

# Covid-19 Disruptions in the Catholic Diocese of Bethlehem in the Free State, South Africa

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## Abstract

Since the beginning of Christianity, pulpit or church sermons have been the primary mode of delivering sermons. The last decade has seen huge progress in technological advancement in Africa. Several pastors have now empowered themselves with the use of technology in their ministry and in delivering sermons. In 2019, Covid-19 swept across the globe and caused worldwide panic. In South Africa, the National Institute for Communicable Diseases reported the first case of Covid-19 in March 2020. To contain the spread of the coronavirus, the President of South Africa, Mr Cyril Ramaphosa, announced a lockdown for 21 days and alert level 5 was imposed on South Africans. That compelled all South Africans to stay at home, and all faith-based gatherings were prohibited. Thus, preaching the Word of God in churches was prohibited. During the pandemic, online sermons or the streaming of church services online became a popular way of hearing Sunday sermons. This article discusses the historical use of technology, for example, radio and television, which were the tools employed to reach out further. We will explore the recent use of online sermons and electronic communion in churches, particularly in the Catholic Church. Statistics will be scrutinised to examine the effects of online sermons and faith practices (electronic communion). In achieving the goal of this article, the study utilised desk research and oral interviews through a narrative analysis of aspects mentioned by church leaders and congregants considered to relate directly to online sermons and electronic communion. The following will be points of discussion: methodology, with a brief discussion of data collection and analysis; the Covid-19 crisis; the impact of coronavirus and leadership; alternative methods employed by the Diocese of Bethlehem; challenges with online sermons; successes; electronic communion; recommendations; and conclusion.

**Keywords:** Bethlehem; online sermons; Covid-19; lockdown; parishioners

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## Introduction

In 2019, Covid-19 swept across the globe and caused worldwide panic. South Africa was hard-hit by a high number of Covid-19 cases. The pandemic did not give the church time to convoke a synod or conference to deliberate on the challenges and problems brought about by Covid-19. All local congregations where faith communities gather, celebrate, inspire and are inspired, had to be closed.

While spiritual hunger was rampant, many Christians under hard lockdown regulations continued to be spiritually uplifted. They were forced to deal with online sermons that were available to those privileged enough to have online access. However, they experienced manifold forms of deprivation when the doors of the church were closed. Veldsman suggests that the Covid-19 pandemic would have a long-term impact on most people. He explains that the pandemic left scars, wounds, and socioeconomic destruction—not only in its wake, but over and above deep existing scars (Veldsman 2021, 375).

When lockdown levels were relaxed, all gatherings (including churches in South Africa) reduced their capacity due to the requirement for social distancing. There were fewer church services. There was also a group of Christians who participated in live-streamed Mass or church services from the comfort of their homes.

The researcher aims to zoom into the Bethlehem Diocese's response to the situation. Therefore, the research is based on the Bethlehem Diocese, which is to serve as a test case for the rest of the Catholic Community in South Africa. Moreover, the article will investigate if it was irresponsible of church leaders to close the doors of the church during the crisis of the pandemic.

## Methodology

In this presentation, participants in the research were chosen on the assumption that they could contribute immensely to the discussion. Participants were carefully chosen from different parts of the Diocese of Bethlehem. That included priests, religious sisters and the laity. Their pastoral experience spanned between five to 30 years at the time of the research. The interviews were conducted in Southern Sotho, isiZulu and English, and the location was approved by the participants.

## Data Collection

Data collection took place in the four deaneries within the diocese of Bethlehem, namely Central, Southern, QwaQwa, and Mpumalanga. The researcher conducted face-to-face interviews, and at the end of the interviews, the interviewees were granted the opportunity to add their own personal experiences of Covid-19 and their thoughts thereof.

## Data Analysis

The qualitative method was utilised in this research. The researcher took time to go through the transcripts while listening to the audio recordings. With an open mind, the researcher allowed the data to speak to him while he noted down anything that was relevant in the transcript and recordings. For instance, the researcher took note of emerging themes and common themes based on the coronavirus experience.

