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## **Horizons and Bridges of Dialogue:** Interreligious Dialogue and Social Cohesion in the Coastal Kenya

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### **Abstract**

This research article explores the way in which the Roman Catholic Church (RCC) has brought to life the interreligious principles of the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965), as articulated in its Magna Carta *Nostra Aetate* (NA), which served as the Church's official doctrine and stance on its relationship with non-Christian religions and world cultures. The article also delves into the RCC's interpretation of postconciliar exhortations, including the Papal encyclicals and magisterium, in its religious and social activities to foster community cohesion and peaceful co-existence in Kenya. It explores the theological outcomes of interreligious dialogue and its pastoral practice in the Coastal Kenya. It scrutinizes the RCC's contribution to religious moderation and social cohesion through its multifaceted dialogue initiatives with the civil society, religious, and corporate communities. It empirically analyzes the numerous initiatives and ambitious development programs, i.e., education and charity, empowerment through conferences, training, and theological exchanges with the religious other. It utilises qualitative and quantitative approaches to gather empirical data from 140 respondents through interviews, Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), and questionnaires. From the empirical data it evaluated the impact and outcome of RCC's interreligious programs and how dialogue can reshape prevailing stereotypes about other religions in a pluralistic context.

**Keywords:** Archdiocese of Mombasa, Dialogue, Interreligious Dialogue, Coastal Kenya, Roman Catholic Church

### **Introduction**

Dialogue has become an increasingly viable means for negotiating peace in fragile multicultural, multireligious, and pluralized societies. The Roman Catholic Church (RCC), like many other religious organizations in Africa and Kenya in particular, has been struggling to build social cohesion. The struggle for national integration in a diverse society such as Kenya with multiple

religious, ethnic, and cultural groups appears complex and elusive. This calls for a multi-sectorial approach that involves intra- and interreligious dialogue (IRD) and, more fundamentally, cultural transformation. This study championed the propagation of an ideology of unity that values peaceful co-existence and social cohesion. It aims to build a culture of dialogue in addressing historical (in) justice and grievances. Indeed, Kenya, like many African countries, has witnessed devastating ethnic and political violence that has created a wedge between communities. Furthermore, there seems to be a pattern of recurrent violence and protests in all the periodic elections since the re-introduction of multi-party politics in the early 1990s. This also plays out in Coastal Kenya, where calls for secession characterize every periodic election cycle. The ethnic and religious conflict between Orma and Pokomo is still unaddressed, while the contested politics and violence between Midzi-Cheda and the migrant up-country communities (*Wabara*) remain unresolved.

Despite the challenges above, the RCC has been committed to "critical peace-related values including empathy, unity, an openness to and even love of strangers, human rights, unilateral gestures of forgiveness and humility, interpersonal repentance and accepting responsibility for past errors as a means of reconciliation, and just national integration. By contrast, however, the RCC has also faced challenges of political and ethnic violence in its advocacy for societal cohesion, where even some lay Christians have been involved. In advocacy for societal cohesion, Scott writes that forgiveness and reconciliation are essential political realities that help create a conducive environment for dialogue and peacebuilding. Scott also observes that top-down peacebuilding processes are ineffective "without a ground-up, bottom-grassroots processes of dialogue and change" in society. In Kenya, the political rhetoric of national unity propagated by state institutions has not effectively promoted societal cohesion. In response to Scott concerns, this study used the RCC Archdiocese of Mombasa as a test case of how interreligious dialogue initiatives can promote social cohesion and national integration. It argues that IRD initiatives such as those carried out by the RCC Archdiocese of Mombasa promoted a culture of nonviolence and reconciliation that Scott propagates. The central question is how the RCC can utilize its faith-based dynamics and religious impulses within a broader national cohesion and integration spectrum.

## **Materials and Methods**

The research article adopted a mixed research design combining qualitative and quantitative approaches. Applying empirical methods in theological research has gained traction in human sciences. Empirical research is widely used in practical theology to better understand the pastoral issues affecting the people. As an empirical research, this study benefited from both qualitative and quantitative approaches in data collection and analysis. Thus, interviews, Focus Group Discussions (dialogic interviews), and questionnaires were used to gather data on RCC's interreligious dialogue initiatives and social cohesion. I collected data from diverse sources without methodological constraints by adopting a mixed research approach. Furthermore, the mixed design helped gain insights into how inter-religious programs initiated by the RCC promoted social cohesion in Coastal Kenya. Using purposive sampling technique, 40 research participants were selected for interviews and FGDs. 30 were involved through face to face interviews and 10 were engaged through FGDs. The respondents included: Imams, Muslims, African Traditional Religion (ATR) practitioners, and members of Hindu community, RCC priests, laity and other Church leaders drawn from various Church organizations including Mombasa Church Council (MCC). The research study also targeted members and leaders drawn from interreligious organisations such as Coast Interreligious Council of Clerics (CICC), Interreligious Council of Kenya (IRC-K) and Commission for Interreligious Dialogue and Ecumenism (CIRDE). Randomly the study surveyed 100 lay RCC Christians through questionnaires. In total, 140 research participants were involved in the study. The quantitative and qualitative data were triangulated to develop themes discussed in this study.

