

# The Catholic Church's Dialogical Method and Engagement with the Zimbabwean State between 2000 and 2010

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## Abstract

The Catholic Church's advocacy against bad governance in Zimbabwe (the country's name was Rhodesia till April 18, 1980) can be traced back to its colonial days. The nature of the Catholic Church's participation in the struggle towards good governance is focused on ensuring that the needs of the people are catered for by the responsible governmental structures. As the Catholic Church defends the people's rights, such a defense inevitably forces it to confront and challenge structures responsible for bad governance. Such confrontation or challenge of political or social structures (which it deems responsible for bad governance) is dialogical in nature as the Catholic Church expects a response towards their anticipated change. This article examines the nature of the Catholic Church's dialogical method by using an 'Empathetic Dialogical Method' focusing specifically on three Catholic Bishops' pastoral letters which were written between 2000 and 2010. A critical reflection of these letters reveals the contribution made by the Catholic Church during the post-independence period. In terms of dialogue, the article reveals that the Catholic Church's dialogical method is predominantly non-empathetic. It further understands the dialogical method of the Catholic Church as highly prescriptive and in most cases non-consultative. This position, as the article argues, is influenced by the Catholic Church's religious and political structure.

**Keywords:** Catholic Church, Empathetic Dialogical Method, Catholic Bishops' Conference, pastoral letters, Zimbabwean state

## **Introduction**

This article is a critique of the late Robert Mugabe's leadership. Such a critique has been exhausted. What it primarily wants to achieve is to critically assess the nature of dialogue between the Catholic Church and the Zimbabwean state, with specific emphasis on the former.

The article will be divided into five sections<sup>1</sup>. The first section is a background to the study and presents three important elements that will help the reader to understand the context of the study. The first element will briefly show the pivotal role played by the Catholic Church towards the freedom of Rhodesia. The second element will explain that the Bishops' pastoral letters are based on social research and not mere speculation. The last element will reveal why the period between 2000 and 2010 is vital. The second section will present the methodology and the theoretical frame. The latter will consist of both the dialogical method and the Catholic Church's church-state model.

The third section provides a brief investigation of literature on pastoral letters and Rhodesian politics, church and society, the church in Rhodesia, and the Catholic Church in Rhodesia with a brief focus on Paul Gundani's article on the Catholic Bishops in Rhodesia's interaction with the society through these pastoral letters. The fourth section is an overview of three Bishops' pastoral letters written between 2000 and 2010. Then, finally, the fifth section presents the Catholic Church's nature of dialogue, initially looking at the format and design of the pastoral letters and their implication on the nature of dialogue. Second, it explores how the religious and political structures of the Catholic Church have an immersed influence on the way it dialogues with the state or other social institutions.

## **Background**

There are three important sections that present a better understanding of the article. The first section indicates that the Catholic Church has played a pivotal role as a force to be recognized with reference to the freedom of Rhodesia. The second section denotes that the pastoral letters of the Bishops are based on research carried out by the Justice and Peace Commission, which is

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<sup>1</sup> This article is drawn from my Master of Theology dissertation, University of KwaZulu-Natal (Phiri 2010).

the Catholic Church's research arm. The last section narrates why the period between 2000 and 2010 is vital to this study.

Between the end of the Second World War and end of the Cold War, most African countries gained independence except for Rhodesia and a few other African countries. Despite Britain's efforts to surrender its colonies to African leadership, Rhodesia continued to be a settler colony of the racist Smith regime. The 1965 Unilateral Declaration of Independence (UDI) explains why the freedom of Rhodesia was postponed from the 1960s to the 1980s. The UDI was meant to protect and retain the white settler rule beyond the British colonial era as highlighted by Astrow (1983). Ian Smith resisted 'British's preference for gradual transition to majority rule as proclaimed by the 1961 constitution' (Astrow 1983:15). Smith demanded independence from Britain without conditions in order to introduce drastic measures to further protect the rights of the white minority at the expense of the majority black populace. The UDI sought to reinforced media censorship in 'addition to the already-existing state of emergency and other strict regulations' (Good 1973:16).

