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The Roman Catholic Church and Interreligious Dialogue: A Pastoral Approach of Pope John Paul II and Its Application in the Archdiocese of Mombasa, Kenya

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Abstract

Pope John Paul II contributed more than any other Pope in Christian history to interreligious dialogue. This article reviews the pastoral approach of Pope John Paul II (1978-2005) to interreligious dialogue (IRD) and its application in the Archdiocese of Mombasa, Kenya. The Roman Catholic Church (RCC) embraced IRD during the Vatican II Council (1962-1965) convened by Pope John XXIII, who passed on in 1963. While his successor, Pope Pius VI, guided the council and laid grounds for IRD by shifting from its exclusive theology of the pre-Vatican period, Pope John Paul II directed and shaped the pastoral approach of the RCC on IRD and social cohesion. This article analyses Pope John Paul II's magisterium and encyclicals on IRD and its pastoral application by the Archdiocese of Mombasa in moderation of religious and social extremism. It argues that the Archdiocese of Mombasa adopted interreligious dialogue to strengthen interreligious relations and build social cohesion.

Keywords: Archdiocese of Mombasa, Pope John Paul II, Interreligious dialogue, Roman Catholic Church, Social cohesion

Introduction

Religion plays an integral role in fostering peace and social cohesion globally. In many polarized and fragile countries due to ethnic, political, and religious conflict, religion binds together broken social relations by building bridges of understanding and peace. Through diverse approaches, including dialogue, religious institutions are at the forefront of peacebuilding, conflict transformation, and social relations in divided societies. Thus, dialogue is essential to the Christian peacebuilding and social cohesion mission. The Roman Catholic Church (RCC) and its leaders have diversely embraced Interreligious Dialogue (IRD) as a non-violent alternative mechanism for unifying conflicting communities and building social cohesion. Furthermore, the RCC has had a rich tradition in cross-cultural and interreligious dialogue and particularly in Kenya after the Vatican II Council (1962-1965). The talks for IRD began during the Vatican II Council with the promulgation of *Nostra Aetate* in 1965 that opened the doors for dialogue with non-Christian religions and cultures. *Nostra Aetate* was followed by production of many encyclicals on interreligious dialogue. In addition, the Post-Vatican II Popes including Paul VI, John Paul II, Benedict XVI and Francis did immeasurable work to develop IRD through their official, social and personal engagements globally. The magisterial teachings and pastoral approaches to IRD varied based on hermeneutical differences but emphasized the Vatican II resolutions and exhortations. One of the Popes who played a leading role in developing IRD was John Paul II (1978-2005). This was perhaps due to his longevity in the pontificate.

Studies have been conducted on John Paul II and interreligious dialogue, often mapping his theological position and social encounters in different places. According to Michalik (2011), the Pope made 104 international trips and 146 travels within Italy, thus building bridges of dialogue, peace, and social cohesion. However, Michalik is more interested in

the anthropology of interpersonal contacts and its import to interreligious dialogue and cross-cultural communication. Ł. Kamykowski also draws attention to the gestures of John Paul II in the context of interreligious dialogue, which he affirms "were even more eloquent and significant than words" Byron Sherwin and Harold Kasimow (2005) wrote on John Paul II theology of dialogue arguing that it was "inclusivist rather than exclusivists nor a pluralist." John Paul II did not believe Christianity was the only path to salvation. Jose Cabezon's essay looks at how John Paul II tried to proclaim the uniqueness of the Christian faith by being open in dialogue, which is true and valuable in the religions of others. Cabezon argues that while John appreciates "what is true and holy" in Buddhism and all other religions, the Pope sees these as "seeds" or "traces" of the Word that are more fully revealed in Christianity. This article reviewed this literature among other primary documents on Pope John Paul II to understand his pastoral approach to interreligious dialogue and its practical application in the Archdiocese of Mombasa, Kenya.

The Archdiocese of Mombasa was a relevant case in point due to a number of reasons. First is due to diversity of the social and religious landscape. Based on this diversity there is competition among many religions, such as Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and African Religions/ATR, for political and spiritual influence, which has contributed to societal divisions. Secondly, the diverse cultural and ethnic composition of the population has triggered rivalry for control over public spaces. Thus religious influence is more prominent among immigrant and evangelizing religions, including Islam and Christianity than non-evangelizing religions like Hinduism and African Traditional Religions (ATR). Third, there are interdenominational rivalry which occasionally arises because of disputes over power and material resources, particularly in the administration of religiously-sponsored institutions in this country. There are cases where managers are selected to lead specific religious institutions not solely based on their qualifications, but rather due to their religious allegiance. Based on this diversity and emerging interreligious suspicions and tension, this article examines the relevance of Pope John Paul II pastoral approach to the Archdiocese of Mombasa.

Apart from this introduction, the next session focuses on the materials and methods used in the development of this article. The third section analyses the theological and historical development of interreligious dialogue in the RCC. While the fourth section documents the pastoral contribution of Pope John Paul II including his symbolic gestures such as symbolic visits to Mosques and pastoral engagements in Kenya. The gestures and acts of charity are important in understanding Pope John Paul II's theology of interreligious dialogue. The last section deals with the application of Pope John Paul II teachings and pastoral initiatives in the Archdiocese of Mombasa and conclusions that can be drawn from his social encounters and experiences with non-Christian religions and cultures.