## **Bridges of Dialogue: The RCC's Quest for Religious Moderation and Social Cohesion**

The Catholic theology of religions (CTRs) that emanated from the Vatican II Council (1962-1965) offers the Kenyan church an opportunity to serve as a moderator to religious extremism, conflict, and social disunity in a multicultural and multireligious context. This section of the study analyzed the interreligious activities undertaken by the Catholic Church that have improved interfaith interactions and partly addressed social conflicts in Coastal Kenya. It also elucidates Catholic Christian theological views on IRD. Since the colonial period, the RCC has strived for community integration and social cohesion and continued recognizing religious pluralism and cultural diversity. To this end, we narrow down to specific interreligious activities and initiatives that the RCC undertook as an institution as well as corporately with other organizations, including the Coast Interfaith Council of Clerics (CICC), the Interreligious Council of Kenya (IRC-K), Catholic Justice and Peace Commission (CJPC), Agiamondo,

Caritas, and Kenya Episcopal Conference of Catholic Bishops (KECCB). From numerous data gathered from these organizations, the RCC's interreligious initiatives and activities included peace projects, education programs, relief to victims of pandemics such as COVID-19, gestures of charity to other religions, etc.

### **Interreligious Peace Connecting Projects**

The RCC has initiated several peacebuilding projects aimed at community integration and social cohesion across the country particularly in the Mombasa Archdiocese. In the 1990s following the re-introduction of multiparty democracy, politicians instrumentalized ethnic and religious differences for political goals. In the Rift Valley, ethnic violence was instigated by KANU politicians to disfranchise some communities from participating in multiparty elections. In Coastal Kenya, the violence took an ethnic, political, and religious angle as different political groups worked towards the displacement of up-country communities living and working in the Coastal counties of Mombasa, Kilifi, and Kwale. Earlier, in 1990, the Islamic Party of Kenya (IPK) led by Sheikh Balala had emerged to address the social, economic, and political grievances of Coastal Muslim communities. Against this backdrop, many academic accounts highlight discrimination towards Muslims in political, educational, and employment settings, as well as the difficulties they face in obtaining travel documents (Ndzovu 2014). The formation of IPK and its final banning sent signals among the Muslim community that the Christian-controlled government under President Moi was out to frustrate Muslim political leaders, and this deteriorated Christian-Muslim relations.

In August 1997, state apparatus out to weaken opposition parties sponsored political violence that turned out to be ethnic as well as religious. Like the 1991 conflicts in Rift Valley, the RCC with support from the KECCB issued a statement condemning the violence and calling for peaceful co-existence among Coastal communities. The ethnic and religious violence targeted upcountry communities and the motive was to displace and deny them the opportunity to vote. For many years both Midzi-Cheda from various religious backgrounds and Swahili Muslims have frequently complained about their relative marginalization vis-à-vis 'upcountry Christians' in terms of education, economics, land access, and political representation. And the government in partnership with local politicians appropriated such feelings of marginalization to underscore their selfish political goals. The RCC in Likoni became a shelter for thousands of internally displaced people from different religious backgrounds. Likoni parish had to solicit material support for the victims. Meanwhile, Bishop Njenga organized a meeting with all priests and mobilized resources that could help alleviate the pain experienced by the people. The Bishop also condemned the government for sponsoring the conflict and warned politicians of stoking disunity in Mombasa.

The conflict in Likoni provided another opportunity for the RCC to engage in a *dialogue of action* by working together with people from other faiths in social activities to support victims of violence. The violence led to the formation of the Coast Interfaith Council of Clerics (CICC) which is a consortium of interfaith leaders representing various religious groups. Bishop Willybard Lagho who was one of the priests in the Mombasa Archdiocese by then noted that:

CICC emerged as a result of the Likoni conflicts and the need for an interreligious forum that could be used to address emerging conflicts in a multiethnic and multireligious county.

The formation of CICC also came at a time when the desire for dialogue was becoming more evident in Kenya following the August 1999 Nairobi bomb blast that claimed over 200 lives and wounded thousands. In an interview with Bishop Emeritus of the Anglican Church, Julius Robert Kalu, he connects the formation of CICC beyond the local context:

Christians and Muslims alike in Mombasa and by extension Coast province saw the need to sit together and chart how to work together. The tension that was happening in the Coast province had been brought by global changes in the sense that the Christian world and the Muslim world were on a collision path. This was worsened by the global war on terror which was interpreted in the majority Muslim world as a target on Islam.

While the formation of CICC emerged out of necessity for dialogue supposedly in containing "ethnic and political violence" its main goal was to offer a space for religious moderation in a setting characterized by religious plurality. Consequently, the Catholic Church became a shepherd of this noble goal by initiating various interventions to educate and create awareness on the significance of dialogue for community integration and cohesion which intersected with the politics of religious moderation for peaceful coexistence. The CICC leadership often evaluates events that are likely to stoke ethnic and religious tensions and provides direction aimed at promoting peace and national unity. These evaluations subsequently motivate attempts to accommodate various religious communities in morally desirable social constellations via peace and development projects.

The Catholic Church discouraged leaders from politicizing religion or ethnicity thus, there has been a change in the attitude of the local congregations toward other religions and their members. With the encouragement and support from other faith

leaders, the Catholic Church carried out many other social activities with the collaboration of followers of different religions in peacebuilding. The projects tailored towards the promotion of peaceful co-existence were undertaken by Bishop John Njenga and his predecessors, Boniface Lele (2005-2013) and the present Archbishop, Martin Musonde Kivuva. The bishops have been working closely with the Interreligious Dialogue Commission (IRD-C) of the Church to promote mutual understanding, respect, and collaboration between Catholics and followers of other religions.

### IRD Education and Awareness Programmes

The RCC's education programs aimed at creating awareness of the value of interreligious dialogue (IRD) in a multicultural and multireligious setting are coordinated by IRD-C. In 2020, IRD-C launched an ambitious project of equipping trainer of trainers (ToT) with interfaith knowledge and skills across Coastal Kenya. The first training was conducted at Ukunda where 60 laity members were trained by the IRD Commission on various topics. This training aimed at scaling up the number of people with knowledge on matters of interreligious collaboration and using them as change agents. This form of training was more of an intra-religious dialogue where members of the RCC both clergy and laity were exposed to knowledge of other religions and cultures.

