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## Coronavirus in Africa: Lessons from the Church and the Ebola experience

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NESSUN COMMENTO

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**By Allen Ottaro – The Catholic World Report**

Ms. Masika Semida, the last Ebola patient in the Democratic Republic of Congo, was discharged from hospital on March 3rd, bringing to an end the outbreak which hit the DRC in August 2018, and which killed more (<https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/ebola/drc-2019>) than 2,260 people. It has been three weeks with no new case reported, and this could be a victory for health workers on the frontlines of combating the epidemic, in extremely difficult circumstances. In North Kivu province, rebels attacked and killed Ebola response workers and razed to the ground treatment centers, vehicles and equipment. Between 2014 and 2016, West Africa experienced one of the worst Ebola outbreaks in history, with over 11,000 deaths reported. Sierra Leone, Liberia and Guinea were at the epicenter (<https://www.cdc.gov/vhf/ebola/history/distribution-map.html>) of the outbreak.

In both West Africa and the Democratic Republic of Congo, the Church played a critical role in providing care for patients and containing the spread of the Ebola virus. Church agencies such as Caritas worked tirelessly to train health care workers, and to provide the necessary medical and hygiene kits. The extensive network for the Church made it possible to pass important information on to communities, and to build trust between the communities and health workers. Health officials would visit churches on Sundays, and after the homily, they would be given the opportunity to speak with congregants about the Ebola outbreak and convey critical advice about hygiene practices.

Besides the physical needs, the Church also prayed for and with those infected and their families, which was perhaps the most important weapon in the arsenal that stakeholders had at their disposal to wage war against Ebola. A lasting image that exemplifies this special role of the Church was the 2018 photo of Fr. Lucien Ambunga, kneeling in a quarantined area to receive the blessing of his Archbishop, Fridolin Ambongo. Father Lucien contracted the disease while taking care of an Ebola-patient in a rural community in Itipo, in the Diocese of Mbandaka-Bikoro. He was given a hero's welcome in his parish after receiving a clean bill of health, one month after he tested positive for Ebola.

Exit Ebola, enter the Coronavirus. Both are highly contagious and have no known cure. Compared to the rest of the world, Africa has so far recorded relatively few number of cases of the Coronavirus. With 128 reported cases in 12 countries as of this moment, it is rare to see anyone wearing a mask on the streets of Nairobi or Abuja. Nevertheless, governments are taking note of the evolving situation and preparing accordingly.

South Africa is the only country to report infections in all of southern Africa. Soon after the first case was reported in South Africa's KwaZulu-Natal province, Bishop Sitembele Siphuka, President of the Southern Africa Conference of Catholic Bishops (SACBC), invited bishops to issue guidelines in their dioceses to help curb the spread of the virus. The Archdiocese of Johannesburg, in a statement signed by the Vicar General, Fr. Paul Beukes OMI, announced a raft of precautionary measures, while encouraging Catholic faithful to "pray for an end to this challenging situation throughout the world". The measures include distribution of Holy Communion only in the hand, exchanging sign of peace without physical contact (or omitting it altogether), and emptying of Holy Water fonts. Faithful who are sick of experiencing symptoms of illness are also not obliged to attend Mass and, the statement adds, "that out of charity, they ought not to attend." In the Diocese of Manzini, which covers the entire Kingdom of Eswatini, Bishop Jose Luis Ponce de Leon issued guidance similar to the ones in Johannesburg. "We are not aware of any positive case in our diocese," Bishop Jose Luis said in a [March 9th blog post](https://bhubesi.blogspot.com/2020/03/coronavirus-praying-and-caring-for-each.html), (https://bhubesi.blogspot.com/2020/03/coronavirus-praying-and-caring-for-each.html). "but I believe it is a good opportunity to be pro-active and to be in communion with all the affected countries."

In the meantime, the Symposium of Episcopal Conferences of Africa and Madagascar (SECAM) issued a [terse statement](https://secam.org/wp-content/uploads/SECAM-Message-and-prayer-on-Corona-Virus.pdf) (https://secam.org/wp-content/uploads/SECAM-Message-and-prayer-on-Corona-Virus.pdf), soon after members of its Standing Committee met in Nairobi, March 4th to 7th. They expressed concern at the growing number of Coronavirus infections in Africa and the rest of the world, and expressed "sympathy for and solidarity with those who are infected and affected by this strange epidemic". The statement further urges all the faithful to meticulously follow the instructions given by the civil and ecclesiastical authorities regarding the virus. Signed by SECAM President Cardinal Philippe Ouedraogo, the statement also suggested a 'Prayer for the end of the virus'. As the pandemic spreads, more dioceses and Bishops conferences will certainly be issuing guidance to their faithful.

While the ability of the weak health systems in many African countries to deal with the Coronavirus pandemic has been called into question, especially in Western media commentaries, there has been little reflection on the fact that a number of African countries, some of them recovering from war and conflicts, have experience in dealing with deadly disease outbreaks such as Ebola, often with very little resources. Churches and Church leaders were on the frontlines of dealing with the Ebola epidemic as seen in countries in West Africa that were affected, and in the Democratic Republic of Congo.

A 2015 study titled [“Keeping the Faith: The Role of Faith Leaders in the Ebola Response”](https://www.christianaid.org.uk/sites/default/files/2016-03/keeping-the-faith-research-report-jul-2015.pdf) (https://www.christianaid.org.uk/sites/default/files/2016-03/keeping-the-faith-research-report-jul-2015.pdf), commissioned by an inter-faith group comprising CAFOD, Islamic Relief Worldwide, Christian Aid and TearFund, sought to provide an evidence base on the role of faith leaders in addressing the Ebola outbreak in Liberia and Sierra Leone. The study revealed that while faith leaders play an important role in the people’s lives, there was a significant delay in engaging them at the start of the outbreak. As a consequence, the response of the faith leaders was mixed. “As the outbreak spread, draconian measures were taken which went against cultural values and religious practices, which resulted in denial of the disease and hostility towards those who were seeking to contain it”, the study states. The study further observes that once faith leaders became involved, they played a transformational role. They helped to drive out stigma that was destroying community coherence, and provided “much needed support to those affected by the disease, those placed in quarantine or those who had survived Ebola”. The study found that faith leaders helped to replace messages of fear with messages of hope. “It is the holistic way in which faith leaders were able to engage with people from both a technical and religious perspective that enabled changes in both the hearts and minds of communities that were asked to sacrifice practices that they knew and trusted”, the study concluded.

In the wake of the spread of the Covid-19 pandemic, the Church in Africa, especially in Sierra Leone, Liberia, Democratic Republic of Congo and Guinea, may have plenty to share with the rest of world about providing care and support in times of panic, worry and uncertainty. They lived and loved through the Ebola epidemic, and with God’s grace they will certainly concur the Coronavirus. We could all learn important lessons from them.

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