Just before the UDI, the Catholic Bishops wrote a pastoral letter which signified the Catholic Church's unwavering political role. Since Bishop Donal Lamont was one of the Bishops behind this pastoral letter called *Purchased people* he was first detained and then deported by the government of the day (Phiri 2001:76, Lewis 2003). By 1965 the Catholic Church fearlessly condemned the Smith regime. The pronouncement of UDI by Smith took place when the Rhodesian Catholic Bishops were away in Rome. The Rhodesian Bishops had to leave Rome and go back home since the predicament under Smith's rule was considered 'dire' and needed to be attended to (Phiri 2001:76). The Catholic Church categorically criticized the Smith regime using its Magazine called *Moto*. This critical position taken by the church through this magazine resulted in its editor, Father Mike Traber being arrested and finally deported (Frederikse 1983:27). Furthermore, the Catholic publishing house in Gwelo called Mambo Press<sup>2</sup>, which printed this magazine was condemned under the State of Emergency Act. This condemnation of the publishing house was discontinued by the state after a short period because it feared being labelled as persecuting the church (Phiri 2001:76). Most secular voices which resisted the Smith regime were either prohibited or brutally si-

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<sup>2</sup> This is a Zimbabwean town which is presently know as Gweru.

lenced, except for religious institutions such as the Catholic Church and the Rhodesian Council of Churches<sup>3</sup> (RCC) that continued to speak on behalf of the oppressed. The voice of the Catholic Church is still one of the leading voices to speak on any form of government abuse, even post-independence.

It is of paramount importance to highlight that the Catholic Bishops do not just sit down and reflect on the Bible and write a pastoral letter. These letters are a product of a critical reflection of specific context with which they engage. The Catholic Bishop's Conference works closely with the Justice and Peace Commission whose function (the latter) is to 1) create 'awareness of the social teaching of the Church'; 2) 'gather as much information as possible concerning present social issues and problems and publicize them; and 3) 'to research and investigate allegations of injustice and to take necessary action to correct such violation of human rights. All these activities are conducted within the light of the Gospel' (Auret 1992:29). I will problematize this spiritual dimension in light of the dialogue discussed below. The duty of the Commission with regards to the Bishops' conference is 'to inform them of the "state of the nation" and acts as a "buffer" for the Church in Church-State relations' (Auret 1992:104-105). In fact, the commission advises the Bishops to 'speak out' through pastoral letters: 'On many occasions these letters and statements were drafted with the assistance of JPC members' (Auret 1992: 105).

## **The Importance of the Period in Question: 2000-2010**

This was the only period in the Zimbabwean history that ZANU PF was defeated by the opposition, the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC)<sup>4</sup> – in March 2008 – rendering its domination being severely assaulted for the first time since independence. Due to this embarrassment, the ruling party desperately sought ways to intimidate the electorate as a pathetic attempt to regain some dignity. Another event associated with this period was when the people of Zimbabwe categorically expressed their frustration with the Mugabe rule by rejecting the Constitution referendum of the year 2000. During the 2000s Zimbabwe experienced a record economic decay 'with a 364% inflation the highest in the world. The Zimbabwean gross domestic product declined by

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<sup>3</sup> Zimbabwean Council of Churches (ZCC as it is known today).

<sup>4</sup> This is a party formed 19 years after the independence of Zimbabwe.

more than 43% between 2000 and 2007. About 1.3 million Zimbabweans went in diaspora, 3 million earned their living through the informal sector, while unemployment was over 80% and the poverty level has doubled since mid-1990s (CCJP 2008:6-7). Compared to the present, the situation of Zimbabwe was worse with ZANU PF still in power. This is the period where Zimbabwe, for the first and last time, was in a government of national unity with the opposition. When Mugabe was losing popularity, he illogically initiated an unplanned land redistribution to attract those who were losing faith in his leadership. He further brutally demonized anyone who stood against this unsustainable agenda. The pastoral letters stand as a reaction to the Zimbabwean predicament of this period.