After the training of trainers (ToT), the RCC began a program of educating its members on other religions and how to live with members of other religions. In this training, it was observed that some Christians came from families with people worshiping in different religions. There was therefore a need to develop relevant programs for all this category. Subsequently, another training was conducted on interreligious (or mixed) marriages where the spouses came from different religions for instance those between a Muslim and a Christian. The Church conducted a seminar on November 2019 at Ukunda parish with a topic on "Mixed marriages". The seminar was facilitated by Father Kizito, priest of the RCC Archdiocese of Mombasa and specialist in Canon Law. The training began with an understanding of what constitutes marriage for the Roman Catholic Church and how to navigate interreligious marriages.

Interestingly, this training was not based on any doctrinal or theological understanding but rather on a pastoral consideration owing to distinct local dynamics that shape the interaction of traditions related to social relationships including marriage. In religiously diverse and multicultural societies like in Coastal Kenya, interreligious (or mixed) marriages have been relatively common and often unproblematic. Broadly, interreligious marriages fall under the *dialogue of life* considering social interactions between people of different religions, and traditions in the public sphere and extending to the private or family space. Subsequently, interreligious marriages provided a space where members of different traditions negotiated issues that arose in such mixed marriages and conflicting worldviews. Pope Paul VI's encyclical *Matrimonia Mixta* (1970) offered an official Catholic position on mixed marriages as permissible. Although the process is regulated, requiring "dispensation from disparity of cult" obtained from the local bishop for a priest to conduct a church wedding between a Christian and a non-Christians.



**Figure 1. Mixed Marriages Dialogic Workshop, Ukunda Parish**

Apart from training on mixed marriages, the RCC was aware that many Christians live and work in a multi-religious and pluralistic context which requires multicultural consciousness. This was in line with the Second Vatican Council which had

suggested the importance of educating future pastoral workers in the spirit of ecumenism and interreligious dialogue. Thus, between 2018 and 2023, the RCC was purposeful in initiating a series of training programs on non-Christian religions and cultures. The documents reviewed including multiple interviews demonstrated that the Church focused more on creating awareness of Islam and African Traditional Religion (ATR) than Buddhism, Hinduism, Sikhism, and Judaism among other world religions. In an interview with the program officer for the IRD commission, Sr. Lucy Kamau, she quipped that "first Christians had regular social interactions with Islam and ATR yet they had less knowledge on their beliefs and practices; and secondly, Christians have had a conflictual relationship with the two religions in many instances created by prejudices and stereotypes". The strained relationship between Abrahamic religions with non-Abrahamic religions including African Religion is well documented by Chidongo (2010) who decried how Christianity and Islam have undermined the development of ATR in Coastal Kenya. To bridge the historical rift and constrained relationship, the RCC conducted training in all deaneries targeting religious leaders, priests, youths, and laity by working closely with the Young Catholic Association (YCA) and Church councils.

The RCC trained the leadership including priests and council members from all deaneries on the necessity of interfaith dialogue and the feasibility of practicing it in light of the recommendations of the Vatican II towards building community integration and social cohesion. The necessity for dialogue according to Fr. Harrison Yaa was motivated on one side by the silent conflict between Catholics, Protestants, and Pentecostal churches witnessed during social events such as burial ceremonies and crusades where sermons were tailored to attack the doctrines and practices of other denominations and religions. On the other side was the emergence of comparative preaching where some Muslim Imams and scholars would engage with Pentecostal clerics in a "rhetorical debate" over doctrinal and theological matters. Often such debates turned chaotic and divisive as they focused on establishing theological differences with the motive of conversion hence promoting religious *xenophobia*. Comparative preaching has also been exploited by fundamentalists to stoke religious and political divisions. While some of the RCC's priests and laity had no interest in opening the space for dialogue, not many shared this negative attitude as evident during the training. Efforts to encourage dialogue beyond the Church boundaries were echoed by the majority of participants as one observed:

Fellow brothers and sisters, we have lost our children and relatives to acts of terrorism and extremism. We can indeed get angry but this is the right time for dialogue with people of different religions to assuage the tensions that may be caused by discrimination and extremist elements in our society.

The Christian agency to interreligious dialogue was not limited to the Vatican II, encyclicals and post conciliar documents but also by the empirical realities undergirding the RCC's evangelism in Coastal Kenya. The calls for IRD became a reality with the bombing of American embassy in Nairobi in August 1998 and intensified with the 9/11 attack in the USA. Furthermore, the counterinsurgency against AlShabaab terrorists in Somalia catalyzed the RCC's push for interreligious dialogue aimed at easing ethnic and religious tension brought about by radicalization and terrorism in Coastal Kenya. The RCC through IRD-C has been central in facilitating intercultural and religious understanding and tolerance with a view of empowering the citizens and building resilience against violence and terror. Deemed central to these efforts was the involvement of the youths and women not for their vulnerability to conflict and extremism but for the responsibility to sustain the peacebuilding agenda and social cohesion. Consequently, the second cohort to be trained was the Y.C.A officials drawn from Mombasa, Kwale, Voi, and Kilifi. The training focused on unpacking the RCC's teaching about "Interreligious Dialogue" through its official documents including *Nostra Aetate*, Dialogue and Mission, and Dialogue in Truth and Charity. In summary, they learned about respect for other religions and cultures, mutual understanding, love, honesty, acceptance, prudence, no prejudices, openness, good preparation, and formation among others. After training YCA officials, IRD-C began to educate other youths on understanding Islam better across the Archdiocese.



