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## The Role of the Catholic Church in Ethnic Conflict Resolution among the Residents of Kipchimchim Parish in Kenya

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### **Abstract:**

*The Catholic Church plays a vital role in conflict resolution across the globe. Most of the conflicts in Kenya happen during the election period, and the church intervenes to reduce the tensions among individuals and ethnic communities. The main aim of this study was to establish the role of the Catholic Church in conflict resolution among the residents of Kipchimchim in Kenya. The study employed a cross-sectional design. The sample size was 200 respondents derived from a target population of 2106 individuals. The primary data was collected using questionnaires, interviews, and observations. The study found out that the church plays a vital role in restoring peace and forgiveness among warring groups; families, institutions, and communities through mediation and conciliation. However, she had not done enough. The church had failed to effectively address the key issues which had caused perennial ethnic conflict. The church was expected to be at the forefront in addressing historical land injustices, electoral reforms, inclusivity, and equitable sharing of national resources, which are the leading cause of ethnic conflict. The study recommended that the church work with policymakers, including the government, to find solutions to the country's recurring cases of ethnic conflict. There was a need to address issues relating to electoral reforms, historical land injustices, equitable distribution of resources, inclusivity, and protection of human rights as a matter of priority for lasting peace, unity, and stability among Kenyan communities.*

**Keywords:** Catholic Church, conflicts, ethnic communities, land, and resources

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Background of the Study

The cases of armed conflicts are increasing in the world today. The causes of the conflicts vary from one region to the other. Despite all the dangers and the lessons learned from the previous ethnic conflicts from the neighboring countries, Kenya still finds herself on the verge of violent conflict almost every five years. This is serious and alarming. The Kenyan cases mostly are the conflicts that are ethnically based. Before the election period, there is always a relative peace. People work, pray, cooperate while living together, sharing the resources they have together. It is mostly during an election when a sharp difference emerges based on parties that particular tribe affiliate themselves. According to Okullu (1994), tribal loyalties have taken over from Christian loyalties, and the evidence is not difficult to see.

Mulunda (1997) asserted that the central problem in the African continent (Kenya included) is how to manage the tension between conflict and consent in a democratic society. He added that the situation in Togo, Congo, Kenya, Burundi, and other places challenges the church to resolve the tension between consensus and conflict. He observed that special training in both the areas of controversy and conflict resolution is needed for all community members, children, youths, women, men, students, and all people in leadership positions.

The church has always tried to play her role of trying to prevent ethnic conflicts and foster reconciliation. However, when the situation gets out of hand, the government has to use force to reestablish peace, which may not necessarily be peace. Through the Catholic Justice and Peace Commission (CJPC), the church has tried to reconcile people and foster peace. When elections are over, there is always relative peace, and people begin to reconstruct their lives for those who opt to return. During this period of relative calmness, one may not realize that there were ethnic clashes. Peace and unity are in jeopardy in most cases during and after contested elections. The question here is that, what can the church do which it has not done to settle the recurring problem of violence which repeatedly occurs despite all the efforts previously put?

Apart from peacebuilding, the church has also contributed a lot in the sector of education and health. However, there is still massive room for improvement in all sectors, especially in ethnic conflict resolution matters. If the church were very effective, the cases of conflicts among the Christians from different tribes or even the religious themselves

would not have been there. This is just a pointer to a problem among the Christians of Kipchimchim parish and the entire church because even the religious men and women are not exempted despite them being expected to be the agents of peace and unity. This points out that there is an unresolved problem based on Christian belief.

### 1.2. Purpose of the Study

The primary purpose of the study was to establish the role of the Catholic Church in conflict resolution among the residents of Kipchimchim parish in Kenya.

### 1.3. Research Questions

The study answered the following question:

What role does the Catholic Church play in conflict resolution among the residents of Kipchimchim?