## **Methodology and Theoretical Frame**

This study is qualitative research, which involves a general extensive literature review with a specific focus on the documental analysis of three Zimbabwean Catholic Bishops' pastoral letters namely 1) *The cry of the poor* (ZCBC 2005); 2) *God hears the cry of the oppressed* (ZCBC 2007); and 3) *On national healing and reconciliation* (ZCBC 2009). It also uses two theoretical frames namely the Empathetic Dialogical Method and the Catholic Church's church-state model.

The article will use the Empathetic Dialogical Method as a theoretical frame. Lartey, in his book *In living colours* under the chapter titled 'Introduction to pastoral care', understands empathy as pivotal and central to the processes of pastoral counseling (Lartey 1997:21-41):

Empathy is significant in this respect because it is a skill which enables the counsellor to imagine what it is like to be in the position of the counsee; this understanding is important for the counsellor to be able to help his/her client through the process of healing which is ultimately the responsibility of the client (Phiri 2010:6).

Empathy applicable to this article refers to the dialogue between the Catholic Church and the Zimbabwean state. This type of empathy is of significance because it emphasizes the necessity of the Catholic Church to respect the position and the circumstances of the state before challenging it. 'This will help

it to understand some of the complications or dynamic elements which constitute the political realm, and this will consequently make the Catholic Church propose a reasonable critique or challenge whose demands are attainable and realistic' (Phiri 2010:6). Being empathetic has nothing to do with being sympathetic, neither does it imply being prepared to compromise the truth, 'it implies being able to say the truth which frees both the oppressor and the oppressed (using Freirean language). This article chose to call this method an Empathetic Dialogical Method' (Phiri 2010:6).

In addition to that we need to understand the Catholic Church on the basis of the nature of its dialoguing through its church and state model. I will use some insights from two documents namely the Vatican II document and the Catholic Encyclopaedia to illustrate how the Catholic Church understands its relationship with the state. Both documents seem to understand the relationship between the church and the state as mutual and of equal value. A further reading only exposes a different position taken by the Catholic Church. It expresses its superiority to the state towards the welfare of people as expressed in section 1.2.1 in the first chapter under the 'Catholic Church-State model' (Macksey 1912). Once the Catholic Church believes that its role towards the welfare of the people is superior to that of the state, it will inescapably also believe that the state is supposed to follow the dictates of its 'divine' wisdom. Such an unequal relationship is against positive outcomes of a dialogical process. Due to the church's conception of itself as superior in terms of the welfare of the people, the Catholic Church further asserts its right for religious freedom (Flannery 1980:705). The argument that I am putting forward does not question the authenticity of the Catholic Church's divine truth, but how this truth is convincing to those who do not believe. For dialogue to produce anticipated results the Catholic Church must also consider the predicament of the state. As I pointed out earlier, this article is neither focusing on the state nor assuming that the state is faultless, but it is focusing on the Catholic Church's dialogical method by means of the pastoral letters.

## **A Brief Literature Review**

Terms such as 'church' and 'religion' are normally associated with religious institutions in the context of being spiritual or having conversations associated with heaven. Such an understanding is not uncommon since religious dis-

courses are closely aligned to either spirituality, heaven, or God. Religious institutions also associate themselves with social issues but such associations are not as valued as those inclined or related to the spiritual realm. As religion was criticized by prominent secular figures like Karl Marx as the 'opium of the people', there has been a significant shift by churches toward social and political engagement. A number of theorists have highlighted the centrality of social actions to the spiritual character of the church and religious institution. These theorists include Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1955), Alistair Kee (1986), Jürgen Moltmann (1984), Joseph Cardijn (1995), Gustavo Gutierrez (1979), and Molly Manyonganise (2022:107) to mention only a few.