Material and Methods

This study employed reverse interpretation to understand Pope John Paul II's pastoral initiatives and their application to the Archdiocese of Mombasa. Grounded Theory backed the reverse interpretation of conciliar and post-conciliar documents. Grounded theory/theology is a guiding theory and a research methodology. In Grounded theory, the researcher approaches empirical data without preconceptions. This inductive approach from data to theory is ideal for African interreligious and cross-cultural research. Grounded theory has gained significant relevance in practical theology and religious studies. This study utilized the theological version of grounded theory as a qualitative method that merged grounded theory and theological reflection on a research phenomenon. This was inspired by the works of Steven Bruce (2017), who developed "Grounded theology" from "Grounded theory" and demonstrated its practical relevance in theological research. Charmaz (2014) defines grounded theory as "an inductive qualitative method that relies on 'imaginative reasoning ... about empirical experience'". The inductive nature of grounded theology gave me the latitude to engage with the empirical data without imposing concepts. Thus, grounded theology moved beyond the descriptive toward something generative. It promotes the importance of 'learning not to know' and encourages researchers to be explicit about their subjectivity.

In Grounded theology, the experience of ordinary people and the 'religious other' are important in creating and developing analysis and discourses without bias. On this basis, Grounded Theology comes with the notions of a 'theology of experience' and 'theologies from below.' Grounded Theology was necessary for this study as it highlighted the experience of individuals and "gaps and connections between theology and lived faith practices." This way, Grounded theology became an orientation toward praxis within a community of practice. Consequently, this article sampled 20 respondents for interviews and another 20 for Focus Group Discussions to understand how the Archdiocese of Mombasa has applied Pope John Paul II's teachings on IRD. This was complemented by a quantitative survey of 100 lay Catholics

drawn from different parishes across the Archdiocese. Those sampled for the study had previously participated in interreligious dialogue initiatives organized by the Interreligious Dialogue Commission (IRD-C).

Interreligious Dialogue in the RCC: A Theo-Historical Contexts

The theological and historical development on interreligious dialogue (IRD) in the RCC has evolved as the Church sought to foster understanding and cooperation with people of different faiths. Before Vatican II (1962-1965), the RCC had adopted an *exclusivist attitude* towards interreligious dialogue. This attitude was shaped by the Church's understanding of salvation through Christ and the RCC as the only path to salvation. Subsequently, the magisterial teachings of the Church reinforced this exclusivist attitude which constrained her relationship with other religions and cultures. Thus ecclesiocentrism was entrenched on the basis that "Outside the Church no salvation" (*Extra ecclesiam nulla salus*). Historically, this position can be traced back to St. Cyprian of Carthage (+258) who was disgruntled by emerging schisms and heresies in the Church. Contextually, this confrontational attitude was applied to the schismatic and heretics who left the Church over doctrinal disputes but later it was applied to all non-Catholics and non-Christians.

The RCC maintained this confrontational approach towards other religions. The emphasis was on affirming the uniqueness and superiority of Christianity, often leading to a lack of understanding and dialogue with other faith traditions. Taking deliberations at the Council of Florence (1442) as an example, emphasis was placed on the uniqueness of the RCC:

The Roman Catholic Church holds a strong belief, and openly declares, that individuals who are not part of the Church, including pagans, Jews, heretics, or schismatics, cannot attain eternal life. Instead, they will be condemned to the eternal fire that has been prepared for the devil and his angels. However, there is a possibility for them to be saved if they are received into the Church before their life comes to an end.

The council denounced all religions apart from the Roman Catholic Church, including Muslims and other "pagans" such as Hindus, Buddhists, and adherents of other Asian, African, and Latin American religions. By contrast, there was a radical shift in the RCC theology of religions during the Vatican II Council. The Vatican II Council was a convocation of over two thousand bishops of the RCC, called together by Pope John XXIII. The Council was held in Rome and emphasized the need for a revitalizing spirit to reform the approaches that will guide the RCC in its interactions with other religious traditions. The Council convened from 1962 to 1965 and operated under the assumption that no individual or group possesses exclusive authority over the truth. Pope John XXIII passed away in 1963 and was followed by Pope Paul VI (1963-1978), who significantly contributed to interreligious dialogue (IRD) during his tenure. The Vatican II Council was pivotal in shaping the relationship between the RCC and other denominations and religions. As a matter of principle, the Church directed all Christians to develop a positive relationship with other believers. The gradual change of attitude towards the accommodation of other faiths was evident from the writings of a few Bishops. However, Vatican II made a radical paradigm shift on IRD with non-Christian religions by acknowledging that IRD was essentially a dialogue between humans.