Finally, efforts were made to do justice to the contributions of the participants during the interpretation of the data. The findings were connected to the literature review to gain a deeper understanding of the impact of Covid-19 on the Catholic community.

## Covid-19 Crisis

In 2020, South Africa struggled with coronavirus and had a high rate of transmission. When the President of South Africa, Mr Cyril Ramaphosa, announced the initial lockdown, all South Africans were compelled to stay home, and all faith-based gatherings were prohibited (South African Government 2020). The churches, synagogues and mosques were affected by the restrictions of the hard lockdown, and this affected the physical gathering of people. It is worth noting that these religious institutions supported the lockdown measures to contain the spread of the coronavirus. Subsequently, Bishop De Groef wrote a pastoral letter to priests and said: “I further implore you all to make people aware of the seriousness of this disease and the importance of keeping to the measures already propagated by President Ramaphosa” (De Groef 27.03.2020).

The initial lockdown measures announced by the president and subsequent announcements, which came to be known as “Family Meetings,” affected other institutions through the “closure of borders and the halting of airlines’ operations” (Fuso and Edunyah 2020, 4). The livelihoods of families were affected in terms of relationships as well as their sources of income. The government implemented stringent measures to curb the virus; for instance, a ban was enforced on the sale of tobacco and alcohol.

The churches relied on online sermons or the streaming of church services online to connect with families and the downtrodden. Thus, online sermons became a popular way of hearing Sunday sermons—sometimes even daily sermons. Interestingly, the head of the Roman Catholic Church, Pope Francis, during the hard lockdown, live-streamed the daily celebration of the Holy Mass for 1.6 billion Catholics worldwide (Francis 2020).

The situation above necessitated a series of questions, such as: What would Jesus do in this situation? Is the church flaming fear among people instead of showing them faith and trust in God?

It is necessary to zoom into the response of the Catholic Church to the hard lockdown and the response of the Bethlehem Diocese to the Covid-19 crisis. The Bishop of Bethlehem, Jan de Groef, who was in Belgium during the hard lockdown, wrote pastoral letters addressed to the priests, religious and faithful of the diocese. He issued circulars to encourage the live-streaming of Mass, online sermons and spiritual communion, among other spiritual exercises that could be performed at the peak of Covid-19. Priests were encouraged to make social platforms available to preach on Sundays and Holy Days of Obligation. Facebook was commonly used as a means of connecting with the faithful. Priests posted their sermons and words of encouragement on their Facebook accounts. However, the cost of data was a challenge even to seminarians, whose studies were interrupted by the coronavirus. Many of them had to stay with a priest at a presbytery to have access to parish Wi-Fi.

The Easter celebrations of 2020 were not celebrated, even though the Holy See (through the Congregation for Divine Cult and Discipline of the Sacraments) issued a decree on how Easter could be celebrated in different countries and dioceses (Sarah, Prot. N. 153/20). In this regard, Bishop De Groef issued a diocesan decree: “Because of the lockdown, we shall no longer be able to have any kind of meeting, even for prayer in church, outside the home. Holy Week falls within the period of lockdown, and all celebrations will have to be celebrated at home (by families)” (De Groef 24.03.2020). He further emphasised that there would be no sacraments celebrated during the Easter vigil: “As there will be no public Easter vigil celebrated, those baptisms and confirmations will have to be postponed” (De Groef 24.03.2020).