Authors like Frans Verstraelen (1998), Jimmy Dube (2006), Munetsi Ruzivo (2008), and Robert Matikiti (2008) recognize the pivotal role that Zimbabwean churches play in the public realm as champions of the democratization process. They specifically consider the church as the conscience of the society, acting as a reference point of society's ethical standards. Inasmuch as these authors appreciate the role of the church, others question its effectiveness in terms of its lack of 'political acts of theological imagination' (Dube 2006:85). They regard the involvement of the church in politics as 'sporadic instead of consistent and systematic' (Dube 2006:87). This conclusion seems not to apply to the Catholic Church and other evolved contemporary church denominations.

Paul Gundani (2007) seems to regard the Catholic Church as consistent and systematic in its involvement with the Zimbabwean state, though he questions its effectiveness before 2000. Gundani is confident that the Catholic Church came out openly in defense of the oppressed and marginalized in Zimbabwe after the year 2000. Though Gundani uses the pastoral letters, his focus is on how the Catholic Church plays its prophetic role since independence. This article looks specifically at how the Catholic Church dialogued with the state of Zimbabwe between 2000 and 2010.

Ezra Chitando is a prolific writer, who has written extensively on the contribution of the Church to political reforms in Rhodesia. Some of his works have looked specifically on how the church has made a contribution to politics through pastoral letters. Among his writings is a co-authored article (with Lovemore Togarasei) called *The church and the 2008 Zimbabwean political crisis* (Chitando & Togarasei 2010). That article focuses on the 2008 Zimbabwean political crisis and the involvement of the church through the pastoral letters. It emphasizes that the Zimbabwean ecumenical church is not

necessarily a single denomination such as the Catholic Church. In her article *The march is not ended: Church confronting the state over the Zimbabwean crisis*, Manyonganise (2022:107) reflects on the ongoing crisis in Zimbabwe. Like the article by Chitando and Togarasei (2008) she looks at the ecumenical contribution of the church towards politics in Zimbabwe, and she specifically uses the Catholic Church's August 14, 2020 pastoral letter titled *The march is not ended*. Like Moyo (2015), Manyonganise is reflecting on this pastoral letter within the context of the second republic. Inasmuch as Moyo (2015) uses the same period as me (2000-2010), his analysis explores ecumenical pastoral letters such as *The Zimbabwe that we want*. Furthermore, his argument is critical of the 'general' church's failure to resist the politicians' manipulative tendencies. This article focuses only on the Catholic Church and is interested in all three the Zimbabwe Catholic Bishops' Conference (ZCBC) pastoral letters that were written between 2000-2010. It critically analyzes how the Catholic Church engages with the state in Zimbabwe through these pastoral letters. What makes this article still relevant even in the second republic is the fact that the Catholic Church's style of writing pastoral letters has not changed up to this day.

### **An Overview of the Bishops' Three Pastoral Letters**

The Catholic Church continued to advocate for good governance even after independence. As mentioned above, during the Smith rule the Catholic Church advocated against colonial oppressive tendencies, and after independence it advocated against Mugabe's draconian rules which were synonymous with the dictatorial tendencies experienced during the colonial period. Even in the second republic after Mugabe's rule, the Catholic Church continues to speak against any form of oppression committed against the people by either the government or other social players. The Catholic Church manifests its commitment to justice and good governance in many ways, among which the writing of pastoral letters is one of them. For this reason, the following section will focus on the three pastoral letters written by the ZCBC.

The first pastoral letter, which was written on June 17, 2005, with the heading *The cry of the poor* was a response to what the Zimbabwean government called a cleaning-up operation, which was understood in the local



Shona language as Operation Murambatsvina<sup>5</sup>. Barbara Slaughter's article (Slaughter 2005) titled *Mugabe's Operation Murambatsvina* points out that this operation was carried out to chase many struggling families out of the urban areas to the rural areas since Mugabe considered them criminals. As a result of this so-called cleaning up operations most affected families were rendered homeless, and their sources of livelihood were badly disturbed to a dire situation in which some faced the possibility of both starvation and death. 'President Mugabe claims that the operation was necessary because the cities were overrun with criminals and had become havens for illicit and criminal practices and activities which just could not be allowed to go on' (Slaughter 2005). As for Slaughter, the reasons given by Mugabe were not true as he was punishing those people whom he suspected did not vote for him or possibly voted for the opposition.