This article argues that while Pope John XXIII opened the doors for IRD in 1963 and his successor Pope Paul VI (1963-1978) directed the church during the Vatican II and after, it is Pope John Paul II who played a significant role in shaping the pastoral approach and development of theology of IRD. He shifted the gears of dialogue from inclusive approach that emerged with Vatican II to a pluralistic paradigm or mutuality model in the post-Vatican II era. The pluralistic paradigm recognizes the presence of truth and wisdom in other religions, without compromising the unique salvific role of Christ. In addition, the paradigm emphasizes the importance of engaging in respectful dialogue, seeking mutual understanding, and promoting cooperation for the common good. But more importantly, it departs from the pre-conciliar and Vatican II documents which did not envisage dialogue as part of the Christian mission. Pope John II considered dialogue as an integral element of evangelization in mission theology as elaborated in his various encyclicals and magisterium. The next section analyses Pope John II encyclicals, speeches and symbolic acts on IRD that unpacks his pastoral creativity in engagement with non-Christian religions and cultures. The analysis of his writings and speeches is significant in the development of Catholic theology of religions in the Post-Vatican II because they affirm the importance of dialogue, promote a culture of encounter, and advocate for solidarity among people of different religious traditions.

Pope John Paul II Encyclicals on Interreligious Dialogue

There are several post-conciliar documents authored by John Paul II on interreligious dialogue as well as those issued during his tenure. Here, I applied the principle of reverse interpretation to analyse three post-conciliar documents mainly, *Redemptor Hominis*, *Dominum et Vivificantem*, and *Redemptoris Missio* that were all issued by Pope John Paul II (1978-2005).

Redemptor Hominis

This was the first encyclical issued by Pope John Paul II in March 1979. *Redemptor Hominis* (RH) set out a restorative mission for the Church towards humanity through faith and love. *Redemptor Hominis* (RH) outlined the centrality of love on human life: "Man cannot live without love". RH is divided into four parts with part one dealing with "inheritance" and with Vatican continuation of God's mission among humanity. The second part, "The Mystery of the Redemption" (7-12) explores the core tenets of the Christian faith about the "Incarnation and Paschal mystery of Jesus Christ" and elucidates how these principles evoke a profound sense of awe towards the inherent worth of the human individual. The third part of the text is particularly significant for interreligious interaction, as the Pope discusses the topic of "Redeemed Man and his Situation in the Modern World" (13-17). John Paul II addresses the difficulties faced by individuals in the present world due to the influence of modernity. The final section, titled "The Church's Mission and Man's Destiny" (18-22), utilizes the Pascal enigma and sets fundamental principles for the Church to represent a civilisation characterized by compassion and solidarity towards humanity. However, the Pope also expressed a deep concern for the consolidation of Christian harmony:

In order to remain faithful to the teachings of Christ, we must strive for unity despite any obstacles or challenges that may arise. Failing to do so would mean we are not fulfilling his wishes. Some individuals, when faced with challenges or due to their belief that previous attempts towards unity have had unfavourable outcomes, may desire to retreat. Some individuals even assert that these endeavours are detrimental to the propagation of the Gospel and are contributing to an additional division within the Church. Genuine ecumenical engagement involves being receptive, fostering tighter connections, being willing to engage in discourse, and together exploring the truth in its whole from an evangelical and Christian perspective.

In RH, Pope John II laid out his agenda of advancing his predecessor's work on dialogue and encouraged Christians to embrace ecumenical spirit. The Pope cautioned uncertain Christians about the importance of engaging in interreligious dialogue as a preventive measure. According to John Paul II, Christians are encouraged to engage in discourse, establish connections, engage in shared prayer, and explore the riches of human spirituality with non-Christian religions and civilisations. The Pope reaffirmed the notion of the unity of humanity by stating that adherents of non-Christian religions also believe in the Spirit of truth, even though they are not part of the visible boundaries of the Mystical Body. God's grace is not restricted to the Church or the sacraments. He bestows his gifts without restraint upon those whom he chooses and according to his own volition. He wishes for all individuals to be saved and attain a deep understanding of the truth. The Pope acknowledged the legitimacy of several global religions, despite their significant differences from Christianity.

The Pope portrayed religion as a worldwide phenomenon that has been intertwined with the history of humanity since its inception. He discussed non-Christian religions and ultimately focused on Christianity. Engaging in conversations with non-Christians can serve as a means of fostering unity among Christian Churches that are motivated by a shared love for Christ. Essentially, RH is a conciliar statement that prioritises the significant spiritual qualities that are manifested in religion and have a profound impact on culture as a whole. Although individuals may choose different routes, there is ultimately only one objective that captures the profound yearning of the human soul: the pursuit of God and the love for humanity.

Dominum et Vivificantem

In May 1986, John Paul II issued his third encyclical, *Dominum et Vivificantem* (DV). In DV, the Pope responded to the call of his predecessor, Paul VI who had called for "a new study of and devotion to the Holy Spirit" at the end of the Vatican II. Pope John Paul II devoted this encyclical to the relevance of the Holy Spirit in Human relations with self and others. According to Fr. Innocent Maganya, the director of the Institute of Interreligious and Islamic Studies (IIRS) at Tangaza College, Nairobi, "this document was a continuation of RH tracing back the history of salvation to the beginning of creation and maintaining the universality of salvation to Christians and non-Christians through the Holy Spirit." DV asserts that the Holy Spirit goes beyond the confines of the Church, thus giving the possibility of salvation for all:

The Holy Spirit, who acts freely and unpredictably (cf. John 3:8), was active in the world even before Christ's glorification (Ad Gentes, n. 4), and permeates the entire world, maintaining its cohesion and being aware of all that is said (Wisdom 1:7). The Spirit prompts us to expand our perspective and reflect on his work in all times and locations (cf. *Dominum et Vivificantem*), n. 53).