Concerning funerals, the bishop gave the following guidelines:

It is understood that there can no longer be funerals, Masses, nor even services. Adhering to the measures already propagated and still more severely applied by the lockdown, there can be only a short prayer at the graveyard with just a couple of family members attending. There should surely not be a night vigil. (De Groef 25.03.2020)

The sick were deprived of the sacrament of healing during the hard lockdown. Bishop De Groef issued a decree saying:

Because of the lockdown, regular communion to the sick will not be able to continue. It is left to the discretion of the priest to discern when you are called to a sick person in danger of death. When assisting this person, all precautionary health protection measures must be adhered to. (De Groef 25.03.2020)

In essence, the lockdown restrictions were not implemented smoothly in a rural diocese like Bethlehem. As a result of this crisis, the Catholic Church in the Diocese of Bethlehem still feels the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic two years later. In many parishes, people have still not returned to church in the same numbers as before Covid-19. In the next section, the author will look at the response of the leadership of the Diocese of Bethlehem in the midst of the Covid-19 crisis.

## Impact of Coronavirus and Leadership

According to Gill (2012, 9), “Leadership is showing the way and helping or inducing others to pursue it. This entails envisioning a desirable future, promoting a clear purpose or mission, supportive values and intelligent strategies, and empowering all those concerned.” Therefore, the principle of leadership could be used to investigate the impact that the leaders of the church had at the peak of the coronavirus. Some of the leaders of the church were sceptical about online sermons or online church services. For example, Cardinal Ramiero Cantalamessa (2022) had this to say: “The internet age has made people to turn their backs on Jesus” (<https://www.catholicnewsagency.com>).

Our interviews in the Diocese of Bethlehem revealed that the impact of coronavirus varied according to parishes and the leadership therein. A youthful priest, Father Sifiso Thusi, pastor of Christ, the Good Shepherd parish, a small town in Senekal, said that in using technology, baptism preparations were done via Zoom, because some young couples were wary of bringing their toddlers and active children to Mass at a time of strict sanitary regulations. Children preparing for First Holy Communion were catechised via the internet (Thusi, Interview 22 June 2022).

The team of priests working in QwaQwa, with 30 000 Catholics, was heavily affected by Covid-19. They had to look, at least, after 10 funerals in a week. There was so much death, and they had to relate to people remotely.

The researcher looked closer at data that revealed the impact of Covid-19 on the Diocese of Bethlehem. There were more empty seats in church (after the pandemic), even though people were vaccinated. Mpumalanga Deanery suffered the largest attendance loss. Compared to the Southern Deanery, there were parishes that saw a 20% drop in attendance. Mpumalanga saw a 40% drop. In Central Deanery, closer to the seat of the bishop, the average attendance showed a 15% drop in persons attending church services. Within that same time frame, slightly less of a drop was experienced by QwaQwa Deanery, where attendance was down by 12%.

During this time, the church did not welcome new members. Fr. Michael Atoro, pastor in QwaQwa, said that the attendance and offerings were both down since the beginning of the pandemic (Atoro, Interview 2 July 2022). In the parish of Our Queen of Peace, Bethlehem, a Catholic township, pastoral council members made hundreds of phone calls to parishioners throughout the pandemic, and despite these efforts to reach out, the parish lost 20% of regular Mass-goers. All of the priests interviewed acknowledged that a significant number of parishioners had “disappeared” during the pandemic and were unlikely to come back. For Fr. William Kaupa, the Covid-19 situation seemed to be their exit moment (Kaupa, Interview 17 July 2022).

The drop in numbers happened despite the fact that in some parishes, measures were taken seriously to curb the spread of coronavirus. For instance, medical teams were established to come up with a strategy of conforming to the regulations of the National

Institute for Communicable Diseases. This effort assisted in keeping many parishioners healthy during the pandemic.

During the peak of Covid-19, priests and leaders of the church had to cope with constant changes throughout the pandemic. They had to master complex, ever-evolving Covid-19 regulations to prevent the spread of the virus in the parish while overcoming new obstacles to serve the people of God. Some of the priests who worked so hard during Covid-19 contracted coronavirus, suffered burn-out, and were affected by loneliness through the pandemic. Sadly, some priests experienced a crisis of faith at the peak of Covid-19. This was caused by many things, including seeing a fellow priest dying, seeing parishioners dying, empty pews, and financial struggles.