The target audience of this letter was the Catholics and political leaders in Zimbabwe, which included the late Robert Mugabe. The first section of the letter condemns this operation (ZCBC 2005:1). The second section of the letter recognizes how the government selfishly exalted its interests over the dignity of people. This letter argues that people's dignity transcends public policies or the elitist or party wishes. For this reason, people's dignity should always be prioritized. The third part of this pastoral letter focuses on the governments' failure on moral grounds, which is based on how the government looks after members of the community who are poor and most vulnerable. The letter calls for decentralized power (power from the grassroots) and the basis of equality and fairness, unlike centralized government power, which is oppressive.

The pastoral letter which was written on April 5, 2007, titled *God hears the cry of the oppressed* presents a broader reflection on the crisis in Zimbabwe. An article in the *New York Times* by Michael Wines (2007) explains the letter's context by pointing out that it was written at the background of 'the breaking down of the services provided by the national power authority; and water treatment that was giving rise to a new outbreak of cholera in Harare' (ZCBC 2007). Most public services were non-functional in small cities due to insufficient money to repair broken equipment. The price of important commodities was so high that only a few people could afford it.

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<sup>5</sup> *Murambatsvina* can be translated with *cleaning up rubbish*.

Doctors' salaries were miserably low. The circumstances were so bad that even the security forces (police) wanted to strike together with everyone else.

This letter focuses on the terrible conditions of the Zimbabwean economy and how people are suffering because of this economic meltdown. The Catholic Church encouraged those responsible for this bad governance to repent and experience the change of heart that will help them to listen to the suffering of those whom they govern – the poor. The church was confident that the people who are failing to govern are the same people who are Christians. It attributed the source of misgovernance or crisis to a lack of moral leadership. The church was convinced that there was a crisis of moral leadership and failure of governing bodies. Leaders were associated with vanity such as greed and disrespect of human values. It also identified the contribution of personal sin, which is attributed to a failure of personal virtue and related to leadership failure. Additionally, they identified structural sin which was based on structures built on diabolic systems such as colonialism, which was manifested in the colonial legacies embodied in colonial constitutions such as one signed at Lancaster, which was not fundamentally changed.

The third and final ZCBC pastoral letter of October 1, 2009, has the heading *On national healing and reconciliation*. Its objective was to focus on the need for reconciliation and healing in Zimbabwe. The letter drew its starting point from the pastoral letter of 2007 by reiterating that the 'Zimbabwean problems are not just economic and political, but they are also spiritual and moral' (ZCBC 2009). It further made a psychological analysis, which used theological terms like 'sin' and 'forgiveness'. It located the predicament of Zimbabwe's woes from divisions between tribes and religion, and the mismanagement of the state's resources to the bad memories that Zimbabweans intentionally chose to ignore. The church claimed that the starting point of dealing with their problems was 'to confess our sins, be forgiven and learn to fully accept one another' (ZCBC 2009). The letter regarded healing in three folds embedded in three epochs: 1) A pre-colonial history of the 1800s where the Ndebele leaders<sup>6</sup> used to raid the Shona<sup>7</sup> – this hatred still lingers on and remained a barrier to nation building; 2) the second epoch was the colonial period legacy which was defined by continuous racial conflicts; and 3) the third epoch is the post-colonial period in which the present states are built on

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<sup>6</sup> This is the second largest tribe in Zimbabwe.

<sup>7</sup> The Shona tribe constitutes the biggest ethnic group in Zimbabwe.

the infrastructure which is filled with unresolved colonial trauma. Hence, Zimbabweans are haunted and traumatized by the past.