## 2. Literature Review

The church has a significant role in as far as ethnic conflict resolution is concerned. Mulunda (1997:63) points out that "The Church as a watchdog should be able to assess the people's needs so that their legitimate expectations can be fulfilled." He stipulates that the church must tell the people that democracy is not a guarantee of competent leadership. Thompson (2009: 30) said, "Religiosity has personal and social dimensions. The personal is the cultivation of a living relationship with God, and the social is the creation of a culture that is permeated with theist spirit shown in public worship and in the kind of community he sets up with fellow human beings." The church must be equipped for a ministry of reconciliation that can resolve serious conflicts. Therefore, special training workshops designed for Church leaders, young adults, and teenagers are needed in all our Churches. And these strategies or training must go beyond some of the western styles of negotiation and problem-solving techniques that are not equipped to deal with the particularities of African culture.

It is now the high time for the church in Africa to stand firm and shun tribalism and all that create hatred and division among the people. She should fight passionately against all injustices and vices. This means that the church first must begin by cleaning herself to have the moral authority to do so. This is because

Religion can have a development of a society- can fulfill social functions precisely because, in the first place, every religion limits and orientates the behavior of believing groups within it. It offers them an understandable and communicable representation of the world while this representation organizes the experience lived by this group. It situates and guides it in its socio-cultural surroundings. Maduro (1982: 116).

There are many ways in which the Churches can transform the mentality of the people. Apart from preaching to the congregation directly at the pulpit, the lifestyle of the Christians and the leaders should portray what they profess. Njageh (2012:293) propagates this that;

The preaching of God's word is a major strategy used by the church in transforming the world. The church mainly evangelizes through the preaching of Good News of salvation to humanity. Churches hold worship services of different forms, including sharing God's word, prayers, and worship songs. Though not necessarily focusing on the theme of peace, these activities directly or indirectly address the central aspects of education for peace.

Njageh said that the Church in Kenya has largely been involved in dialogue towards realizing a culture of peace in the country and beyond, through dialogue involving Christian religious leaders and leaders of the faiths, and dialogue with government leaders, primarily through meetings between Church and state officials. She reiterated that dialogue gives and involves the parties in a forum to share and contribute to the realization of harmonious co-existence.

Bansikiza (2004) holds that the role of the church is to give a testimony of Jesus. He said that the church is charged with the mission of witnessing unity and peace globally and more so now in this troubled continent of Africa. Advocating for brotherhood and sisterhood of all peoples, he said that a true bond of brotherhood and sisterhood unites all world communities into one community of God, one to another and all to Christ their Lord, who is the firstborn among creation. In this regard, therefore, Bansikiza postulates that we are called to such a unity because of our shared human origins who is God himself. Therefore, people who believe in God should consider all others as their brothers and sisters and should practice brotherhood and sisterhood in their communities and nations irrespective of their differences in language, mentality, economy, social and educational status. Prior to forming current states, the church has always been at the forefront in providing a social network that spread beyond the local community (Bruce 1996). Even though the states are now established and capable of providing those amenities or social networks, it does not eradicate the church's role. Even if the services rendered are on humanitarian ground, the church transcends the level of being humanitarian. All that the church is doing is done not only for the physical or humanitarian assistance. Her approach is holistic redeeming humanity physically, socially, and spiritually. Bruce (1996) outlined that, "Secular nationalist philosophies can perform similar function, but religion does it better because there is no more comforting and reassuring thought than that one has God on one's side" (107).

According to Turner (2011), religion functions to preserve social cohesion. He asserts, "Historically, religion has been important for the distribution and control of property in the society, and it has performed this function by providing beliefs and institutions which are relevant to the control of instinctual life." If the church historically has been able to do so, what went wrong? It is time now for the church to introspect herself and re-embark on its roles in society. Opongo (2006: 49) said, "Conflict prevention can also be carried out through workshops and training. These are often fertile grounds for planting seeds of practical life experiences while creating tangible mechanisms for follow-up and implementations of the various social issues of concern". However, to deal with a problem, you must first identify and find the root cause of the

problem. For Opongo (2006), identifying different layers of the issue at hand is crucial to understanding a particular conflict.

### 3. Research Methodology

A cross-sectional research design was used in the study. The target population was 2,106, including Christians, Catechists, Priests, and Sisters. Through a stratified sampling technique, twenty-one Christians were selected from every outstation, of which seven were men, seven women, and seven youth. Each stratum chosen multiplied by the nine outstations made 63 apart from the 2 Priests, 4 Sisters, and 5 Catechists. Therefore, the total number of the sample size was 200. The instruments that were used were the primary sources, which include; Questionnaires, Interviews, and Observation. The secondary sources were useful in obtaining information from the parish records, particularly on matters concerning the population of the parish.

