Challenges Faced by the Catholic Church in Implementing Initiatives of Social Change in Nairobi County 1963–2023.

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Abstract: The Catholic Church has played a significant role in shaping social change in Kenya, particularly in Nairobi County, through its involvement in education, healthcare, economic empowerment, and social justice initiatives. Despite extensive historical accounts of the Church's contributions to national development, limited research has comprehensively analyzed its challenges in implementing the strategies and the initiatives in Nairobi county from 1963 to 2023. This study sought to fill this gap by examining barriers the Catholic Church's role in social change. This was achieved by focusing on the following specific objective: to discuss the challenges faced by the Catholic church in implementing initiatives that brought social change in Nairobi County in 1963-2023. The study was guided by Social Movement Theory, Critical theory, Faith-Based Organizational Theory and Liberation Theology, which provided analytical frameworks for understanding the Church's challenges/ limitations/ barriers to social change as the Catholic Church emphasizes its moral obligation to advocate for the poor and oppressed. A case study research design was employed, allowing for an in-depth exploration of the Church's initiatives in Nairobi. The study utilized qualitative methods, including interviews, observation, focus group discussions, and document analysis, to gather rich insights from Church leaders, beneficiaries of Church-led programs, and historical records. Sampling was purposive, targeting individuals who had direct experience of the Church's institution or interventions. Data was analyzed thematically to identify patterns and trends in the Church's contributions to education, healthcare, and social justice. The findings of this study will contribute to the broader discourse on religion and social change by highlighting how faith-based organizations particularly the Catholic Church has played a pivotal role in addressing socio-economic inequalities that has yielded to social change. The study has provided practical recommendations for policymakers, religious institutions, and development organizations on enhancing collaboration with the Catholic Church to promote sustainable social change. By documenting the Church's historical and contemporary (1963- 2023) contributions, this research will serve as a valuable reference for future studies on the intersection of religion and social development in Kenya.

KEY TERMS: Caritas: A confederation of Catholic relief, development, and social service organizations at the international, national, and local levels develop people & alleviating poverty and suffering.

Catholic Social Teaching: (CST)A body of doctrine developed by the Catholic Church on matters of social justice, for human dignity, rights of workers, poverty &the role of the Church in society.

Encyclical: A papal letter sent by the Pope of the Catholic Church to discuss and provide guidance on important

issues related to Church doctrine, social teachings, or current events.

Inculturation: A process by the Catholic Church to adapt/ incorporate aspects of local cultures into her teachings and practices, promoting a meaningful integration of faith and cultural identity.

Laity: These are non-ordained members of the Catholic Church, not clergy or in religious orders.

Liberation Theology: A theory that interprets Christian teachings through the lens of the poor and oppressed, and advocating for social justice and liberation from oppression.

Social: of or relating to human society, the interaction of the individual and the group, or the welfare of human beings as members of society.

Social change: Significant and radical changes in social relations, structures, and processes within a society, affecting various aspects such as economy, politics, culture, and social interactions.

Political instability: is defined as a condition in which a political system experiences frequent and unpredictable changes in its institutional structures, leadership, or policies, often accompanied by civil unrest or violence, lack of consistent, effective governance and may involve challenges to the legitimacy of established political institutions.

1.1 Introduction

This chapter explores the challenges and limitations that the Catholic Church faced in advancing social change in Nairobi County between 1963 and 2023. While earlier chapters highlighted the Church's significant contributions in education, health, governance, and advocacy, it is equally important to examine the obstacles that constrained its mission. Drawing on interviews with clergy, laity, and development practitioners, as well as documentary evidence from pastoral letters, government records, and academic literature, the discussion critically unpacks the tensions that emerged in the Church's pursuit of justice and development. Themes covered include political interference and repression, financial and resource constraints, the complex balance between evangelization and social activism, and the evolving relationships with the state, other Christian denominations, and Muslim communities. Analyzing these dimensions, provides a nuanced understanding of the Church's resilience and vulnerabilities in effecting transformative change.

1.2 Political Interference and Repression

The relationship between the Catholic Church and the Kenyan state has often been characterized by both cooperation and confrontation. While the Church has been an indispensable partner in education, healthcare, and development, its prophetic mission of advocating for justice, good governance, & human dignity frequently placed it at odds with political authorities. Political interference & repression emerged as persistent challenges that constrained the implementation of Church's social change initiatives in Nairobi County between 1963 and 2023.

1.2.1 Historical background of Church–State tensions

Following independence in 1963, the Catholic Church initially enjoyed a cordial relationship with the government of Jomo Kenyatta. Both institutions shared a vision of nation-building, with the Church supporting educational and health projects while the state recognized the role of religion in fostering stability (Hornsby, 2012). However, tensions arose when clergy criticized land injustices, corruption, and the centralization of power. By the late 1960s, the Church was already being accused of interfering in politics when it supported squatters displaced by land redistribution policies (Branch, 2011). These early confrontations foreshadowed the deeper repression that would unfold under Daniel Arap Moi's regime from 1978 to 2002.