As a way of encouragement, the Bishop of Bethlehem wrote a brotherly letter to his priests:

How does it feel to be in lockdown mode? I suppose that you feel a bit sad and discouraged as you cannot reach out to the people under your pastoral care. You, too, are now housebound. It is good to remember that the Lord's presence cannot be contained, even not in a lockdown, and He has his ways of reaching out to people. (De Groef 27.03.2020)

## Alternative Methods by the Diocese of Bethlehem to Reach Out to the Faithful

In his encyclical, *Redemptoris Missio* (no. 30, JP II 1990), Pope John Paul II writes that “the history of humanity has known many major turning points ... the church, guided by the Spirit, has always responded to them with generosity and farsightedness. Results have not been lacking.”

In 2020, the church in South Africa was confronted by the challenge of Covid-19, and it responded accordingly. Through the difficult times of Covid-19, the church became creative in order to connect. Radio Veritas, the only Catholic Radio Station in South Africa, was established in 1999 as a production house. Today, it broadcasts on 576AM, DSTV870, the Radio Veritas App, and online. Over the years, Radio Veritas has been a source of knowledge and consolation to its listeners. This became very evident during the hard lockdown in the country in 2020.

Radio Veritas was also there to give moral support, especially during the Christmas and Easter online services. The Bishop of the Diocese of Bethlehem encouraged the faithful of his diocese to listen to Radio Veritas. He wrote to the priests:

I got some information about the broadcasting of Masses: Radio Veritas (576 medium wavelength or DSTV Audio 870) broadcasts the Mass on a daily basis at 12h00; the Jesuit Institute will livestream all Sunday Masses and Easter Triduum celebrations. ([www.jesuitinstitute.org.za](http://www.jesuitinstitute.org.za)) (De Groef 25.03.2020).

Apart from spiritual deprivation, many people had little or nothing to put on the table. Poverty exacerbated the situation, and many people lost their income. With financial help from Rome, Caritas, private donors and funds from the government of South Africa, the diocese designed a programme to reach out to the poorest. The channel of deaneries was used to distribute food parcels.

## Challenges with Online Sermons

A parishioner in the Central Deanery, Ms Sylvia Mofokeng, said: “Following church service or Mass online is not the same” (Mofokeng, Interview 8 August 2022). The greatest challenge during Covid-19 was the lack of smartphones or proper devices; the expensive data made matters very difficult for the marginalised, those in the periphery of society, living in impoverished dwellings or residential areas. As a result, the elderly in our rural areas were unable to hear online sermons from their priests. These elderly parishioners had no emails or internet connection, and they were struggling without a network. Sadly, the message of encouragement from their church was inaccessible because of their living conditions. The pastoral fact is that these people needed this message and pastoral care more than ever before. There were not enough funds for this endeavour, to the extent that it was not sustainable in some of the parishes. For example, they could not afford Zoom or YouTube prayer meetings or Eucharistic Sacrifice. Even though online sermons were introduced in the diocese, they were not accessible throughout the entire diocese, especially in the rural areas.

Furthermore, this begs the question: Will the Catholic Church in the future be aware and acknowledge the “digital faith” in terms of online sermons and digital ecclesiology in terms of the historical Church? We need to face the future to believe in the future. Digital faith and online sermons are now a reality.

The Catholic News Agency (CNA) reported that Pope Francis (Catholic News Agency 2020) warned the church of online Masses going overboard. The Pope said that the forced isolation was devised to stop the pandemic and was now presenting the danger of people living the faith only for themselves, detached from the sacraments, the church and the people of God. The CNA went further to report that the Pope said online Masses and spiritual communion did not represent the Catholic Church (17 April 2020). He reasoned:

The online Masses were allowed during the pandemic because this is the Church in a difficult situation that the Lord is allowing, but the ideal Church is always with the people and with sacraments, always. (Catholic News Agency 2020, <https://www.catholicnewsagency.com>)

The interviews of our study revealed that in all of the deaneries, there was a sentiment that the virtual celebrations of liturgy and sacraments were only devotional and not sacramental. The use of social communication is recommended by the church more than ever before. *Codex Iuris Canonici* clearly says: “Pastors are to teach the faithful that

they have the duty of working together so that the use of the means of social communication may be imbued with a human and Christian spirit” (*Codex Iuris Canonici* 1983, 822). The church is to be prepared for the consequences of dealing with social communication. Kgatle (2018, 5) warns the church to avoid negative publicity by conducting ministry on various livestream mediums in a responsible manner.