Figure 2. Youths Training on Interreligious Dialogue, Changamwe Parish

The workshops on Islam were titled: "Witnesses of Dialogue". Seminars of this nature began on 24 November 2019 at Changamwe parish being facilitated by an Imam, Sheikh Ali Mwinyi who is a member of the CICC. During the workshop, the youth could express all their prejudices, stereotypes, and criticism to the Imam on Islam and received correct teaching and explanations. The youth learned about Islam's creed, its rules, and practices. The "witnesses of dialogue" seminar helped the youths to demystify the most common stereotypes and practices related to Islam. The dialogue between the Imam and the youths created a space for RCC Christians to experience their own religious life as well as that of Islam and also provided a context for theological exchange on certain Christian and Islamic rituals and practices. Dialogue of this nature was undertaken across all the deaneries including Bomu Catholic parish, Mikindani, Mtopanga, and Ukunda among others. In the course of the training, the youths were divided into groups and given literature on the life of four Saints related to interreligious dialogue: Saint Francis, Mother Teresa of Calcutta, Pope John Paul II, and Pope Francis II. These Saints embraced dialogue, love, and tolerance toward other religions and cultures. The dialogic studies involved the youths sharing their stories and reflecting on interreligious questions proposed by IRD-C trainers.

The training of Christian youths on Islam and other non-Christian religions was in line with the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue (PCID) call for awareness on non-Christian religions and cultures. Between 1998 and 2001, PCID focused on interfaith education to facilitate intercultural and religious understanding and tolerance among young people in multicultural and religious pluralist societies like Kenya. On "*Witnesses of Dialogue*" training, Bishop Lagho who was a member of the PCID observed that "exposure to other religions lead to appreciation of other belief systems and practices, mutual respect and acceptance of the plurality of religions". Likewise, Sheikh Rishard, one of the interfaith actors asserts that "interreligious knowledge helped in shaping peoples attitude towards tolerance of other religions and establishes healthier relations in society". In consonance with Rishard, Sheikh Mahmud of Swahilina Mosque and a member of CICC observes that "this positive attitude towards people of other faiths traditions need to be encouraged by all religious groups for purposes of national unity". The openness and tolerance among the people also help in religious moderation during times of conflicts brought about by terrorism. On this note, the Catholic Church through IRD-C organized an interactive workshop on 3<sup>rd</sup> July 2021 on "the role of Christian Faithful in Inter-faith dialogue in the context of preventing and countering violent extremism". The workshop was attended by over 40 participants who deliberated on how dialogue was necessary in addressing violent extremism. This workshop created a space for demystifying the truth and lies on the connection between religion and terrorism.

### **Symbolic Interfaith Prayers During National Events**

The RCC, Protestants, Pentecostals, and other faiths do share a platform for prayers during national celebrations and other special events. There are a series of prayers organized annually by the RCC through IRD-C. Also, the IRD-C organizes a week of ecumenical prayers annually to commemorate Christian unity. The Church through Dicastery for Interfaith Dialogue assists in this intra-religious dialogue. Locally, the RCC has partnered with other denominations to form Christian church forums. In addition to enhancing ecumenism, such forums provide an intra-religious space for them to respond to public affairs. The RCC has also supported interfaith prayers held annually christened National Prayer Breakfast. This annual interreligious practice helped in preaching tolerance and national cohesion. At the local level, IRD-C has worked closely with the Technical University of Mombasa (TUM) to create awareness of interreligious dialogue through symbolic prayers. Prayer is the universal language with which every believer calls on God; or whatever name one uses. Each religion has developed different ways to relate to God. Thus, prayer is a common way that elevates people in their communication and dialogue with God.

### **Interfaith Gestures of Charity to Other Religious Groups**

IRD has also been expressed through acts of charity. The RCC has supported vulnerable families across religious, ethnic, cultural, and political divides. In many instances, the Church has been delivering basic material goods to support poor families. In COVID-19 pandemic context, the RCC engaged in dialogical actions distributing food items, face masks and sanitizers to vulnerable families in Coastal Kenya. The COVID sensitization campaign was led by Archbishop Martin Kivuva and Sheikh Rishab Rajab who urged the public to uptake COVID-19 vaccination. This was important, according to Kivuva, because some people objected to vaccination on religious and cultural grounds. Consequently, some members of the Mombasa Interfaith Covid-19 Committee took it upon themselves to educate people on how to keep safe from the COVID-19 virus. Reflecting on the interfaith activities during the COVID-19 pandemic, Sheikh Mahmud Khalifa says:

The Catholic Church had a history of interreligious dialogue and expertise that was lacking in many religions and other Christian denominations. However, the COVID-19 pandemic although a deadly disease gave as an opportunity to interact and learn from each other. We had an opportunity to express our love, charity, and service to humanity. I used the occasion to build, I think lasting friendships with many religious leaders. I came know that here in Mombasa, we can achieve a lot by working together.

As pointed out by Sheikh Mahmud, religious leaders mobilized their members to participate in donations in support of vulnerable community members. In addition, interreligious leaders conducted the COVID-19 sensitization campaigns in open spaces including market centers, social media, and radio and television stations (see Figure 3). Religious leaders also shifted their services online. Interpreting the church's charitable projects, Fr. Joseph Mwarabu argues "that charity is at the centre of many religious teachings and through these activities, both religions can find common causes to come together". He further observed that such social activities can help to overcome stereotypes and prejudices between religions. Thus, charity is important for bridging ethnic and religious divides and fostering social cohesion.