In his speech to the Roman Curia during the World Day of Prayer for Peace in Assisi, Pope John Paul II noted that the Holy Spirit, who is mysteriously present in the heart of every individual, is the source of genuine prayer, regardless of whether the person is Christian or not. DV exalts Jesus Christ, the divine Son of God, as the focal point of our faith and the central focus of our mission within the church and in the world. However, in the same discussion, the Pope went beyond a

personal viewpoint and expressed the fundamental components that might be considered as forming the theological foundation for a constructive attitude to different religious traditions and the act of engaging in interreligious dialogue.

In the document "Dominum et Vivificantem," Pope John Paul II emphasizes the importance of conversation in the context of redemption. He suggests that Christians and people of other faiths should work together with the Holy Spirit, who is universally present and actively involved in the lives of individuals. From this standpoint, interreligious conversation goes beyond the goal of just achieving mutual understanding and harmonious relations. It delves into a profound level, the realm of the spirit, where interaction and collaboration involve a reciprocal affirmation of one's beliefs and a collective examination of one's individual religious convictions. Therefore, both Christians and non-Christians are encouraged to enhance their religious devotion by responding more earnestly to God's invitation.

Redemptoris Missio

This encyclical provides further stimuli on interreligious dialogue and the activity of the Holy Spirit at all times and places. *Redemptoris Missio* (1990) is important because it draws the nexus between World evangelization and interreligious dialogue. The Pope makes references to his first encyclical, RH on the mission of Christ, the redeemer of humankind. In continuity with the magisterial teaching of his predecessors, Pope John Paul II invited the Church to renew her missionary commitment. The Pope laid the ground for his zeal for evangelism:

The reason that compels me to emphasise the importance of missionary evangelization even more strongly is the fact that it is the primary duty that the Church can fulfil for every individual and for all of humanity in the contemporary world. This world has witnessed remarkable accomplishments, but it appears to have lost its understanding of fundamental truths and the very essence of life.

This form of mission and evangelism relates to the dialogue of life and action. The Christian witness of dialogue of life and religious experience is the first and irreplaceable form of mission. According to the Pope, Christ is the model of all Christian witness. Yet Christian witness should be holistic engaging in dialogue of action through acts of charity toward the poor and powerless and being committed to peace, justice and human rights. The Gospel should be directed to total liberation of humankind.

The Pope is also conscious of forced conversion in the missionary field. He draw reference to Vatican Council concerns for safeguarding freedom of conscience. Christians in their evangelization mission must understand the right to religious freedom:

Every individual should possess absolute immunity from any form of coercion, whether it be from individuals, groups, or any human authority. No one should be compelled to act against their conscience in matters of religion, nor should they be hindered from acting in accordance with their conscience, whether in private or public, whether alone or in collaboration with others, within reasonable boundaries.

As Christians come into contact with non-Christians, they should be aware of their rights to freedom of religion. Consequently, dialogue with non-Christian religions and traditions become paramount. In this process, the Holy Spirit becomes the principle agent of mission. In their missionary endeavour, Christians should broaden their vision about the activity of the Holy Spirit in their lives and others. In conclusion, RM outlined the missionary task of the Church as directed at people who do not yet believe in Christ (*Missio ad gentes*), re-evangelization and pastoral care of the flock of Christ.

This article found convergence in John Paul II language particularly the centrality of Christ in the salvation history of mankind as accommodating to other Christians i.e. evangelicals. In commenting on RM, Bishop Tee Nalo of Praise Chapel observes that "it had a moderating language with its emphasis on the uniqueness of Christ and proclamation of the Gospel to non-Christians". However, Zachaeus Mwangagi observes that while RM was transformative in promoting dialogue, some of its aspects were limited to the Catholic doctrine including the place of the Virgin Mary in missions and the re-evangelization aspect. The latter leads to polarization due to competition within the missionary field with other Christians and serves as a barrier to dialogue. Regardless of the divergent interpretation of its relevance to interreligious dialogue, there remains a consensus that RM while referring to other conciliar texts reaffirmed the Great Commission of the Church and laid down its missionary mandate as empowered by the Holy Spirit.

