ADOPTING NEW WAYS OF CELEBRATING THE WORD OF GOD IN A PANDEMIC ERA

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Abstract

The paper sets out to explore new ways of celebrating the Word of God in a pandemic era. This is against the backdrop that the world has experienced various pandemics since the 1st century. Each of these was severe in its own way, but the recent COVID-19 pandemic has been particularly devastating in its effects. Surprisingly, the pandemic has led to serious debilitating consequences on human, economic, social, cultural and even religious life. The effects of the pandemic have particularly challenged the celebration of the Word of God. There has been a drastic downward trend in the celebration of Word of God during liturgical worship, as efforts are made by pastors and pastoral agents to observe the Nigeria Centre for Disease Control (NCDC) protocol guidelines. Additionally, the number of those who attend Physical Worship has dropped, thereby denying them the opportunity to listen to the Word of God; that is always alive and active (Heb 4:12). Admittedly, the Word of God constitutes an indispensable and dynamic part of the cult of the Church. Employing descriptive and analytical methods, new options to be explored, for the "new" normal, in order to compliment the traditional ways of celebrating the Word of God include the good use of the social media platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram, live streaming, etc. The paper challenges the clergy and the lay faithful to adopt some, if not all, of such measures to celebrate the Word of God. In these ways, online viewers and worshippers are able to follow their pastor's celebration of the Word of God and Mass online at the exact time.

1. Introduction

Amidst the fact that the world has experienced various pandemics since the 1st century, each of these was severe in its own way. But

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the recent COVID-19 pandemic has been particularly devastating in its effects. Surprisingly, the pandemic has also led to serious debilitating consequences on human, economics, social, cultural and even religious life. The effects of the global COVID-19 pandemic on human sufferings, health hazards, death tolls, economic depression, social distancing, face masking, e-congregation, etc. are glaringly clear with over 121 million reported cases and over 2 million deaths reported world-wide as at 15th March, 2021. The effects of the pandemic have also particularly challenged the celebration of the Word of God. There has been a drastic downward trend in the celebration of Word of God during liturgical worship, as efforts are made by pastors and pastoral agents to observe the Nigeria Centre for Disease Control (NCDC) protocol. The Catholic Bishops' Conference of Nigeria (CBCN) gave instructions on how to carry out liturgical celebration which was downloaded in dioceses across the country with adequate social distancing, use of face mask, washing of hands with sanitizer or the use of an alcohol-based rub frequently. In that light, the number of those who attend Physical Worship has dropped, thereby denying them the opportunity to listen to the Word of God; that is always alive and active (Heb 4:12).

Admittedly, the centrality of the Word of God in liturgical celebration confirms its intrinsic relationship between the Word and the Sacraments. The Word of God constitutes an indispensable and dynamic part of the cult of the Church. It should serve as a rich and trustworthy reference point and a spiritual "Global Positioning System" (GPS) for Christian life and spirituality. After over sixty years of the Second Vatican Council and the promulgation of the Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, *Verbum Domini*, (On the Word of God) by Pope Benedict XVI in 2010, the Council Fathers initiated the restoration of the Word of God to its rightful place in the liturgy. In recent times, Pope Francis' special Apostolic Letter *Motu Proprio Aperuitillis* made the clarion call in this regard. Pope Francis' special Apostolic Letter *Motu Proprio Aperuitillis,* published on 30th September, 2019 establishes that "the Third Sunday in Ordinary Time is to be devoted to the celebration, study and dissemination of the Word of God" in all Catholic Churches around the world. One of the areas in the Christian liturgy calling for urgent attention during the Covid-19 pandemic era, from all and sundry, is the celebration of the Word of God. The reasons are

obvious. The Word of God, which has the power to nourish, enrich and revitalise the faith of the people, is often not sufficiently given the ground for receptivity and productivity in the hearts of the liturgical community.[2]Employing descriptive and analytical methods, new options, for the "new" normal, to be explored in order to compliment the traditional ways of celebrating the Word of God ought to be tapped by the clergy and the lay faithful. This paper sets out to explore new ways of celebrating the Word of God, as one of the gains, in a pandemic era