The 1982 constitutional amendment that formally established Kenya as a one-party state entrenched authoritarianism and narrowed civic space (Throup & Hornsby, 1998). With political parties banned and media under strict control, churches became one of the few remaining platforms for dissent. Moi's government, wary of

this influence, frequently attempted to monitor and suppress church activities, particularly when sermons or pastoral letters touched on issues of justice, democracy, or human rights (Mutua, 2008).

1.2.2 Repression of Catholic clergy

Respondent testimonies from this study vividly recalled the risks faced by Catholic clergy who spoke against authoritarianism.

A retired priest from the clergy home who served in Nairobi during the 1980s explained:

> *"We knew we were under watch. State security officers sat in the pews, not for prayer, but to record what the priest said. After Mass, you might find yourself summoned to the DC's office. Yet people looked to us for courage, so silence was never really an option"* (R 97)

The catholic church leadership accused senior politicians of orchestrating clashes and warned of bloodshed, attracting harassment from the regime (Haugerud, 1995).

A parish leader from Mukuru recounted:

"Fr. John Kaiser became a symbol of resistance. His defiance of state intimidation culminated in his suspicious death in 2000, after a government minister warned him not to visit Eldoret. Many Catholics interpreted his death as martyrdom. Archbishop Ndingi Mwana a'Nzeki's outspoken stance against ethnic violence during the early 1990s illustrates the courage and consequences of resistance. When Ndingi said the truth, we felt relieved that someone dared to speak. But it also made us afraid because we saw police harass catechists and parish workers after his sermons. His words were like fire warming the oppressed, burning the powerful." (R28)

A youth activist from Christ the King Kibera interviewed remarked:

> *"When Fr. kaiser died on 23rd August, 2000, we cried in anger. But his courage planted something in us. It taught us that even death cannot silence the truth. We began to see the Church as our shield when politicians became wolves."* (R 137)

Yet, repression did not always inspire courage. Several respondents acknowledged that fear silenced some clergy. One parish leader in Holy family minor basilica in Nairobi observed:

> *"Not all priests were like Archbishop Ndingi or Fr. Kaiser. Some avoided politics completely. They feared losing schools, hospitals, or government support. We understood their fear, but the silence hurt because people expected a prophetic voice."*. (R145)

This view aligns with Mutua's (2008) critique that the Church was often divided, with some leaders acting as defenders of justice while others compromised to protect institutional interests.

1.2.3 Political co-optation and selective engagement

Beyond outright repression, the state also sought to co-opt the Church through patronage. Government leaders invited bishops to state functions, provided development grants, and occasionally offered them a seat at the table in constitutional negotiations (Hornsby, 2012). While some bishops used these opportunities to advocate for reform, others softened their criticism after receiving state benefits.

A respondent candidly explained:

> *"We saw how the state gave money for schools or clinics to some dioceses. In return, their bishops became quiet. The government knew how to divide the Church. Not every silence was cowardice— sometimes it was bought silence."* (R145)

This dynamic reflects broader debates in the literature. Branch (2011) argues that state patronage was a deliberate strategy to weaken Church activism, while Gifford (2009) emphasizes that co-optation exposed the vulnerability of religious institutions to political manipulation.

Still, some respondents defended pragmatic cooperation. A catechist noted:

> *"Even if a bishop accepted government money, it was to help the poor. We cannot say they betrayed us completely. Maybe they balanced survival with courage."* (R145)

This echoes Appleby's (2000) observation that religious institutions often navigate a delicate balance between prophetic witness and institutional preservation.

1.2.4 Suppression of lay Catholic organizations

Repression was not limited to bishops. Lay organizations such as Caritas Kenya and parish-based Justice and Peace Committees faced restrictions, esp. during the early 1990s when they promoted civic education and voter awareness. The Government accused them of supporting the opposition and sometimes denied them permits for public gatherings (Linden Mayer & Kaye, 2009).

A Caritas staff member recalled:

> *"When we tried to train youth on their rights, police stormed our workshops. They said we were inciting people against the president. We told them we were only teaching the constitution, but they never listened. Our work became very risky."* (R94)

These accounts demonstrate the tension between the Church's grassroots initiatives and the authoritarian state's suspicion of any form of mobilization. Yet paradoxically, as respondents observed, repression sometimes enhanced the Church's moral credibility.

A young activist from Kasarani noted:

> *"When government tried to stop the Church, it proved the Church was speaking the truth. People trusted priests more than newspapers. Persecution made the Church stronger in our eyes."* (R115)

This supports Gifford's (2009) argues that repression inadvertently legitimized the Church as a defender of people.