Although the Vatican II Council (1962-1965) initiated interreligious dialogue, it was the persistent endeavours of Pope John Paul II (1978-2005) that solidified the Roman Catholic Church's reputation in engaging with non-Christian religions. We have briefly examined the Pope's primary encyclicals on dialogue, namely *Redemptor Hominis* (1979), *Dominum et Vivificantem* (1986), and *Redemptoris Missio* (1990). In the book *Redemptor Hominis*, John Paul II discussed the concept of a "unifying Spirit of truth" that connects all religions. In *Dominum et Vivificantem*, he explores explicitly the role of the Spirit in the world outside of the Church. Additionally, in *Redemptoris Missio*, he emphasizes that the presence

and influence of the Spirit extend beyond individuals to encompass society, history, peoples, cultures, and religions. These encyclicals were not haphazardly published throughout time, but rather deliberate expressions of the importance and worth that John Paul II placed on interreligious dialogue and the respect for non-Christian religions and culture. To this end, I provide a detailed analysis of the Pope's speeches, with a specific focus on "Dialogue and Proclamation" (1991) and the Pope's interreligious gestures.

Pope John Paul II, inspired by the vision of the Vatican II Council, urged Christians to engage in dialogue and promote more harmony and friendly interactions among different religions, with the aim of achieving a more peaceful world. He strongly advocated for promoting the spread of the Gospel through constructive interreligious interaction with other global religions. During the closing plenary of the assembly of non-Christian religions in 1984, Pope Paul II emphasized the importance of dialogue for the Church. He stated that the Church is obligated to participate in God's plan by engaging with others through techniques of presence, respect, and love. The Church views discourse as rooted in the divine nature of God, which is both singular and threefold. God is the progenitor of all humanity, with Christ uniting every individual to himself. The Spirit operates inside each person. Consequently, discourse is founded on love for the human person as a whole, who is the primary and essential focus of the Church. However, achieving discussion is challenging due to the potential for religion to be manipulated and used as a tool for creating polarization and separation. Religion can promote discourse to foster reconciliation between people and with God. This is a crucial requirement for peaceful cohabitation and unity, as desired by God and restored by Christ. In the present global context, engaging in discourse necessitates acquiring the ability to forgive, as all religious communities may identify potential injustices endured over the course of generations.

Symbolic Gestures

John Paul II made three visits to Kenya in 1980, 1985, and 1995 which demonstrated his love for the people and the Church in Africa. On 16 August 1985, the Pope visited Kenya during the Eucharist congress in Nairobi, this took place five years after his first visit as a pilgrim. In his address, the Pope observed:

I am also delighted that this tour will provide me with the opportunity to interact with numerous fellow Christians and individuals belonging to other faiths. We all possess a shared sense of worth as offspring of the same divine entity, our heavenly God and Father. As our world becomes increasingly interconnected through modern modes of transportation and communication, there is a growing demand for conversation and collaboration among individuals and nations. The Church is committed to provide assistance to endeavours that aim to address this requirement. The Church supports and advocates for all endeavours aimed at fostering harmony, fraternity, and tranquilly.

The Pope's message resonated well with the social and political context, taking place three years after the foiled *coup d'état* of August 1981. The Holy Father urged the country to unite and preach peace to avoid disintegration and instability that was being witnessed across Africa. The Pope urged both Muslim and Hindu representatives to work together with other religious leaders in addressing common human needs since it was untenable for any religious group to live and act in isolation in a pluralistic society. Reconciliation and community cohesion in the spirit of brotherhood formed part of his agenda on 18th August 1985. The Pope's interreligious gestures were also misinterpreted in some cases, for instance, in his third visit to Kenya on 19th September 1995, some Muslim clerics boycotted the interdenominational prayer service at Uhuru Park in Nairobi. The event organizers had invited Sheikh Ali Shee from the Jamia Mosque to speak to Pope John Paul II. However, Sheikh Ali Shee declined the opportunity, alleging that the Pope had the intention of converting the entire continent to Catholicism. Sheikh Shee states in his letter, "We believe it is not possible for us to gather and attentively listen to his sermon." We maintain amicable relations with our Catholic brethren, nevertheless, the pontiff aspires to propagate Christianity across the African continent before the conclusion of this century." On the contrary, the Pope had no intention of using interdenominational prayers for proselytization of non-Christians. John Paul II had always expressed goodwill towards other religions and particularly Islam. In his inaugural visit to Kenya on 7 May 1980, he addressed the Muslim leaders as follows:

The RCC acknowledges that both Islam and itself have the common practice of worshipping the one, living, subsistent, merciful, and all-powerful Creator of heaven and earth. This recognition serves as a significant bond that unites Christians and Muslims. Our mutual respect and shared dedication to serving humanity drive us to collaborate in advancing peace, social justice, moral values, and all the fundamental freedoms of mankind.

The Pope had always tried to reach out to Muslims across the globe and the boycott by Muslim leaders in 1995 can best be seen from the geo-political conflicts of the 1990s between the West and Eastern Islamic countries. Regardless of the said tensions, the Pope's interdenominational address focused on ecumenical unity and the unity of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Father cautioned leaders and urged people not to let their social divisions 'smother the yearning for true peace,'.

Each of the three visits made by Pope John Paul II to Kenya took place during the authoritarian regime of President Daniel Arap Moi (1978-2002), who clamped down on free expression and criminalized opposition groups.