2. The Nature of the Word of God

The Word of God can be interpreted in different forms and dimensions since as a Latin adage says: "*Tot omnia, tot sentential* (as there are many men, so also their opinions). Nonetheless, etymologically, 'word' is derived from the Hebrew word *dabar* which means 'matter', 'affair' 'thing' or as 'a thing about which one speaks of.' Its Greek equivalent is *Hrema* or *logos*. The Prophets favour this Greek version while the Pentateuch uses more of the former. *Logos* is prevalent in the New Testament and it has both general usage and specific function as a title of Jesus Christ. Its Latin meaning is *verbum* and it is often used in the liturgy since Latin is the official language of the Roman Catholic Church. The phrase "Word of God" can also be designated in another genitive form as "God's Word." Accordingly, it is made of two words, namely, God and Word. "God" has its root in Hebrew as *el*, '*lohim, 'loah* and the Latin *Deus*, meaning divine being[3] whereas 'Word' is the smallest element of phonetic "utterance" of an intellectual concept as opposed to animal noise.

The Latin description of the Word of God is *Verbum Dei*. For the Greeks, it is known as *logos*. In Hebrew 4:12, the Word of God is described as "something alive and active" which can judge secret thoughts and emotions. The Word of God is viewed as the source of Christian life and spirituality. It is the sacred book of life. It consists of principles of morality and guide to life. Pinpointedly, it remains a trustworthy reference point and a spiritual "Global

[2] See Emmanuel C. Anagwo, *Celebration of the Word of God: A Liturgical Enquiry* (Berlin: Peter Lang, 2020) 126.
[3] Anagwo, *Celebration of the Word of God* 30.

Positioning System" (GPS) for Christian life and spirituality. That is why the Word of God looms large in human life and in the whole of creation. The pervasive effect makes it appear to be the only thing that really matters in the world. The Word of God creates, recreates, transforms, reforms, renews and revitalises the assembly. The Word of God acts very powerfully wherever it is accepted, internalized and obeyed. It generates life and all the positive qualities associated with it. Wherever it is neglected, the opposite effects are experienced, namely, death, destruction and all the negative features associated with it. But strictly speaking, God has no mouth to speak/pronounce word. But in every metaphor, the vehicle cannot equal the tenor. God's speaking cannot be reduced to the limit of human speaking. Although, ancient Bible writers ascribe various stages of development to God's speaking in history especially in the context of judgement and theophany. In the patriarchal narrative, God also spoke to humans in dreams and visions. In this context of this paper, the Word of God designates different avenues we hear the utterances of God in the Church, the Scripture, the prayers of the Church, from pulpit, the homily, the social media, market place, crusade, and indeed, from fellow men and women.

3. Basic Considerations on the Word of God

From the perspective of Louis Bouyer, God is not a theology professor. But like the first experience of the human word, God may be described as someone else entering into our life. In the same way, man's experience of God's word was that of a direct intervention in his life.[4] The Jews, to whom God revealed himself, did not view God's word as a series of messages with concepts to be analysed, parcelled and pigeoned. Bouyer did not see it this way because he did not experience it in this way. He experienced the Word of God as an event which affected him directly, so directly that it coloured and transformed his whole life. It was a deciding reality he could not ignore. Bouyer asserts:

> For Israel, not only is the divine word, like every word worthy of the name, an action, a personal intervention, a presence which asserts and imposes itself, but since it is the word of the Almighty, it produces what it proclaims by its own power. God is "true" not only in the sense that he never

[4] Louis Bouyer, *Eucharist* (Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968) 32.