## Successes

The creation of online sermons gave people some kind of hope in the midst of a hopeless situation. The sermons reached most people, including non-Catholics, even though not all understood the message. An online sermon is just a click away, always there and anywhere. People can listen to an online sermon as they commute to work, to school, to different destinations, and so forth. Father Anslem Njoku, a senior priest in the diocese, said in addition, “These methods were successful and better than nothing if you were under lockdown” (Njoku, Interview 10 September 2022).

Since children were not going to school, some parishes resolved to use the hybrid model of catechesis and baptism preparations via Zoom, which was quite successful. A number of adults who helped to prepare children for their First Holy Communion via the internet were applauded by other parishioners who were not so good with technology. Thanks to the 4th Industrial Revolution (4IR), the church has to use technology, and this is the new way of globalisation.

## Electronic Communion

In my interaction with ministers of other churches, particularly my conversation with Professor Mangayi of Unisa (Mangayi, Interview 31 March 2022), I came to understand that electronic communion is the online celebration of communion during an emergency or during the pandemic. Since in the Catholic Church there has traditionally been no electronic communion, I had to do thorough research on it.

Professor Mangayi explained electronic communion in the following manner:

A family will prepare a worship space and elements that would be used for communion. These include wine and vessels. They could bring any kind of bread—crackers or pita. With regards to the beverages, they could bring grape juice, wine or any type of juice. These will then be brought to the table, and the head of the family will lead while the prayer is said by the minister online. (Mangayi, Interview 31 March 2022)

Interestingly enough, at the end of my interaction with Mangayi, he concluded that some of the heads of families refused to lead the family in electronic communion because they said they were not ordained ministers.

However, if we focus on the Catholic context, the Catholic tradition has spiritual communion. During the Covid-19 pandemic, the church encouraged the faithful to perform an act of spiritual communion, given their lack of access to Holy Communion.



It means as the Holy Mass is being offered online by the Catholic priest and you are unable to receive the Holy Communion physically due to circumstances beyond your control (including the pandemic), but you have the desire to receive the Lord in the Blessed Sacrament, you can receive Him spiritually and receive the graces you need via online communication. Upon enquiring from the priests in the diocese how many people benefited from online sermons and spiritual communion, we found that about 40% of the Catholic population benefited from the practice.

Even though spiritual communion is a historical church practice, Pope Francis warned that this was “not the church” and it was dangerous. It was dangerous because people could start living their relationship with God just for themselves, detached from the people of God. He acknowledged that the small number of people present at his daily morning Mass would receive the Eucharist, but not the people watching online, who would only have spiritual communion—but this was not the church (Catholic News Agency 2020, <https://www.catholicnewsagency.com>). Clearly, the Pope understands the church as a sacred space where the faithful gather around the altar to break the bread.

## Recommendations

Is the Covid-19 pandemic past history?

Covid-19 was a significant interruption that initiated many years of disruption, changes and even permanent restructuring in the church. Everything that created a “new normal” during the coronavirus will change in the years to come. Commenting on the “new normal,” Siaki (2021, xi) says: “We are catapulted into a ‘new normal’ where the world is not the same anymore.” As a church, we should perhaps pause and ask ourselves the following question: How are we going to cope with the new normal and rapid changes brought about by the latest innovation of technology? Sweet (2019, 173) talks about “rapidification” and argues that technology is moving too fast for our moral, social and political systems to keep up with or make sense of technology. Essentially, we are on the edge of a phase in history where our human historicity may not be flourishing. As Sweet (2021, 2) states, “In the future, there will be new plagues and new pandemics, more viruses and more outbreaks. We may become Covid-proof, but we will never be pandemic-proof.” On the other hand, theologian Gregersen (2017, 362) warns that we will experience an increase in disaster, and he pleads for the development of a “Phenomenologically Sensitive Theology of Disaster.” As a result, the church will need to keep a technological posture where the default setting is primarily online.