This pastoral letter further pointed out that the cause of 'political conflict is due to the pursuit of power and the partisan use of state institutions as tools to support the ruling party' (ZCBC 2009). The cause of social conflict was 'the lack of appreciation and respect of cultural, ethnic, and religious differences' (ZCBC 2009). This type of gross intolerance was evident in incidences such as Murambatsvina<sup>8</sup>, Gukurahundi<sup>9</sup>, and land redistribution. Additionally, the economic conflict was 'a result of corruption, mismanagement by government officials, sanctions and structural adjustment programmes' (ZCBC 2009).

The pastoral letter encouraged all Zimbabweans to accept their responsibility of the present instabilities: 'Victims need to tell their stories and perpetrators to take responsibility' (ZCBC 2009). The pastoral letter also highlighted and appreciated what has been achieved in 'the agreement of ZANU PF and the MDC to form a coalition government' (ZCBC 2009). It stated that the Catholic Church should facilitate the healing process. It further credited the church as the most appropriate institution 'whose "great" justice is beyond the law and transcends human justice' (ZCBC 2009).

## **The Catholic Church's Nature of Dialogue with the State**

The pastoral letters examined in this article are all designed with a specific structure, which is uniform, although it is differentiated regarding the context and specific content. They all make reference to the social teaching of the church, which seems to be embedded with universal standards that cannot be changed. Such standards seem to be the barometer upon which 'all social activities are evaluated and legitimised' (Phiri 2010:60). This is not different from other institutions because institutions should have standards or principles that regulate their organizational character and functions, otherwise they risk losing their identity.

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<sup>8</sup> The cleaning up operation left thousands of families homeless and hungry.

<sup>9</sup> *Gukurahundi* refers to the brutal killing of the Ndebele. The Justice and Peace Commission produced a detailed report on these atrocities in a document titled *Breaking the silence: Building true peace*.

The other structural characteristic constitutes a strict differentiation between the Bishops and the faithful – the recipients of the pastoral message. This differentiation seems intentional and hierarchical, when the Bishops speak. The language seems to be ‘prescriptive and vested with a sense of “finality”’ (Phiri 2010:61). This is not to deny that there is truth in the message, but how is this truth delivered? Is it dialogical or a mere monologue? All three pastoral letters seem to share this nature of expression. The letter of June 17, 2005, starts by saying that ‘we the members of the Zimbabwe Catholic Bishop’s Conference...wish to offer a pastoral reflection on recent events based on scripture and the social teachings of the Church’ (ZCBC 2005). It concludes:

Finally we repeat what we have said on the previous occasion...we call upon all those who hold special responsibilities in society, be it government, the business community or other sphere of influence to exercise your duties according to the social teachings of the Church...We cannot lead a double way of life, one for Sunday service in Church and the other for public tasks, be it political, economic, social or other kinds. We are always called to be guided by our conscience and to live our faith as an integral part of our lives (ZCBC 2005:2).

The letter of April 5, 2007 follows the same formula as it states that ‘as your shepherds we have reflected on our nation’s situation and in the light of the word of God and the Christian social teachings, have discerned what we now share with you, in the hope of offering guidance, light and hope in these difficult times’ (ZCBC 2007:1). It concludes with the following words:

We conclude our pastoral letter by affirming with a clear unambiguous Yes to our support of morally legitimate political authority. At the same time, we say an equally clear and unambiguous No to power through violence, oppression, and intimidation. We call on those who are responsible for the current crisis in our country to repent and listen to the cry of their citizens (ZCBC 2007:5).

The third letter dated October 1, 2009, follows the same order of logic: It begins with ‘we your Bishops said...’. It also concludes by saying:

## *The Catholic Church's Dialogical Method and Engagement*

The Church aspires for greater justice of the kingdom, which goes beyond law, it is a virtue. It does not deny human justice but integrates it and transcends it. In this way, justice becomes a path leading to forgiveness, a true reconciliation, and thereby restoring communion. We urge Government to show political willingness by creating a conducive environment for healing, reconciliation and integration (ZCBC 2009:7).