> lies, but in the sense that what he says is the source of all reality. It is enough that he says it for it to be done.[5]

It was through the events of history that God revealed himself and the Jews came to know him. The revelation was a progressive one, events gradually unfolding God's plan for mankind-salvation history. In the words of Ferdinand Nwaigbo, the Word of God is "someone initiating movement and directions in human history".[6] But Bernard Cooke remarked that this was not so much a series of events as an event.[7] The event referred to is the corporate reality of God's own people, Israel, the vehicle chosen by God in his self-revelation to man:

> The important aspect of the life and history of Israel is not that which is historically observable, but rather it is the inner reality of Israel's faith. God's great action on Israel's behalf was the awakening and guiding and nourishing of Israel's life of faith.[8]

Thus, the Word of God, both in the written and preached form, is generally taken to be this progressive revelation. Sebastian Kizhakkeyil corroborates this understanding that by the Word of God, we mean the self-revelation and self-communication of God in written word, in the person of Jesus Christ and in sacred tradition.[9] Joseph Ratzinger (later Pope Benedict XVI) further presents the Word of God as a living reality in the Church. He states that it is more than the self-revelation of Christ and the tradition. According to Ratzinger, God's Word is encountered in the Bible, in Tradition and through the teaching office of the Bishop who, through apostolic succession, is to be the servant of and witness to the divine Word.[10] Ratzinger however gave prominence to his

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[5] Bouyer 33.

[6] Ferdinand Nwaigbo, "Mother of the Incarnate Word: A Model for the Church in Contextualizing the Millennium Development Goals of Infant and Maternal Health in Sub-Saharan Africa," in *The Word of God and Meeting the Millennium Development Goals in Africa* (Port Harcourt: CIWA Publications, 2009) 140.

[7] Bernard Cooke, *Ministry to Word and Sacraments* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1976) 321.

[8] Cooke 321.

[9] Sebastian Kizhakkeyil, *The Word of God: Content and Message* (Mumbai: St. Pauls, 2008) 9.

[10] Tradition means an inherited pattern of thought, action or behaviour handed from one generation to another while the teaching office of the Bishop entails the

treatment of the Bible as the Word of God.[11] Kizhakkeyil also agrees with Ratzinger when he remarked that every religion has its sacred writing for the adherents. [12] For Christians, the Bible is the Sacred Scripture and it is the Word of God for them. Islam has the Quran as its sacred book while Hinduism has Vedas. Sikhism has the *Guru Granth Sahib* as its sacred literature while Judaism has the *TANAK* or the Hebrew Bible as their sacred writing. In all these sacred writings, the adherents see the Word of God in written form. Indeed, all religions of the world have a special sacredness attached to their sacred writings.

The common denominator of all these sacred writings is that they are divine because God is their Principal Author. They have the potentiality to cut across and permeate the innermost part of every human being even as it reveals the mind of God to the worshippers. About the Word of God, Patrick C. Chibuko, rightly highlights it thus:

> It elicits sorrow for sins; it convinces one of guilt; it arouses a feeling of repentance, conversion, remedial action and resolution. It produces remorse for one's past actions and leads to a true purpose of amendment. It gives hope in a hopeless situation; it assures one of God's love and readiness to accept the offender back. It gives courage for a new and decisive beginning.[13]

In short, the Word of God has always nourished, formed and renewed his people, marking the road-map, reference point and a spiritual "Global Positioning System" (GPS) for Christian life and spirituality. Like among the Israelites of old, God's Word today is also respected and has the great power to renew his people.

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authority of the Bishop to oversee the flock, ensuring the spiritual wellbeing are provided. They are the extensions of the Word of God.

[11] Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, *God's Word: Scripture, Tradition-Office* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2008) 51.

[12]Kizhakkeyil 13.

[13] Patrick C. Chibuko "Celebration of the Word of God in the Third Millennium Church: Practical Implications for Enugu Diocese" (Enugu: Unpublished Seminar Paper for Enugu Diocese, April 1, 2008) 2.

4. The COVID-19 Pandemic Era

Pandemic Era means a period of an epidemic that has so widely spread that vast numbers of people in different countries are affected. It is a global outbreak of infectious disease that is ravaging the entire world killing over millions of people of the world. The period of the outbreak of coronavirus of 2019 till date could be designated as pandemic era. Infectious disease is not a foreign phenomenon in human history. The world has experienced various pandemics since the 1st century. The list of some of the deadliest pandemics experienced in world history includes the Black Death of 1347 to 1351 which took over 75 million human lives. Between the 19th and 20th centuries humanity recorded also some devastating pandemics: From 1852 to 1860, about 1 million people died of the third Cholera pandemic which originated from India. Over 23,000 people died of this pandemic in Great Britain in the year1854 which was the same year contaminated water was identified to be the means of transmission for the disease. The 1889-1890 Flu pandemic which originated from Central Asia, Northwest Canada and Greenland claimed the lives of over 1 million individuals. The 6th Cholera pandemic that originated from India claimed over 800,000 lives of Indians before spreading to the Middle East, North Africa, Eastern Europe and Russia. Between 1918 and 1920, a devastating pandemic (Spanish Flu) caused by Influenza claimed the lives of over 50 million people out of the 500 million infected persons. Recently, the Asian Flu of 1956-1958 which originated from China caused 2 million deaths. And today, comes the turn of the pandemic era of coronavirus.

