education process and in liturgy.

In terms of liturgy, there is a growing interest amongst students, even though numbers are no longer impressive during Masses compared with the pre-COVID-19 era. However, respondents expressed optimism that numbers would improve so that more congregants could enjoy the Eucharistic liturgy. Opening in the new normal has not only brought spiritual upliftment but has also created environments conducive for teaching and learning, as the physical interaction between students and lecturers has been allowed through the restoration of some of the practices that were temporarily lost during COVID-19. This allows students and the community at the CUZ to engage with Jesus in a fundamental manner, where the values of Catholic education in the search for excellence are espoused. It can be argued that there is no way an individual can search for excellence outside the

distinctness of the Catholic faith, which is lived experience. Student respondents argued that Catholic educational teachings are central and important to the way all researchers relate to the world.

10.4. Broader Curriculum in the New Normal

Learning had continued online; however, since February 2023 face-to-face learning has resumed. This has improved learning of the values of the Catholic Church: a clear indication that the philosophy of the Church is rooted in the hearts and minds of many.

Although most respondents seem to live and practice Catholic education and experience, its key tenets are known by a few. Nine out of ten respondents agreed that Catholic philosophies, especially in education, have stood the test of time, and those who lived the Catholic experience concur that they obtained sustenance that they lacked in their previous formative years and during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The gospel of Jesus Christ and his very person are meant to inspire and guide the Catholic school in every dimension of its life and activity, its philosophy of education, its curriculum, its community life, its selection of teachers and its physical environment.

11. Research Finding

In view of the fact that education is key and central to the Church, it has emerged from responses of the respondents that when they were on campus, they encountered the living God and that their learning was enlightened by the environment that they were exposed to. A similar view is expressed by Milner, who states that this relationship elicits a desire to grow in the knowledge and understanding of Christ and his teachings. Although the pandemic negatively affected so much, the impact did not destroy the entire system but dislocated parts of university operations.

Both students and lecturers in their responses highlighted that decorations in the halls of residence and classrooms were essential to keeping their faith alive. They revealed that when they were away from the main campus, they could feel the emptiness. It is in the new normal where students have continued to do well in their work in terms of learning outcomes; this is due to improved access to university facilities, which expose them to the physical and visible external signs of the Catholic culture, such as the communion, which is received by those who are fully baptised.

12. Challenges and Possibilities in Catholic Education after COVID-19

During lockdowns, it was difficult to administer prayer to students when they were at home. Compromise on forming a complete person led to students wishing they were back on campus having Mass and living a full Christian life: residing on the university campus, praying on a regular basis, going to choir practice and attending academic lessons. However, it should be noted that in the post-COVID-19 era they have returned to the university and are back on prayer. Prayer has always been an essential ingredient of CUZ students, be they Catholic or non-Catholic. Despite the challenges faced during the mandated lockdowns, students did not throw away the correct culture of the Catholic Church and its teachings in relation to Catholic education as a whole. The correct and true culture of the Catholic Church permeated across practices that were followed in the school curriculum, as stated by Bishop Milner.

The study realised that the university tried its level best to play an important role in moulding students into responsible citizens that graduated with relevant qualifications. This is evidenced when lecturers, nuns and the resident priest state that the mentorship programme had been negatively affected by the pandemic. In that regard, it is a clear sign that educators were conscious of what they were meant to do in terms of developing the faith and growth of students. In line with Bishop Miller's view, one can note that, under difficult times, the CUZ system as a whole did not deviate from the principles of Catholic education, even though some of them were only partially implemented. On the whole, it is clear that the Catholic climate has been fully restored following the new normal,

with students and lecturers applauding the easing of lockdowns and the resumption of face-to-face lectures. The university becomes transparent and open in its learning and witnessing of Christ's operations.

13. Conclusions

This research sought to understand implications of COVID-19 lockdowns on Catholic education in Zimbabwe at the CUZ, Bulawayo campus. It clearly emerged that the pandemic affected the life experiences of Catholic students who could no longer obtain the essential human touch with lecturers and religious personnel. Students admitted that they had lost touch and that they had to be re-orientated when they returned to college. It is not in question that the new normal has brought about a new phase that has new ways of understanding Catholic education. The emerging ways started with the running of liturgy Masses through online platforms. It can further be argued that the platforms are slowly vanishing following the opening of spaces; however, they might remain as an alternative platform in some liturgy situations. Students admitted that learning was difficult, as it was online with new demands. Grades fell, necessitating a need to return to face-to-face interaction with lecturers. The teaching staff acknowledged the challenges of teaching online in a country where Internet use is expensive and there are power cuts and hyperinflation. Despite the pandemic, the university was still guided by its mission and vision in terms of providing holistic education in a Christian environment through sticking to its mandate of being guided by the principles of the Catholic Church. It can be said that Catholic education is distinct, and it is a key feature of proper spiritual development that is imparted to students. The CUZ contributed positively to producing well-rounded citizens who live a Christian life hinged on Jesus Christ.

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