**Figure 3. Interfaith Leaders in COVID-19 Sensitization Drive in Kongowea Market**

The Church also engaged in other charitable initiatives including environmental conservation. In 2019, mischievous people burnt Kaya Rabai, IRD-C, and CICC came together to condemn the incident which was viewed as sacrilegious to African Religion/ATR. Kaya elders have played an important role in building harmonious relations between humans and nature and are recognized by UNESCO for leading environmental conversation in the Coastal region. By contrast, the burning of the Kaya forest was interpreted as a religious and spiritual war against the African religion and its practitioners. The IRD-C and CICC teams visited Kaya Rabai to stand in solidarity with the people. The RCC also engaged in environmental conversation in Kilifi, Mombasa, and Kwale counties. Interreligious Council of Kenya (IRC-K) was supportive of the environmental projects. The government through the Ministry of Environment and Forestry Department provided seedlings during this initiative. According to Fr. Mwarabu, the church's environmental concerns were inspired by the Holy Father, Pope Francis II's encyclical "*LAUDATO SI'*". In this document, the Pope on climate change as "a tragic consequence" of unchecked human activity and violation.

The RCC also demonstrated interreligious virtues through symbolic activities. Of interest to this study was the visitation of respective places of worship of other religious traditions and symbolic participation in the celebration of rituals. In an interview with Sr. Lucy Kamau, she argues that "visitation of other religious places of worship including mosques, Kayas, and temples were important in addressing and demystifying existing stereotypes on some religious traditions and beliefs. The visitations took place in all deaneries, at St. Patrick's Church, Kilifi, YCA members visited Masjid Bilal mosque. While in Ukunda, the youths visited Masjid Kongo in Diani; and those from Mtopanga parish were hosted at Masjid Swahilina, Kisauni. The youths

who visited the Mosques were accompanied by expatriate staff of IRD-C seconded by Agiamondo. Mosque visitation provided another avenue for dialogue between Christians and Muslims. As, Fr. Harrison Yaa recalled, it was an opportunity for fostering mutual understanding and friendships with the religious other. One of the youths who attended a Mosque in Diani noted:

I have come to understand how Muslims worship and perform rituals. This has helped in changing my negative initial perception about Islam and helped in understanding, loving and accommodating them as our colleagues on the other religions.

Similarly another youth who was hosted at Swahilina Mosque observed:

The essence of the manner of worship between Christianity and Islam is similar. The holding of hands, kneeling and adoration were common with Catholics. The instruments of worship for instance the use of incense and rosary. The manner of dressing during prayers. The commonality witnessed in this religion shows the belief in One supreme being-God.

The acknowledgement by the youths on similarities between Christianity and Islam was relevant in religious moderation and building of a tolerant and inclusive society. IRD-C also organized a group of lay Christians in visiting BAPS Hindu Temple to understand the inherent differences in worship and rituals. One of the participants observed:

[Our] visitations to the temple and Muslims made me understand the commonality but also appreciate the differences. The Hindus use rosary, Muslims (tasbeeh) and Christians (rosary) for prayers. Hindus strive to establish harmonious relations with both humans and the environment. They do not eat meat and practice meditation a lot. They too have monks just like in Catholic.

The empirical data analyzed showed that participants in places of worship received interreligious exposure necessary for building harmonious relations. The Hindu temple was open for the public from any religious tradition to visit and learn from the priests. A similar approach has been adopted by the RCC and Anglican Church, which have open days for other religious groups to see and learn from each other. As mentioned earlier, the RCC also participated in the celebration of feast of different faiths. In Coastal Kenya, Christians were socialized to participate in interreligious exchanges and social activities, including marriage celebrations and funeral services, which provided a multireligious context where people gathered without thinking of religious boundaries or affiliations. As Fr. Mwarabu observed, many Christians participated in the celebration of feasts of other non-Christian religions. On many occasions, they were invited by religious people to share a meal. The most common was the celebration of *Ramadhan*, which is marked by fasting by the Muslim community (*ummah*). In solidarity with Muslims, some RCC Christians do fast on their own volition. To underscore the importance of Muslims' holy month of *Ramadhan*, CICC organized a seminar on the "meaning of fasting in different religious groups" to educate people on the spiritual value of fasting across different religious heritage.

By honoring invitations by Muslims for *iftar* (fast-breaking dinner) and *Eid al-Fitr* Christians demonstrated good will and reciprocity. Fr. Mwarabu argues that the interactions during these celebrations promote community harmony and social cohesion:

In our African societies, we live harmoniously together despite that we go to different religions and denominations. You can get a Christian family with Catholics, Anglicans, Methodists, Pentecostals and Presbyterians. Still in the same family, you get Muslims, Christians, and African Religious practitioners. But we intermarry and participate in community rituals together eating, drinking, and celebrating without any suspicion.

The plurality of religions and ethnic groups is promoted through social events and interactions. While conducting this research, I attended several interfaith *iftar* in Mombasa, Kwale, and Kilifi. Notably, some feasts such as Al Gander in Islam, which commemorate Abraham's slaughtering of a sheep instead of Isaac, show reference to patristic figures at the roots of some religions. Love for the neighbors, fraternity, and peaceful coexistence, hope for the future, and care for the unfortunate were some themes the participants spoke about during *iftar*.