Very significantly, coronavirus as a pneumonia of unknown cause was detected in Wuhan, China and first reported to the office of World Health Organization (WHO) in China on 1st December 2019. The pandemic was declared a Public Health Emergency of International Concern on 30thJanuary 2020. On 11th February 2020, WHO announced a name for the new coronavirus disease: COVID-19.[14] COVID-19 is a short way of writing the name of the disease: CO-Corona (crown or crowned); VI-Virus; D-Disease; 19-2019 (came into recognition and prominence in 2019).

[14]https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019/events-as-they-happen accessed on 20th March, 2021.

The symptoms associated with corona virus are numerous. They range from mild or less serious ones to severe symptoms. The centres for Disease Control and Prevention identifies symptoms which may appear 2 to 14, following one's exposure to the virus. The symptoms include fever, chill, cough, shortness of breath or difficulty in breathing, fatigue, chest pain or pressure and loss of speech or movement constitute the more severe symptoms of COVID-19.[15]

At worship level, the effects of the pandemic era are squarely experienced. It is common experience to find congregations of the faithful who gather on daily, weekly, monthly and yearly for worship sessions. But social distancing which is a preventive strategy of the COVID-19 pandemic has led or at least minimize the public gathering. This denies Christian and other adherents of other religions the spiritual nourishment benefitted from such gathering especially the experience to be nourished, vivified and revitalised by the Word of God in the liturgy.

5. New Ways to Adopt in Celebrating the Word of God in a Pandemic Period

The Church in Nigeria, like the universal Church, has enjoyed over the years, the *modus operandi* (mode of operation) and *modus vivendi* (mode of living) anchored on the dictum: *"liturgia semper reformanda est"* (liturgy is always undergoing reformation). The proposal of new ways to adopt in celebrating the Word of God in a pandemic era should be seen as occasion for a continued renewal of the liturgy which is the "source and summit," of the Church's activity.[16] Liturgy in the life of the Church is a reality that is *semper reformanda*. Admittedly, it is a pastoral error to think that the Christian faithful understand the Word of God without the need for guidance. There is urgent need for an ongoing task whereby the faithful are provided with adequate information and formation about the celebration of the Word of God in the liturgy and how to translate the values of liturgy in their socio-communitarian participation. Let us highlight a few new ways to adopt in a post

[15] www.who.int/health-topics/coronavirus#tab 3, accessed on 15th March, 2021.
[16] Second Vatican Council, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, [henceforth SC] (The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy) in Flannery, A. ed. *Vatican Council II* (Dublin: Dominican Publications, 1987) 10.

COVID-19 pandemic era, as part of what to reap and gain from the *wahala* of the infectious disease.

5.1 Profound Use of the Social Media

One outstanding lesson COVID-19 Pandemic and lockdown brought out is the more relevance of e-worship and how the available social media platforms can be used in the propagation of the Gospel message and in staying close to one another in spirit. Admittedly, the online presence of the Church in Nigeria will offer some respite and peace to the nation's online space and can provide the nexus that can unite people from different ethnic, social, economic and faith backgrounds. It is an opportunity worthy of exploration to sustain the celebration of the Word of God in a post COVID-19 era.