### 4. Discussion of Findings

Nearly about 96.4% of the respondents indicated that the Catholic Church had a role in ethnic conflict resolution. Only 3.6% of the participants stated that the church had no role in ethnic conflict resolution. This implies that the majority of the respondents believed that the church had a role in ethnic conflict resolution. The views of the participant in regards to the role of the church in ethnic conflict resolutions were as follows: (For reasons of confidentiality the respondents would be referred to using other names and not their real names).

Jane, a female aged less than 30 years, while explaining the role of the church in ethnic conflict resolution, stated that "The church brings people together through prayers and small Christian communities. This helps solve conflicts among communities and during community prayers".

The second participant, Martin, a male aged less than 30 years, indicated that "The church should offer guidance and counseling to the affected families, groups or society at large. The church should be meditating or facilitating community dialogue to bring peace and forgiveness among conflicting parties".

The analysis from the interviewees in response to the role of the church in ethnic conflict resolution was as follows:

Andrew, a former assistant inspector of primary schools, indicated that the church played a significant role in ethnic conflict resolution in an interview with the researcher. He cited:

The church had a big role because when conflict occurs, the only refuge was the church since it was trusted. The reason why they could not go to government agents was because those who were in charge were biased. The Catholic Church was seen as neutral hence refuge for many.

He added that:

The church should mobilize the people to contribute material things like clothes and food, and such basic needs to be distributed to those affected by conflict. Apart from spiritual nourishment, the church should try her part to empower economically, particularly the needy and the oppressed in the community.

Joseph, the Catholic Priest, had this to say on the roles of the Catholic Church in ethnic conflict resolution:

'Through the Catholic Justice and Peace Commission (CJPC), the church has to intervene and resolve conflicts from all levels like *jumuiyas*-small Christian communities to the diocesan level.' Adding, he said that:

'From the higher level, the bishops should take the initiative by insisting on creating peace initiative from the top diocesan level to the grassroots, small Christian communities.' He added that:

'Since all people were created in the image and likeness of God, there should not be any distinction based on ethnic differences. This should always be instilled in the Christians from the small Christian communities (SCC) and the families'.

Another interviewee Susan, the representative of sisters, said the following on the roles of the Catholic Church in ethnic conflict resolution:

The church has a role in resolving such ethnic conflict, especially by educating the youths to value life. This can be done through seminars or any other church functions like church leaders should develop some forum for peacebuilding from the grassroots- the small Christian communities.

The researcher aimed to establish whether the Catholic Church has been instrumental in conflict resolution. In this case, the respondents were required through a questionnaire to answer questions that were put on three points, namely: Always, Sometimes, Never, and Do not Know. About 68.2% of the respondents stated that the Catholic Church has always been instrumental in conflict resolution. (18.2%) indicated that the church has sometimes been instrumental in ethnic conflict resolution. (9.10%) said they did not know. Only (4.5%) of the respondents stated that the Catholic Church has never been instrumental in ethnic conflict resolution. The finding shows that majority of the respondent had trust in the Catholic Church's ability to resolve ethnic conflict. These were the opinions of the participant in regards to the ability of the Catholic Church in resolving ethnic conflicts:

Brian, a male aged between 31-55 years, while explaining the reason why the Catholic Church has been instrumental in conflict resolution, He said,

The churches are peacemakers. They try to bring people together by preaching peace and repentance. However, the church has not been able to settle politically instigated conflict due to Church leaders' political affiliation.

The second participant, Joy, a female aged less than 30 years, while explaining why Catholic Church has sometimes been not instrumental in conflict resolution, stated that "The Church sometimes fails to create peace among the conflicting parties. Sometimes the Church leaders are partial while solving conflict among warring parties."