Christians also acknowledged the feast of Diwali among the Hindus. This was in line with the example of Pope John Paul II. During his pastoral visit to India in 1999, the Pope celebrated a mass, "the Votive Mass of "Christ the Light of the World," at New Delhi, which coincided with the Festival of Lights. This gesture was significant to Catholic Christians worldwide, and IRD-C has stood in solidarity with Hindus during Diwali festivals. Reflecting on these gestures of hospitality, including religious and social exchanges, this study concurs with the works of Riis and Woodhead (2010), who contended that religion should be understood regarding social relationships. From this point of view, interreligious dialogue becomes a process of forging friendships. In addition, the collective engagement projects an image that different religions can work together for the



community's common good. Beyond these social gestures, the Church has continued to engage in social action initiatives by empowering youths and women in the community.

### **Forging Bonds of Friendship: Music, Arts and Sports**

The RCC also appealed to music, art and sports in building relationships between Christians and non-Christian religions. The IRD-C organized interfaith sporting activities between Catholic and Muslim youths at Mtongwe and Mtopanga respectively. The match between Muslim and Catholic youths was played on 23<sup>rd</sup> November 2019 at a public football field near Mtopanga parish. Before the game, IRD-C officials introduced their main goal in organizing the tournament and discussed with the players the mission of the interreligious commission and its activities in the Coastal region. One of the YCA members as reported by Fadhili Mwabingu said:

We also explained to our Muslim guests why they were invited to play a friendly match with the Catholic youth. The match lasted for about one hour, and the Muslim team won (4-0). At the end, we gathered again for a vote of thanks from both teams, and we shared some snacks in a friendly atmosphere.

A similar tournament at Mtongwe in Likoni was also successful. The success of the football match was bringing together two groups of youth, both Catholics and Muslims, to share quality time together, having fun, playing in the name of interreligious dialogue, respect, collaboration and friendship. The RCC also used 'Art and Theater' to encourage interreligious engagement and address societal problems. On 16th and 17th November 2019, IRD-C organized two trainings for youths in Kilifi and Kwale. The trainings were a film-based discussion on a documentary, "WATATU" (Swahili word for three). It is a tragic story of three young men in Mombasa whose lives become intertwined with extremism. One of them, Yusuf, a young unemployed Muslim, was radicalized by an extremist group. The family and friends are traumatized but remain powerless on how to help him. Yusuf's uncle and the father figure around him lack the language and knowledge to counter extremist ideology. On the other hand, Salim's old friend Jack, a local policeman, struggles to win Yusuf's trust. Navigating this tension becomes problematic for the three men, and Yusuf eventually is driven to a desperate and tragic act. This film, written entirely by the citizens of Mombasa, sees an alternative journey for Yusuf, his family, and Mombasa. The documentary addresses societal challenges related to radicalization and terrorism at the Coast. It provides a counter-narrative to violent ideologies propagated by terrorist groups such as Al-Shabaab. It highlighted the fractured relationship between the security personnel and the youth, marked by extrajudicial killings and forced disappearance.



**Figure 4. Muslims versus Christian Youths in Football Match**

The RCC adopted a multidimensional approach to interreligious dialogue in Coastal Kenya. It collaborated with many faith-based and secular institutions, including the civil society and corporate communities. The study empirically described multiple initiatives and ambitious programs of development (i.e. education) and charity, empowerment through sports, arts and music, conferences, training, and theological exchanges with the religious other. Training people on interfaith 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. Furthermore, the participation of the laity particularly the youths and women in interfaith projects shows that they have both the capacity to learn and to contribute to interreligious understanding and community-building. Consequently, this has opened doors for them to participate and offer

tangible contributions to the community including participating in projects like environmental conservation drives, market cleanups, peacebuilding campaigns, and other special events. As attested by this thesis, four forms of dialogue emerged out of the interreligious engagement of the Catholic Church which were central to community integration and social cohesion. These include dialogue of life or living dialogue, dialogue of cooperation, dialogue of theological exchanges and dialogue of religious experience. These forms of dialogue stressed that individuals should learn *from* rather than just *about* other religions.

**Impact of the Inter-Religious Dialogue Programs on Social Cohesion**

The study interrogated the practical outcome of interreligious dialogue initiatives to social cohesion and whether the RCC adopted a pastoral approach can facilitate the construction of a dialogic community. Broadly, it pointed out the empirical outcomes and consequences of interreligious dialogue in Coastal Kenya. Thus, the study addresses what the respondents considered to be the positive impact of interfaith dialogue. Empirically, this study sought to address the question of how people articulate the impact of interreligious dialogue in their lives and also in building community integration and social cohesion. Table 1 captures some of the responses validated by the participants.

**Table 1 Respondents Views on the Impact of Catholic Inter-Religious Initiative**

<i>Statement/Indicators</i>	<i>SA</i>	<i>A</i>	<i>UND</i>	<i>D</i>	<i>SD</i>
<b>It fosters religious tolerance thus averting religious conflict</b>	80	20	-	-	-
<b>Promotes peace and unity/societal harmony</b>	76	18	6	-	-
<b>Promote interreligious literacy</b>	38	20	22	17	3
<b>It bridges interreligious differences by appreciating common values</b>	64	26	5	3	2
<b>Heal community/inter-ethnic divisions</b>	48	39	8	2	3
<b>Contributes to mutual understanding and trust between faith communities, local communities, and nations</b>	62	28	4	4	6

The utilitarian goal of dialogue was community unity and social cohesion. The majority of the respondents thus 94 % observed that interreligious dialogue promoted national unity and societal harmony. All the respondents (100%) acknowledged that dialogue fosters religious tolerance, thus averting religious conflict by promoting community healing and reconciliation (88%). More importantly, interreligious dialogue, according to most respondents (90%), bridged interreligious differences by appreciating common values. Thus, it enhanced mutual understanding and trust between faith communities, local communities, and the nation, as noted by most study respondents (88%). Although some people (58%) observed that interreligious dialogue promoted interreligious literacy, a few (20%) contested this view. On the other hand, some (22%) were not sure about how interreligious dialogue can promote religious literacy.