Pastors of souls and pastoral agents can create their own websites, pages or platforms, Facebook groups, chat groups, YouTube, Podcast, LinkedIn, Pinterest, Google, Skype, Blog sites, etc and through these platforms share the Word of God, liturgical catechesis, inspiring stories, their homilies, talks, sermons and reflections with the faithful of the parish/station on account of social distancing or any part of the world they may be at the material time in question. They can also send daily and Sunday reflections through emails, text messages and social media like Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter, Imo, chat rooms, to nourish and sustain the means of disseminating and celebrating the Word of God.[17] The Church can use screen projectors and power point displays to show hymns, readings, homily, announcements, etc., as liturgical aids to facilitate the understanding of Mass, liturgical catechesis and encourage integral and effective liturgical celebration of the Word of God.

Live streaming is also another important social media platform. As some worshippers are prevented because of ill health or demand of COVID-19 protocol, they are interested in watching video and clips. Parish/station events like Sunday homilies, Church

[17]Emmanuel C. Anagwo, "The Value of Liturgical Catechesis for Formation and Renewal of Young Adults: Challenges for Utilizing ICT in Nigeria" in Timothy Barga (ed.), *Discovery and Empowering African Youth* (*Jos Studies*), Volume 27, May, 2019, 47-48

programmes and exciting events can be covered in video and images and posted to them *via* social network sites. This is because videos and other forms of visual presentation could be effective pedagogical tools to celebrate the Word of God because of its capacity to surmount social distancing imposed on the people because of the demands of the pandemic period.

5.2 Encouraging Family Worship

Another important way to celebrate the Word of God during the COVID-19 pandemic is to encourage family worship. The family remains a vital cell and an important organ of the Church, the society and humanity at large. The importance of family prayer was taught by the master, Our Lord Jesus Christ himself. Accordingly, he says: "Where two or three are gathered in My Name, there I am in the midst of them" (Matt 18:20). It is a pleasing sight to see the family unit who gather together to pray and worship God everyday of their lives. It is not that private prayer is not important in our relationship with God; yet when said with others, there is something more it imparts. We are linked with the Mystical Body of Christ, that is, the Church as the fellowship of believers in Christ. This is the fellowship the Mother Church expects to be manifested wherever any group or family net-work whether biological or spiritual gathered for a purpose. It may be at home, campus, business arena, fund-raising event, meetings, seminaries, convents and more importantly, church building during liturgical worship.

Accordingly, Hilary Okeke states that: "Family prayer is very necessary and useful."[18] Practically, the family can gather at least once a day especially in the evening at a regular convenient such as 7pm or 9pm for family rosary, evening prayer, night prayer and reading/celebration of the Word of God. The coming together of the family members will facilitate to invoke the presence of God. The theological basis for praying together was the hallmark of the early Church. During family prayer, when Jesus Christ came to Simon Peter's house, he healed her of fever (Matt 8:14). Again, the example of family prayer setting was at work when the two sisters, Martha and Mary offered hospitality to Jesus Christ. He raised from dead their brother Lazarus back to life (Luke 10:38-42). In the early Church, when Peter visited the house of the Gentile, a Roman

[18] Okeke 98.

centurion named, Cornelius, Christ said: "Cornelius, God has heard your prayer and remembered your gifts to the poor" (Acts 10:24-27).

According to the accounts in the Acts of the Apostles, the whole believers gathered together to pray in the days after Christ's death. It was a regular practice as they were already engaged in this mission even before the Great Pentecost event that marked the watershed for the birth of the Church. Even since the event, they devoted themselves in continual prayers to God. The Apostles followed the example of Christ praying at every opportunity. They prayed in the temple and in the cenacle. They were at prayer with the Blessed Virgin Mary, the Mother of Jesus. They prayed before electing Matthias who replaced Judas Iscariot. They offered prayers during the persecutions without ceasing (Acts 4:24). They thanked God with praise when Peter and John were released from prison. Indeed, the early Christians were engaged in a group vigil praying for the release of Peter. Before the missionary journey of Paul and Barnabas, their host congregation sent them away with prayer and fasting. In the missionary work of Paul, when he left Ephesus for Jerusalem, the Ephesian elders prayed with him for God to direct his journey. The early Christians could not think of embarking in any mission without according God his rightful place in their midst.