Figure.1 Pope John Paul II, President Moi and other Leaders, 1995

Beyond the Pope's visit to Kenya, during his Pontificate he made other remarkable interreligious gestures that signified unity. Notable gestures included: a meeting with young Muslims at the Casablanca stadium in Morocco (1985) under the invitation of King Hassan II. The Pope pointed out the commonalities between the two religions such as "the belief in one, just and merciful God, the significance of prayer, almsgiving, fast, penance and forgiveness". The Holy Father also highlighted the difference on both religions and concluded the talk by appealing for "humility and respect in a spirit of mutual tolerance; there is a mystery in this, to which [...] the God will enlighten us one day."

This gesture was followed by a visit to a synagogue in Rome on 13th April 1986 where the Pope met with the Jewish community. John Paul II restated the Catholic commitment to dialogue with non-Christian religions. Borrowing from *Nostra Aetate*, the Pope reminded the congregation of the historical bond that binds the Christian Church with Judaism. In his speech, the Pope asserted that "the Jewish religion is not the external reality for our religion, but something internal". The Pope also demystify the blame on the Jews as responsible for Jesus' death. More important in this visit, the Holy Father condemned acts of anti-Semitism and other forms of discrimination against the Jewish people. He condemned the genocide against the Jews during the Second World War. In concluding his talk, John Paul II acknowledged that differences persist between Catholics and Jews but promised more dialogue to eliminate the barriers.

Another gesture was the interreligious meeting attended by John Paul II in Assisi during the Global Prayer Day for Peace on 27th October 1986. The purpose of this meeting was the pilgrimage, the fast, and the prayer of the representatives of different religions from all over the world for peace. Dialogue and prayer were viewed as complementary to harmonious relations and thus the expression of the common concern about peace. Broadly, this event had become a unique sign of the unity of humankind. In his closing remarks, the Holy Father stressed the common practice that had brought all religious leaders together. He observed, "If there are many and important differences among us, there is also a common ground, whence to operate together in the solution of this dramatic challenge of our age: true peace or catastrophic war.

Lastly, the Pope's visit to Masjid Umayyad in Damascus on the 6th of May 2001. In this visit, the Pope shared a prayer with Muslims and focused on the significance of dialogue of life for Muslims and Christians alike. The Pope also pointed to the relic of the head of St John the Baptist considered by the Muslims as a great prophet for giving his life to God. The Holy Father reminded the congregation that "John was a spiritual being that was created to acknowledge and

respect God’s ultimate priority in all things” He encouraged the gathering to remain steadfast in prayer and their commitment to God. The Pope regarded the mosque and the Church as the place, “where both Christians and Muslims give shape to their religious identities, and the youth receives religious education.” John Paul II was the most influential pope in the history of the Church. He extended his hand of charity to other traditions and opened his door for dialogue when interreligious dialogue and interreligious cooperation were in its infancy. John Paul II's gestures and acts of charity towards non-Christian religions and traditions can guide the Catholic Archdiocese of Mombasa in addressing religious diversity.

Application of Pope John Paul II Pastoral Initiatives on IRD to the RCC Archdiocese of Mombasa

Pope John Paul II set a pastoral precedent on engagement with non-Christian religions and culture during his pontificate. Like his predecessor, Pope Paul VI had expressed appreciation of Africa's religious and cultural diversity. Pope John Paul II was instrumental in promoting IRD and social cohesion in Africa and Kenya based on his pastoral visits. Like Pope Paul VI, who had issued *Africae Terrarum* (Land of Africa), which brought forth dialogue between Christianity and African culture into IRD discourses, John Paul II considered dialogue part of the Christian mission, thus opening space for interfaith engagement in the continent. John Paul II reflected on the church's identity and holistic renewal in his Letter *Tertio Millennio Adveniente*, inviting the Church to prepare for the Great Jubilee. He observed that due to this profound renewal, the RCC “opened itself to Christians of other denominations, to the followers of other religions, and to all the people of our time.” The Archdiocese of Mombasa have been inspired by the Vatican II council teachings as well as Pope John Paul II encyclicals on interreligious dialogue.

The Archdiocese has been working closely with the Kenya Conference of Catholic Bishops (KCCB) in developing interreligious dialogue programs in the country. One of the bodies that has helped the Archdiocese in its interreligious initiatives is the Commission for Interreligious Dialogue and Ecumenism (CIRDE). This commission has provided a structure for engagement with other religious organisations and groups. However, the Archdiocese of Mombasa has been vibrant on dialogue initiatives. In the assessment of the interreligious initiatives, Willybard Lagho and Julius Kalu observed that national issues such as constitutional reforms, democracy, and peacebuilding shaped the interreligious dialogue processes. According to Irish priest Fr. Nicky Hennity and current priest at St. Patrick’s Church, Bangladesh observed that there exists a significant gap in how religious groups interpret such national activities as part of dialogue and how they actualize themselves as part of those initiatives in promoting social cohesion. In this study, I carried out a survey to determine lay Catholic Christians’ views about their understanding of interreligious dialogue and their general support for interreligious activities in the Archdiocese of Mombasa. Figure 2 shows the respondents support for interreligious dialogue and Table 1 is a summary of their views from 100 respondents polled.