I do not have a problem with these views of the Catholic Church, especially when understood from the point of view of the Catholic Church. The truth that it proclaims is beneficial to the Zimbabwean people as I have attested earlier. However, let us look at the same viewpoints from a different perspective or the angle of the receiver. The receiver's view and influential position are not discerned. If one's views are not discerned, especially when one is imbued with authority, then sometimes good advice can appear to be judgmental and malicious. We should also remember that the state which is being addressed has authority in its own domain. Unfortunately, the Catholic Church's prescriptive voice seems not to recognize that. The church seems to pull its weight and influence as if it can unilaterally bring about changes in Zimbabwe, but it forgets that the state controls the resources of the country. One possibility is that the state might ignore its voice as unnecessary and needlessly adversarial in nature. Empathy (as I indicated above) assumes a genuine encounter with the state. What empathy does not do is to compromise or manipulate the truth, but it opens to the other party's position and circumstance as the basis of its genuine critique.

My analysis of the pastoral letters argues that the Catholic Bishops present themselves as individuals bestowed with the power to speak with 'finality'. Such a position undermines the receiver of the message, as the message will appear more authoritarian than consultative.

As I have emphasized in this article, the statement above does not open a conducive dialogical atmosphere but creates a dualistic hierarchy between the dialoguing partners. My 'concern' is not based on the truthfulness of the message but what the message implies, especially the dual hierarchical distinction which it imposes. A sober dialogical process must incorporate mutual participation imbued with balanced inclusivity of all partners involved. The following section aims to understand what is behind the Catholic

Church's authoritative stance. To examine this stance, it is necessary to explore this institution through its political and religious structures.

### ***The Religious and Political Structures of the Catholic Church***

A review of how the pastoral letters are structured, reflects the fact that they are designed around the Catholic Church's church-state model<sup>10</sup>, which articulates the church's superiority over the state towards human welfare. Since the Catholic Church is convinced that it has a higher end for humanity its decisions are supposed to be prioritized in relation to the state. It is through an understanding of the Catholic Church's religious and political structure that we get to understand its stance better.

The Vatican City serves as the headquarters of the Catholic Church. It is both a city-state and a sovereign state. 'The Pope is its supreme Monarch. Beyond the borders of this small city, the Catholic Church also has extra-territorial jurisdiction over some buildings around Rome' (Manuel, Reardon, & Wilcox 2006:34). Bishops serve as the chief administrators and custodians of the Catholic Church who meet often for national and regional Papal conferences (Manuel *et al.* 2006:34).

Despite the 1933 Montevideo Agreement on the rights and duties of states, which legally regards statehood as constituting a permanent population, a geo-political government, and the ability to interact with other states, the Vatican City-state has no permanent citizens since all Catholics are technically its citizens. The Catholic Church's capacity to interact is not limited just to state functions, since foreign diplomats are accredited to the Papacy and not to the government of the Vatican. There are a total of 175 countries that have formal diplomatic relations with the Holy See – the Pope (Manuel *et al.* 2006:40). The Papal Nuncios<sup>11</sup> have the same secular rights as any other state. The Catholic Church has permanent observer status at the United Nations (Manuel *et al.* 2006:41). It also acts as an international governmental organization as well as an international non-governmental organization. On behalf of the Pope, Bishops are guardians of both the political and religious life of the church.

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<sup>10</sup> This is explained in the section of methodology and theory.

<sup>11</sup> This is a permanent diplomatic representative of the Holy See accredited to a civil government and often of ambassadorial status.

## *The Catholic Church's Dialogical Method and Engagement*

Since the Catholic Church is a religious establishment, it is logically obvious to deduce that the political structure of this church is not superior to the religious institution because the Pope is not a 'politician' but a religious leader. The Pope is regarded as a divine leader whose influence is derived from Jesus through the apostolic succession as expressed by Canon 331 under the title *The Roman Pontiff and the college* (Walf 2004:431). 'The Pope is regarded as the head of the Church, like Peter, he is also regarded as a representative of Christ, and the bishops are successor of the apostles' (Phiri 2010:66). To understand why the Zimbabwean Bishops speaks with such power, it is significant to examine the nature of the office of Bishops according to Canon Law. Canon 375 under the title *Legates of the Roman Pontiff* declares:

Bishops whom by divine institution succeed to the place of the Apostles through the Holy Spirit who has been given to them, are constituted pastors in the Church, so they are teachers of Doctrine, priests of the sacred worship, and ministers of governance. Through Episcopal consecration itself, received with the function of sanctifying also the function of teaching and governing; by their nature, however, these can only be exercised in hierarchical communion with the head and members of the college (Balvo 2004:490).