For Hilary Okeke, prayer, and you may add family prayer, is one of the four pillars of the Christian community.[19] The believers "remained faithful to the teaching of the apostles, to the brotherhood, to the breaking of bread and to the prayers" (Acts 2:42). They have laid the example for us to emulate. Elsewhere, the writer argues that: "Every occasion offers the believers opportunities to offer prayers to God. Christian families need to rediscover this art of prayer in their lives. Family prayers present itself as a "domestic sanctuary" of the Church to celebrate the Word of God."[20]Pastors and pastoral agents should be counselling their members on how to be praying and worshipping with their families

[19] Hilary Odili Okeke, *We are the Family of God* (Goodmark Publications, 2002) 92.

[20]Emmanuel C. Anagwo, "From the School of Family Prayer to the Sacred Liturgy: Contributions of Bishop Hilary Okeke" in M.O. Izunwa& M. Okonkwo (eds.), *Long Live Good Pastor The Life and Ministry of Most Rev. Hilary Paul Odili Okeke Pioneer Bishop of Nnewi Diocese* (Onitsha: Great-M Print and Publishers, 2013) 61.

in homes. As many members of the family are likely to be at home, it offers opportunity to read, digest and celebrate the Word of God at home. Family worship is a wonderful opportunity to explore the riches of the Word of God.

5.3 Promotion of Worship in Small Christian Communities

With the emergence of small group of ten to twenty groups at a time due to the protocol of the pandemic era, the formation of parish based small group sharing can be another way to ensure the reading and celebration of the Word of God. This can be likened to the Jehovah Witness Religious Family whose trademark is door-to-door evangelization. Beyond the statutory pious groups, like Legion of Mary, Block Rosary Crusade, St. Anthony, Catholic Charismatic Movement of Nigeria (CCRN), or statutory groups, like Catholic Men Organisation (CMO), Catholic Women Organisation (CWO), Catholic Girls Organisation (CGO) or Catholic Youth Organization of Nigeria (CYON), etc, they can further be divided into small groups up to twenty (20) in a parish or station, depending on their numerical strength. Advantages abound with the practice of this system. Ministers of the Word of God as well as the people of God will be enriched as they mitigate the problem of crowding necessitated by the pandemic saga. The texts to be shared could be the readings of the following Sunday. Again, during the mid-week, Wednesday, it could be set aside for the exercise. This will facilitate the meditation on the Word of God.

There is no doubt that "to understand (*intelligere*) is to grasp – through reflections, reasoning, thinking, reading (*legere*) between the lines (*inter limina*) - the truth that underlies and sustains the trueness of a reality is the proper object of the human intellect."[21] In this context of small group sharing, to understand becomes an attempt to grasp the text both from the point of its ''timeliness''; to grasp the sense of text in the time past before making applications. Here we find the need of studies by small group of faith sharing. The Holy Spirit only illumines the mind of those who make effort as "Heaven helps those who help themselves." This lack of understanding of the dynamic nature of the Word of God has led to

[21]Egbulefu John, "Unless Someone Explains it to me: Towards a Better Understanding of the Word of God in the Context of the Question posed in Acts 8: 31 in *Live Witness Journal,* Jonas Okafor, ed. (Enugu: Ebenezer Press, 2015) 1.

a lot of disaster from the people especially in Nigeria. The pull has gradually turned into a pull of ignorance, a 'downpit'' for the people of God. The Church can now enjoy the gain of parish based small group faith sharing of the Word of God.

5.4 Promoting the Rite of the Enthronement of the Word of God

Another way to celebrate the Word of God is the promotion of the rite of enthronement of the Word of God. One of the aspects of the Church's life that has enjoyed salient reforms of the Second Vatican Council is the place and dignity of the Word of God. The reformed liturgy of the Second Vatican Council spoke in glorious terms about the Word of God in the Scriptures. Notably, Jesus is present in His Word just as He is present in the Eucharist. It means, in effect, that the same Jesus in the Eucharist is the same when His words are read in the Scripture. Consequently, this researcher recommends that the culture of enthroning of the Bible in our Churches, Parishes, Homes and offices be sustained. There are the transforming and renewing effects for the homes and among the people of God where the presence of Christ is felt by every member of the Christian communities and families who believe.