From the quantitative analysis, we established the positive values of interreligious dialogue. This becomes more apparent when we triangulate the qualitative data on the success stories of interreligious dialogue gleaned from multiple interviews with people from different faiths (including Islam, Christians, Hinduism, and ATR) and secondary literature. The findings vacillate between two poles: on the one hand, Coastal Kenya is held up as an exemplar of religious harmony, with the much-vaunted Coast Interfaith Council of Clerics (CICC) and Interreligious Dialogue Commission (IRD-C) seen as a paradigm of success stories. On the other hand, the Coastal situation is held as inherently conflicting, prone to communal disharmony, and inherently strained. Yet, as this study unpacks, the broad-based interfaith engagement helped moderate religious tension. It is plausible, therefore, to argue that the relative religious harmony is a result of careful policy and administrative planning by the

Catholic Church and its local and international partners, including the Pontifical Council for Inter-religious Dialogue (PCID). Partly because of lessons drawn from certain historical incidents before and after political independence. Thus, it is a deliberate and calculated strategy to maintain peace and social cohesion. Fr. Harrison Yaa observes that Willybard Lagho, the current bishop of Malindi Diocese has been the face of interreligious engagement in Coastal Kenya. He understands the complex nature of dialogue in the region and has used his position as a member of the 'Dicastery of the Interreligious Dialogue' to engage with people of different religious traditions.

From multiple interviews with people of different faiths on the impact of interreligious dialogue in religious moderation and building social cohesion, they acknowledged that Coast religion had been the center of interfaith activities in the RCC and other religions. Contrary to stereotypes that the region is in perpetual conflict, recent observation shows a state of religious tolerance and peaceful co-existence among people. The ability of interfaith dialogue to nurture interreligious participation and friendships can be seen as an opportunity to bridge the social distance between individuals of different faith traditions. Reflecting on religious tolerance and harmony, Anglican Emeritus bishop Julius Kalu recalls the tension that came with ethno-religious and political conflicts of the 1990s. He observed that some Midzi-Cheda youths had been initiated and took oath to engage in the expulsion of non-Coastal loosely referred to as *Wabara*, he and bishop John Njenga mobilized other faith communities to meet with the warriors to broker peace. Religious tolerance and moderation were necessary for communal co-existence. The *long durée* of interreligious initiatives undertaken by clerics such as Kalu and Njenga have impacted the direction of interreligious work in Coastal Kenya and beyond.

In studies conducted in Northern Nigeria, interfaith mediation was viewed as highly effective in addressing inter-communal conflicts. Interreligious dialogue helped bridge ethnic, political, cultural, and religious differences. Thus, inter-religious dialogue as Bishop John Katana of PEFA church notes is employed as a tool of conflict transformation, peacebuilding, and reconciliation among conflicting communities. According to Fr. Harrison Yaa, interreligious dialogue has guaranteed the preservation of cultural and religious diversity in the country. In an interview, he observed:

While conducting interfaith dialogue some people felt uncomfortable based on past suspicions between different religions. From colonial times, Islam, Christianity and African Religion have been suspicious with each other. This is perhaps motivated by different beliefs and people's own perception and understanding of other faiths based on their teachings. Consequently, interfaith dialogue is misconstrued as an alien concept that expects them to give up part or all of their faith and culture. This makes the work of people like myself, who are engaged in creating safe spaces for deeper understanding and peacebuilding, much more difficult and challenging.

Broadly, the training undertaken by the RCC and its partners has improved the interfaith experience of the laity and clergy. Interreligious dialogue has brought a broad knowledge of learning other cultures and religions. Visiting the temples and mosques enabled the Christians to identify and appreciate religious differences in terms of rituals, beliefs, dressing, and dietary restrictions. Thus, interreligious dialogue helped bridge religious differences by appreciating common values and improving cross-cultural relations among religious communities.

## Conclusion

The research article has stimulated a conversation on interreligious dialogue as fundamental to national unity and social cohesion. It established that the RCC in the spirit of social friendship advocated by Pope Francis II created an inclusive church that positively attempted to address societal challenges and sought the truth in non-Christian religions and cultures. The Church helped shape its members' viewpoints on peaceful co-existence by creating spaces for harmonious and mutual relations with people from diverse religious heritage, thus shifting from the exclusivism paradigm to inclusivism and pluralism in the post-Vatican II period. On this basis, the RCC distinguished between having *knowledge of* other religious traditions and having *exposure to* other religious groups. The concept of religious moderation enconced in NA and other postconciliar exhortations promoted interfaith *dialogue* in Coastal Kenya as a concrete manifestation of the Church's moderate stance and openness towards non-Christian religions were evident in all the four forms of dialogue it pursued in its pastoral contribution toward creating a dialogic community and building social cohesion. The RCC engaged in *dialogue of life*, by encouraging its members to build mutual relationships and understanding with people of other religious heritage. These relationships were nurtured through *dialogue of action or cooperation* in social development. The interfaith connecting projects such as water wells and COVID-19 charity activities profoundly impacted building mutual relations. This article also argued that the RCC promoted *dialogue of theological exchange* by creating spaces that were enabling, participatory, inclusive, and liberating to Christians and non-Christian religious communities. Broadly, we can conclude that the interreligious model adopted by the Catholic

Church was: First *informational*, learning about other religious heritage, basic beliefs, and fundamental teachings. Secondly, *confessional*, permitting its members to define their understanding of their own faith as Christians and those of other diverse religious belief systems. Third, *experiential* by engaging other people on their religious traditions and rituals through acts of charity such as Mosque visitation. Fourth, it was *relational*, developing relationships and social friendships beyond the dialogue business; and lastly *practical*, thus cooperating with other faith traditions in advocacy for social justice and development. Hence, the RCC demonstrated its value as a significant facilitator, convener, innovator, and creator of spaces for interfaith dialogue, as well as a service provider and advocate for peaceful co-existence and social cohesion in Kenya.