In other words, a Bishop in a remote part of Zimbabwe is much more than a member of the clergy of his diocese, as he represents the worldwide Catholic Church, and this universality is embodied through the Pope who represents Christ on earth. In this sense, the power assigned to the Bishops comes from Christ and is managed through a ranked structure called a hierarchy. Hence, the pastoral letters were imposing and non-consultative because what they stated was divinely inspired in a way that cannot err or compromise the truth. When they speak on behalf of the Catholic Church, it is Christ who is speaking to the people. The political structure and all that the Church has is only meaningful in light of the divine. It is for that reason that the latter takes priority in all matters of the Catholic Church. This is the Catholic Church's religious and political structure in brief.

Some Catholic clergy suspect the influence of the Catholic Church and its hierarchical structure which the Catholic Church's documents legitimate in light of the divine as expressed above. Among those who distrust the

church is Leonardo Boff, who agonizes when observing the Catholic Church as an institution infused with divine authority without thinking of it as modelled around a 'empire-like' nature that was derived 'from ancient, secular, and oppressive structures and customs' (Boff 1985:40). Kee (1986:79) points out that the Catholic Church is a class society, or it co-exists with the class society and reproduces it. To preserve its monarchical nature Boff<sup>12</sup> further explains how the Catholic Church developed theologically justified excuses to avoid being questioned:

The rejection of Protestantism was a historical mistake not only because Luther was excommunicated but because any possibility of true criticism or questioning of the system in the name of the gospel was also expelled. Catholicism became a total, reactionary, violent and repressive ideology. There is nothing further from evangelical spirit than a catholicistic system's pretension to unlimited infallibility, to questionability, to absolute certainty (Boff 1985:86).

It seems obvious for a church with such power infused with divinity to claim a higher role in the wellbeing of people and it predictably presumes that its knowledge is much greater than that of the state. The dialogue of 'unequals' usually expects the presupposed weaker party to follow the stronger one in dialogue. This study argues that an effective and reasonable dialogue is possible only if both parties' contribution is equally recognized as pivotal to the welfare of the people as proposed by Bonhoeffer. The Catholic Church should critically consider (without compromising its values) to re-evaluate its methods of challenging the state through pastoral letters in a way that facilitate dialogue. There is no point in being radically faithful to your beliefs when the change that you anticipate is proving impossible. It is not about bending or compromising your values but making them more tolerant.

## **Conclusion**

The article endeavored to reveal that the Catholic Church has had a profound and positive influence on the politics of Zimbabwe during both the precolonial and post-colonial periods. Without undermining its contribution, the article

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<sup>12</sup> Leonardo Boff later decided to leave the Catholic Church.



argues that the nature of the Catholic Church both as a religious and 'political' organization determines how it confronts or dialogues with other actors and political structures. Looking at the Catholic Church's dialogical method through the lens of the Empathetic Dialogical Method, the article concludes that it is predominately non-empathetic in its engagement as it prioritizes its social teachings as a standard measure of its activities. Hence, such engagements that give more credibility to institutional integrity or dogmatism at the expense of the issues at hand tend to render most dialogical processes less effective. This article proposes empathy not as a compromise, but as a basis of a fair and reasonable dialogical tool. It concludes that inasmuch as the political administration that was led by the late Robert Mugabe was stubborn, the Catholic Church's nature of dialogue also needs to be re-evaluated. As attested by the writings of both Manyonganise (2022) and Moyo (2015), the Catholic Church, through the ZCBC continues to challenge the government of Zimbabwe even in the second republic after the Mugabe era.

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