This involves placing the Bible in an altar in a prominent place in the home (usually in the living room) and offices, in the Church at a prominent, permanent elevated place or lectern. The Bible is always open to remind the Churches and families that Jesus is there in His Words listening to whatever the members of the family say or do. When the members of the family are initiated into this attitude, no doubt, they are then to be careful not to do or say things that will be displeasing before God. They become careful in the home just as they are careful in the Church where they believe that Jesus is present.

They may place flowers and electric bulbs to remind them of Jesus' presence in his Word. A priest may be invited to bless and consecrate the lectern where the Bible would be placed to give it the sense of liturgical ritual and sacredness. Adopting this way of celebrating the Word of God in a pandemic era through the practise of the enthronement of the Bible is to be revived and promoted as one of the ways to remind the faithful to explore the riches of the

Word of God in the Bible. Priests should sensitize the faithful in this regard.

5.5 Establishment of Bible Schools for the Laity

It is not enough to have theological institutes and seminaries for the future priests and the ordained clergy. Efforts should be made to combat the ignorance of the faithful on the Word of God. The lay faithful could be the target audience. Such approach could lead to the establishment of Bible Schools where the word of God is explored to the fullest. The Synod of Bishops, in recent times, encouraged the establishment of such schools by the dioceses to train competent and well-prepared readers.[24] The important thing is that the lay faithful are helped to reap the benefits in reading and celebrating the riches of the Word of God.

The advantages of such Bible Schools for the laity are threefold. It is for their personal growth, for dialoguing within the Church and for the work of witnessing outside the fold. While they remain in their profession, they could be the Church's agents of transformation in their various professional bodies, trade union or business class. They could enhance and influence the programmes and policies of the government positively through the message of the Word of God.

To achieve this, experts in the different branches of theology, especially Scripture scholars, could be co-opted to be part of the school. They will provide the students with the requisite knowledge to develop them. However, such schools have been established by the Catholic Institute of West Africa, Port Harcourt, Nigeria in some dioceses like Port Harcourt, Aba (Obigbo), Nnewi, Benin-City, Minna, Onitsha and Owerri. What we can add is that such schools should be consolidated with enough and competent personnel. Let qualified teachers be engaged and adequate provision for their remuneration and qualitative work be monitored, lest it dies a premature death.

5.6 The Use of Good Public Address/Sound System

Admittedly, good public and sound system in the Church can contribute as an improved way to celebrate the Word of God in a pandemic era. The era of managing the sarcastic analogy of Catholic microphone (with the usual hitting of the microphone)

unlike the Pentecostal microphone (audibly clear and distinct) is a necessity to curtail the trend of this pandemic. Nonetheless, one of the challenges in celebrating the Word of God is when the Church's sound system is not properly set up to project voice. The Pandemic Era has opened the dire necessity of good acoustics to reach out to many people in a liturgical space especially because of social distancing and online space. It is to the advantage of the worshipping community to employ the services of a technician, which is a good sound engineer who will aid in the choice and location of sound systems within the Church.

Consequently, it is very necessary that this should be considered at the point of constructing the Church. Periodic maintenance of the public address system is highly recommended for an optimal service to evolve. Stabilizers should be provided to ensure adequate light supply and avoidance of damage to the public address system. The experience of COVID-19 pandemic era has shown that neglect on this aspect of Church Building has colossal consequence to the dissemination and celebration of the Word of God.

6. Implications of Adopting New Ways to Celebrate God's Word

Let us now turn to the implications of adopting new ways to celebrate the Word of God in a pandemic era. Like Philip Pirrip nicknamed Pip in the celebrated novel, *Great Expectations* by Charles Dickens who had dreamed of becoming a blacksmith like his brother-in-law, Joe Gargery,[22] the high aspirations should be the lot of custodians of liturgy today. One may rightly ask then: "What are the implications of all these for bishops and priests charged with responsibility for the Church's worship?" It is common knowledge that every opportunity should be maximised by Christians to a life of witness. Be it moments of joys or moments of sorrows, glorious times or trying times, the demand is the same. The pandemic era offers the clergy and the lay faithful opportunity of witnessing to Christ through the life of communication amplified by the Word of God they hear. The power to evangelize the multitude depends on their union with the Word of God. Having received the Word of God in the spirit of faith and gratitude, the expectation is that, they should echo it, so to speak in their heart. And this echo evokes a

[22] Charles Dickens, *Great Expectations* (London: Chapman & Hall, 2011).

response, a response which could indeed be nothing more than life of witnessing, *martyria*.