Digital faith communities are now realities, and the acceleration effect of the coronavirus projected the church into a new digital reality, changing the very notion of being church. Our imagination as a church, according to Joubert and Van der Watt (2021, 7), “should intentionally be shifted towards a new understanding of the online activities as being an integral part of our spiritual lives.” For example, livestreaming Masses, prayer groups and catechises are likely to continue post-Covid-19, even though

not on a regular basis. As for the youth, a hybrid model of catechesis with a mixture of online and in-person contact is highly recommended by the researcher.

The commentary on the *Codex Iuris Canonici* (1983, nr. 822) emphasises and strongly recommends pastors of the church to “make ample use of the means of social communication,” described in the Vatican II Council as “the press, the cinema, radio, television and others of a like nature.” The commentary goes further to clarify that there is nothing hesitant about this injunction: it is a clear imperative based on “a right which belongs to the church.” Canon nr. 822 raises two vital issues on the use of the means of social communication: i) It prescribes that the church in each country is positively to make use of these means, in accordance with its local possibilities, to preach the Gospel of Christ. ii) It prescribes, furthermore—and perhaps more significantly—that all Christ’s faithful who are personally involved “in the management or use of media” should strive, in so far as they can, “that the church can effectively exercise its mission through these means.”

Therefore, it was an accountable response from the Diocese of Bethlehem to make use of the means of social communication in all parishes and deaneries during the lockdown. It is now imperative that the diocese should start to dialogue about the extensive use of the means of social communication in their deliberations about post-Covid-19 situations. It is in these discussions that the new pastoral plan of the diocese will be formulated. Moreover, the diocese is to be engaged in the programme of going back to the local lost parishioners.

Again, there is a need for post-Covid-19 doctrinal clarity. Through parish engagement, parishioners could be re-taught who they are, what their Catholic faith is and how to be evangelisers. Interestingly, after Catholics were dispensed from the Sunday obligation, Sunday was treated casually. It is now time to restore Sunday obligation to its centrality and that the efficacy of the Eucharist is emphasised. The diocese needs to rebuild the morale of priests by offering guidance and psychological help where needed.

## Conclusion

The church has a role to play in the history of mankind. Since everything changed during the Covid-19 pandemic, there are still a number of Catholics who suggest that the convenience of streamed Mass or online sermons is the way to go; in other words, it is the new normal. The question remains, though, would the rural Catholic Diocese, just like the diocese of Bethlehem in the Free State, migrate easily to online sermons in this day and era, considering the challenges posted in this article? How would the faithful in a rural diocese like Bethlehem sustain themselves if they remained dependent on online sermons? The introduction of technology already indicates that the parish system of delivering sermons will change in the future. The church is in a good position now to plan for this and to continue to look at how, as communities of faith, we can share the Good News.

To summarise, “History teaches us that man is essentially a cooperative being, a *homo cooperans*” (Bregman 2020, 314).

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## Chronological List of Interviews

- Prof Lukwikilu Mangayi. 31 March 2022, at St John Vianney Seminary.
- Fr. Sifiso Thusi. 22 June 2022, at Bishop's House.
- Fr. Michael Atoro. 2 July 2022, at St Kizito Presbytery.
- Fr. William Kaupa. 17 July 2022, at St Kizito Presbytery.
- Ms Sylvia Mofokeng. 8 August 2022, at her house in Bethlehem.
- Fr. Anslem Njoku. 10 September 2022, at John Paul II Centre.