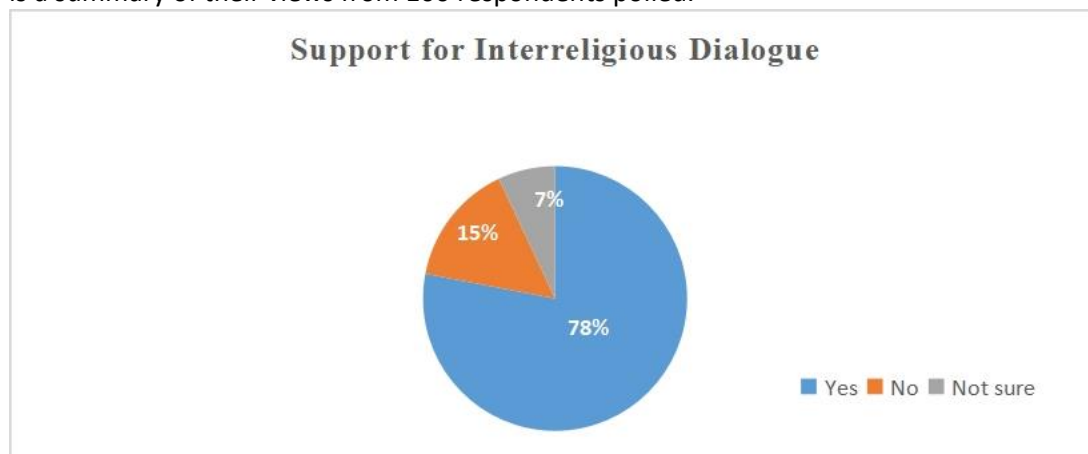


Figure 2 Support for Interreligious Dialogue

The majority of the laity (78 %) supported interreligious dialogue and a few (7%) were not sure whether they were in support of the RCC’s interreligious engagements. About (15 %) of the respondents were against interreligious dialogue with some observing that it would lead to confusion and syncretism in the Church. The views of those who supported interreligious dialogue are captured in Table 1.

Table 1. Respondents Reason for Supporting Interreligious Dialogue

Statement/Indicator	Yes	Not Sure	No
Interreligious dialogue is important in overcoming societal fragmentations.	83	12	5
We need to build friendships across all religions and cultures.	74	16	10
Will help in building respect across religions.	68	21	11
Will help in recognizing and appreciating other religions in our community.	90	3	7
To avoid conflicts and promote peace	86	-	14
Will help to nurture interreligious marriage.	52	21	27
Dialogue will ward off religious competition.	65	19	16

From Table 1, those who supported dialogue believed that it was essential in overcoming societal fragmentations and that the RCC needed to double its effort toward building social cohesion. In addition, dialogue was necessary for peaceful co-existence. By dialogue, respondents believed they would promote friendships across religions and cultures. The Church must thus promote the oneness of humankind and universal love as expressed in *Nostra Aetate* (NA). The support for interreligious initiatives aimed at warding off dangerous religious competition that could destabilize harmonious co-existence in society. Lastly, others pegged their support for interreligious dialogue for purposes of cross-religious marriages which is common in the Archdiocese.

To meet the demands for dialogue, the RCC Archdiocese of Mombasa has partnered with other religions, including Hindu and Islam, to cultivate a conducive dialogue environment. According to the current Chair of IRC-K, Bishop Willybard Lagho, the Archdiocese of Mombasa has been vibrant in a) promoting interreligious fellowship, inter-religious dialogue, and sharing of common values; b) supporting religious communities to identify areas of convergence in their respective faith traditions that can be harnessed to build a peaceful, just and cohesive society; c) initiating interreligious collaboration to respond to: social economic, health, educational, governance, peace and environmental challenges; and d) implementing collaborative advocacy programmes based on shared moral commitments in all thematic areas. One partnering faith-based organization is the Coast Interfaith Council of Clerics (CICC), formed in 1997 through collaboration between Catholic priests and other religious leaders from Christian and non-Christian communities. CICC has been one of the main structures for interreligious dialogue and has worked to bridge the differences between various religions and cultures.

As part of its conscientization program on IRD, the RCC began by training its clergy and leadership on dialogue and its value for building harmonious relations in society. This was backed by development and laity empowerment programs through conferences, workshops and theological exchanges on the religious other. By exposing its congregations to other religious traditions and cultures, the RCC believed that all Christians had a duty and the right, "to seek the truth in religious matters so that, through the use of appropriate means, they may prudently form judgments of conscience which are sincere and true on those traditions". The training sessions were conducted in all deaneries that brought together Christians from all parishes and congregations in the Archdiocese of Mombasa.

In its training and awareness campaigns on IRD, the RCC applied the pedagogy of the oppressed by Paulo Freire, which allowed the participants to share and search for common themes that promoted social cohesion. This study established that this approach created a dialogic community where everyone was a teacher and learner; thus, participants shared common values that can promote interreligious cohesion, such as peace, human dignity, love, justice, and development. This training aimed at scaling up the number of people with knowledge on matters of interreligious dialogue (IRD) and using them as change agents. This form of training was more of an intra-religious dialogue in which members of the RCC, clergy, and laity were exposed to other religions and cultures before engaging them further in interreligious dialogue. This study observed that training on IRD was not based on doctrinal or theological considerations but on social and pastoral realities in the Archdiocese.