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## Interviews

1. Alphonse Mwaro Baya, digital recording, interview by the author on 6<sup>th</sup> February 2024 at Bishop's Office, Mombasa: Kenya.
2. Bishop John Katana, digital recording, interview by the author on 2<sup>nd</sup> February, 2024 at St. Joseph, Tudor, Mombasa: Kenya.
3. Archbishop Martin Musonde Kivuva, digital recording, interview by the author on 7<sup>th</sup> February, 2024 at his home, Nyali, Mombasa: Kenya.
4. Bishop Willybard Lagho, digital recording, interview by the author on 8<sup>th</sup> February, 2024 at Bishop's Office, Malindi: Kenya.
5. Rgt Rev. Julius Robert Kalu, digital recording, interview by the author on 8<sup>th</sup> February, 2024 at his home, Kakuyuni, Malindi: Kenya.
6. Bishop Tee. Nalo, digital recording, interview by the author on 6<sup>th</sup> February, 2024 at Praise Chapel, Mombasa: Kenya.
7. Hema Shah, digital recording, interview by the author on 9<sup>th</sup> February, 2024 at Nyali, Mombasa: Kenya.
8. Sr. Lucy Kamau, digital recording, interview by the author on 15<sup>th</sup> February, 2024 at Tudor pastoral Centre, Mombasa: Kenya.
9. Rev. Samuel Lewa Kiti, digital recording, interview by the author on 3<sup>rd</sup> February, 2024 at St. Joseph, Tudor, Mombasa: Kenya.
10. Rev Stephen Anyenda, digital recording, interview by the author on 5<sup>th</sup> February, 2024 at CICC offices, Nyali, Mombasa: Kenya.
11. Gloria Lupoi, digital recording, interview by the author on 5<sup>th</sup> February, 2024 at CICC offices, Nyali, Mombasa: Kenya.
12. Rev. Fr. Innocent Maganya, digital recording, interview by the author on February 3<sup>rd</sup> February, 2024 at St. Joseph Pastoral Centre, Tudor, Mombasa: Kenya.
13. Fr. Nicky Hennity, digital recording, interview by the author on 3<sup>rd</sup> February, 2024 at St. Patrick, Bangladesh, Mombasa: Kenya.
14. Lilian Japani, digital recording, interview by the author on 5<sup>th</sup> February, 2024 at CJPC offices, Cathedral, Mombasa: Kenya.
15. Mustafa Genz, digital recording, online interview by the author on 6<sup>th</sup> February, 2024 from St. Joseph Tudor, Mombasa: Kenya.
16. Rev. Fr. Henry Ndune, digital recording, interview by the author on February 6<sup>th</sup>, 2024, at St. Francis, Aldina, Mombasa: Kenya.
17. Fr. Joseph Mwarabu, digital recording, interview by the author on 6<sup>th</sup> February, 2024 at St. Francis, Aldina, Mombasa: Kenya.
18. Sheikh Mahmud Khalifa, digital recording, interview by the author on 6<sup>th</sup> February, 2024 at Masjid, Swahilina, Kisauni, Mombasa: Kenya.
19. Ustadh Taqbir, digital recording, interview by the author on 3<sup>rd</sup> February, 2024 at Masjid, Saada, Mkomani, Mombasa: Kenya.
20. Rev Jane Jilani, digital recording, telephonic interview by the author on February 15<sup>th</sup> February, 2024 from St. Joseph Tudor, Mombasa: Kenya.
21. Sheikh Rishard, digital recording, interview by the author on 5<sup>th</sup> February, 2024 at Sheikh Khalifa Secondary School, Bombolulu, Mombasa: Kenya.
22. Mwanasiti, digital recording, dialogic interview by the author on 4<sup>th</sup> February, 2024 at al Ridha Muslim Complex, Likoni, Mombasa: Kenya
23. Mustafa Mbodze, digital recording, dialogic interview by the author on 4<sup>th</sup> February, 2024 at al Ridha Muslim Complex, Likoni, Mombasa: Kenya
24. Sheikh Dor, digital recording, interview by the author on 7<sup>th</sup> February, 2024 at CIPK offices, CBD, Mombasa: Kenya.
25. Imam Alphan, digital recording, dialogic interview by the author on 4<sup>th</sup> February 2024 at Consolata Catholic Church, Likoni, Mombasa: Kenya
26. Zeinab Juma, digital recording, dialogic interview by the author on 4<sup>th</sup> February 2024 at Consolata Catholic Church, Likoni, Mombasa: Kenya.
27. Fr. Harrison Yaa, digital recording, dialogic interview by the author on 4<sup>th</sup> February 2024 at Timbwani Catholic Church, Likoni, Mombasa: Kenya.
28. Mzee Salim Mwalimu Mwasabu, digital recording, interview by the author on 22<sup>nd</sup> July 2024.
29. Joseph Kahindi Mwarandu, digital recording, interview by the author on 22 June 2024 at Mombasa: Kenya.
30. Stan Kahindi Kiraga (Kaya Fungo), digital recording, interview by the author on 22 June 2024 at Mombasa: Kenya.

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