In the contemporary society, one of the significant modern means to communicate the Word of God is the social media: newspapers, magazines, radios, televisions, tapes and internet facilities. Social media platforms have become the wonder of development today and have pervasive influence on our world. Prior to the pandemic era and even more because of social distancing, they are becoming the fastest means of communication that could easily reach millions of people in the shortest time. It should be used to disseminate mystagogical catechesis. The people of God could be reached through these avenues on liturgical information and formation.

All Catholics who are media practitioners should be co-opted to join the crusade. They should be given adequate catechesis of the Church for proper guidance in their professional duties. They should have a common body to oversee their affairs. This body should be represented in a diocesan committee on social communication when they are formed. This diocesan organ should be charged with the responsibility of transmitting religious matters through the radio, television and newspaper. The members of the committee should include priests who are specialists in Mass Communication along with other Catholics who are media practitioners along with other specialists in their various professions.

The terms of reference of the committee will include reading, writing, reviewing, editing and publishing Catholic literature and educating Catholics on the proper use of the media. The annual Communication Day could be utilized to project any programme that will enlighten the public on the trend in the Church. For example, the Year 2020-2021(8th December, 2020 to 8th December, 2021) is dedicated as the Year of St. Joseph, a lot could be devoted to this subject matter, to explore what the ministry of the Word can achieve using modern social media. In the words of Hyginus Aghaulor:

> What a glorious prospect lies ahead for Christianizing the world as we embrace more and more the modern techniques of communicating the Word of God, be it the use of SMS,

> internet e-mail, phone calls, parish/diocesan/congregation websites, VCD, music, etc.! It all depends on how courageously those who evangelize through the media are themselves communicators of divine grace by their lives of heroic loyalty to Jesus Christ.[23]

The implication is that it is in the right direction to pursue the cause of promoting the modern means of communication to reach the wider audience in the proclamation and the celebration of the Word of God in the pandemic era. It remains a strategy to reach the nooks and crannies of the nation and beyond especially for those to whom it may not be convenient to come to the Church to sit and be instructed about their faith owing to the demands of pandemic protocols.

7. Conclusion

From the foregoing discussion, the paper affirms that new options, for the "new" normal, to be explored in order to compliment the traditional ways of celebrating the Word of God in COVID-19 pandemic era include the good use of the social media platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram, live streaming, family worship, the formation of parish based small group sharing, promoting the culture of the enthronement of the Word of God as well as the good use of public address system. Admittedly, God still speaks in the liturgical and family assembly each time his Word is proclaimed. He addresses the assembly whenever the sacraments and sacramentals are celebrated and His Word demands adequate response from his hearers. God's word should always serve as a rich and trustworthy reference point and a spiritual "Global Positioning System" (GPS) for Christian life and spirituality. The mantra of the paper is that every rightful opportunity should be utilized to celebrate the Word of God for the people. When constrained because of the demands of pandemic's protocol, such as social distancing, amplification of the sound system and the use of virtual ministry through online can help those at home.

[23] Hyginus Aghaulor, "Media and the Word of God in the Mission of the Church" in *The 2nd Liturgical Symposium 2009* (Nnewi: Cathcom, 2009) 34.

In conclusion, the paper therefore challenges the clergy and the lay faithful to adopt some, if not all, more of such measures to celebrate the Word of God in the pandemic era. The Church in Nigeria must reconsider the level of participation since physical worship is giving way to virtual worship. In these ways, online viewers and worshippers are able to follow their pastor's celebration of the Word of God and Mass online at the exact time. They must consolidate on the gains of the pandemic era by mapping out at the beginning of every pastoral year, funds for personnel, social media, gadgets and other logistics to sustain the different ways of celebrating the Word of God. After all, it is said that: "It is the modern cat that knows how best to hunt the modern rat."