Training people on interreligious issues helped promote intercultural dialogue and created spaces and conditions for demystifying stereotypes and prejudices by being open and motivated to cooperate to build up a better, fairer, just, and more inclusive society, as Pope John Paul II advocated. Equally, the training was also important in building congregation consciousness that would not be persuaded easily by comparative preachers from other religions. By exposing the laity to IRD, they were being encouraged to cooperate with members of other faiths through understanding and mutual respect in

addressing societal challenges. The Church was opening its doors for further engagement in promoting peaceful and harmonious coexistence. Its training was punctuated with hospitable gestures such as honouring invitations to religious festivals and rituals of the religious other and visiting mosques, temples, and shrines. Yet, on the other hand, this study noted that the awareness campaigns and advocacy for social cohesion were diverse, including engagement with youths from different religious, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds through Music, Art, and Sports.

From training and awareness campaigns on IRD, the Church also engaged in cooperation for social action. It launched peace-connecting projects, for instance, the water project in Mtwapa but more work on peace was undertaken with CICC one of its partners in the interreligious field. The RCC was among the founding members of CICC in 1997 and has been actively engaging in its IRD projects. This study established that the COVID-19 pandemic opened a space for the RCC to engage in more social action projects. The Church collaborated with other religious groups in charity work targeting the vulnerable, distributing masks, sanitizers, medical, and other material provisions. Moreover, the Church also engaged in other charitable initiatives including environmental conservation.

The impact of IRD was more pronounced as most respondents believed it promoted national unity and societal harmony. In addition to fostering religious tolerance, religious conflict can be avoided by promoting community healing and reconciliation. More importantly, interreligious dialogue bridged interreligious differences by appreciating common values from different religions. Although achieving social cohesion is difficult in a multicultural and pluralized society, there was consensus that IRD enhanced mutual understanding and trust between faith and local communities and the nation as a whole. The respondents were positive that IRD promoted interreligious literacy which is essential in a multireligious and pluralized society.

In summary, the RCC Archdiocese of Mombasa through its multidimensional and integrated interreligious initiatives and activities stimulated a conversation on the value of interreligious dialogue (IRD) as fundamental to national unity and social cohesion. The Church, in the spirit of dialogue advocated by Pope John Paul II, created an inclusive church that positively attempted to address societal challenges and sought the "Divine truth" in non-Christian religions and cultures. The Church helped shape its members' viewpoints on peaceful co-existence and developing harmonious and mutual relations with people from diverse religious heritage. Thus, the paradigm shifts from exclusivism to inclusivism and pluralism in the post-Vatican II period. This study established that the RCC Archdiocese of Mombasa relied on authoritative teaching teased from (1) Vatican Council documents, (2) postconciliar magisterium, (3) Papal addresses, and (4) documents of the Roman Curia such as Dicastery of Interreligious dialogue. The language of religious moderation ensonced in the conciliar, magisterium, and other postconciliar exhortations manifested the RCC's moderate stance and openness towards non-Christian religions. Again, from the documents and based on its pastoral activities, the Church distinguished between having *knowledge of* other religious traditions and having *exposure to* other religious groups. Thus, overall, the RCC Archdiocese of Mombasa implemented four types of dialogue advocated by Pope John Paul II: dialogue of life, dialogue of action, dialogue of religious experience, and dialogue of theological exchanges. This study established that dialogue of life and dialogue of action were the main IRD models promoted by the RCC Archdiocese of Mombasa.

Conclusion

This study argued that the RCC adopted IRD as a non-violent alternative mechanism towards social cohesion. The Vatican II Council (1962-1965) brought renewal to the RCC, which led to theological, liturgical, and pastoral changes witnessed in the Archdiocese of Mombasa in its quest for positive interreligious relations. The study established that the Vatican II council challenged the exclusive paradigm and vouched for IRD with other religions and cultures. Thus, the positive attitude adopted by Vatican II provided theological warrants for the RCC Archdiocese of Mombasa to employ IRD toward social cohesion. But more importantly, the teachings and gestures of Pope John Paul II inspired the RCC Archdiocese of Mombasa. Thus, it formulated dialogue as part of its core mission by partnering with other religious institutions to implement several peacebuilding initiatives across religious and political divides. The main IRD initiatives pursued by the RCC included IRD education and awareness programs, humanitarian action through peace connecting projects, symbolic gestures, charity, and hospitality toward other religions and cultures.

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The researcher confirms that the all data collected was responsibly handled and accurately documented without manipulation of any kind or bias.

Competing interest

The author affirms that this research was conducted without impartially competing interests of any kind financially, professionally and personally that may have influenced the outcome of biased results or interpretation.

Author's contribution

The researcher is the sole author of this article.

Disclaimer

The views expressed in this research article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated agencies of the authors or the journal itself.

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