According to the interviewees' response to whether or not the Catholic Church has been instrumental in conflict resolution, the following were the findings:

Joseph, a Catholic Priest in an interview with the researcher, indicated that the church played a significant role in ethnic conflict resolution. He cited:

'Yes, it has impacted greatly. This is manifested by how the church intervened in resolving the conflict in 2007/2008. The gun which was stolen from the police station was returned when the church leader talked to the people to return, and indeed they returned and dropped in the church. This shows that people listen to what the church says'.

He added that:

'The education that the church initiated has impacted on the lives of the people positively.'

Samson, the Catechist, had this to say on the significance of the Catholic Church in ethnic conflict resolution:

The church has brought a significant change in the Kipchimchim Parish area. It has converted many people who, in turn, brought a change in society. It has also helped children and the poor in society.

Another interviewee Stanley, a catechist, said the following on the significance of the Catholic Church in ethnic conflict resolution:

The church has trained people to be self-reliant. The Priests have a cordial relationship with the people. This is manifested through the support the people give to the priests in the parish. Despite the churches' closure due to covid-19, the Christians continued to support the church and her pastors. This shows how the church has impacted on the lives of the people.

The researcher was interested in finding out the strategies that the Catholic Church could utilize to effectively resolve ethnic conflict. The following were participants' suggestions drawn from both questionnaires and interviews.

'The church should preach, practice, and emphasize the need for reconciliation through peace building, love, and forgiveness to help communities and individuals who have conflicted to reconcile, re-unite, and forge forward.'

'The church should provide social rehabilitation among the affected families, counseling them, and providing shelter and education. Offer humanitarian relief and development to the affected groups through food donation and clothing'.

'The church should liaise with the government by informing the government what is wrong and what must be done to maintain peace because the church is close to the people. The church should be very active in talking to the youth and the people to control unnecessary conflicts. It should try to reach, teach, and seek an amicable solution in every situation. The church is better positioned to prevent or resolve conflict because both the government and the people listen to the church since she has no conflict of interest. Therefore, she should use that advantage to resolve the conflict'.

'The church should put more effort into educating people to value life and avoid conflicts. The church should also involve itself in the program of introducing lessons about peace in schools. The church should double her efforts to help people realize that they are one people despite the difference in terms of ethnicity. The clergy should know how to talk to people, especially when there are ethnic conflicts. Sometimes, if a clergy speaks in a biased way, it will make people react negatively. The local priests who are missionaries working in other places should be invited to talk to the people, especially during crises like ethnic conflicts such as those of the year 2007'.

'The church should be at the forefront of teaching the people on the effects of ethnic conflicts. The church should also be at the forefront of fighting for the truth. If the votes were stolen, the church should not lean on the government's side in concealing the truth. The church should not take sides. It should be an intermediary to promote peaceful co-existence among the people of different ethnic groups. The church should still instill togetherness from the family and the small Christian communities. If the church insists on this, then such ethnic conflicts will reduce or not arise'.

## 5. Conclusions and Recommendations

### 5.1. Conclusions

The church was identified as an agent of peacemaking as it brings people together through preaching peace and repentance. Since the church was trusted, it should be mediating or facilitating community dialogue to bring peace and forgiveness among conflicting parties. The church has a role in providing social rehabilitation among the affected families, counseling them, providing them with shelter and education, and offering humanitarian relief to the affected groups through food donation and clothing. The Catholic Church, through its umbrella of the Catholic Justice and Peace Commission (CJPC), has the role of intervening and resolving conflicts from all levels from *jumuiyas*-(small Christian communities) to the diocesan level.

The church's role is to preach, practice, and emphasize the need for reconciliation through peace building, love, and forgiveness to help communities and individuals who have conflicted to reconcile, re-unite, and move forward. The church should be at the forefront of fighting for the truth, justice, and reconciliation. To find a lasting solution to ethnic conflict, the study found that: The church had a duty to advocate for a just society and protect the rights of the poor, the weak, the oppressed, and the marginalized groups in our society.

### 5.2. Recommendations

The study recommends that the church work with policymakers, including the government, to find solutions to the recurring cases of ethnic conflict in the country. The church should advocate and address the following as a matter of priority; electoral reforms, historical land injustices, equitable distribution of resources, inclusivity and participation, and human rights protection.

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