1.2.5 Contradictions and debates

Despite the courage displayed by certain leaders, contradictions within the Church's response to repression are evident. Some respondents accused sections of the hierarchy of being too close to State House. A journalist who covered church affairs during the 1990s remarked:

> *"We must admit the Church was not united. Some bishops were prophetic; others were political allies of the regime. This inconsistency confused the faithful. It was difficult to know whether the Church was fully on the side of justice."* (R143)

Scholarly debates mirror these contradictions. Throup and Hornsby (1998) celebrate the Church's role in opening democratic space, while Mutua (2008) criticizes it for selective engagement and silence on gender justice. Gifford (2009) warns against romanticizing the Church's resistance, arguing that its courage was embodied by a few individuals rather than the institution as a whole. These critiques underline that political interference not only constrained Church initiatives but also exposed internal divisions and selective advocacy.

1.2.6 Post 2002 developments

The end of Moi's regime in 2002 did not eliminate political interference but altered its form. Under Mwai Kibaki and subsequent administrations, open repression decreased, but new tensions emerged. The Church's involvement in debates around the 2010 Constitution, particularly on issues of abortion and sexuality, attracted government criticism (BBC News, 2010). Pastoral letters opposing sections of the draft constitution were dismissed by some politicians as backward or anti-progressive (Kapinde, 2018). A respondent summarized the dilemma:

> *"In the Moi days, the state feared Church for speaking about democracy. In Kibaki days, the state mocked the Church for speaking about morality. The interference never stopped; it changed shape."* (97)

In recent years, bishops have faced political pressure during election periods, particularly when condemning electoral malpractice or corruption. A parish youth leader observed:

> *"Today, when bishops tell politicians to stop stealing, politicians insult them, saying, 'Stay in the church, don't come into politics.' But corruption affects our lives, so how can the Church remain silent?"* (R97)

This continuity demonstrates that while the forms of repression have shifted from violent intimidation to rhetorical de-legitimization, political interference remains a limitation on the Church's mission.

Political interference and repression have shaped the Catholic Church's social engagement in Nairobi County for six decades. From the authoritarian strategies of surveillance, intimidation, and co-optation under Moi to the rhetorical dismissals of Church moral positions in the post-2002 era, state interference has consistently constrained the Church's initiatives. Yet, paradoxically, this repression often enhanced the Church's credibility among ordinary citizens, who saw it as a moral counterweight to corrupt and authoritarian regimes. Respondent testimonies reveal both the courage and the compromises of the Church, affirming that while repression limited its effectiveness, it also amplified its prophetic voice. Ultimately, the challenge of political interference

underscores the complex terrain in which the Catholic Church has sought to implement social change: a terrain where faith, power, and justice constantly intersect.

1.3 Financial and Resource Constraints

While political repression has often been highlighted as a central obstacle to the Catholic Church's social engagement in Kenya, financial and resource constraints have posed equally formidable challenges. Nairobi County, being the epicenter of Kenya's political and economic life, has presented both opportunities and burdens for the Church's mission. On the one hand, Nairobi hosts affluent parishes with relatively strong financial bases. On the other, it is home to sprawling informal settlements such as Kibera, Mathare, and Mukuru, where poverty levels are acute, social needs immense, and church resources severely strained (Amnesty International, 2009). This imbalance has underscored the uneven distribution of financial resources within the Church and revealed deeper structural challenges in sustaining social change initiatives.

1.3.1 The scope of financial challenges

Document analysis reveals that from independence through the 1980s, Catholic dioceses in Kenya were heavily dependent on foreign missionaries and international donor agencies for financial support (Gifford, 2009). Many schools, health facilities, and social programs were sustained by grants from Catholic agencies in Europe and North America, such as Misereor, CAFOD, and Catholic Relief Services. However, the withdrawal or reduction of such support in the 1990s and early 2000s, as donor priorities shifted, created funding gaps that directly affected the Church's capacity to maintain programs in Nairobi (Kigotho, 2012).

One respondent, an Ex-Caritas Kenya official, lamented:

> *"In the 1980s we could count on European donors for almost everything—schools, clinics, water projects. By 2000s, they were gone or reduced. We were told to raise funds locally. But how could we raise money in slums where people cannot even afford food? It crippled many initiatives."* (R149)

Another respondent, a parish youth leader, echoed this frustration:

> *"We wanted to expand vocational training for young people, but funds were never enough. Donors kept asking for proposals and reports, but at the grassroots, youth dropped out because of poverty. The money always seemed finished before the work was done."* (R150)

1.3.2 Urban–rural disparities in Church financing

Nairobi's Catholic parishes vary greatly in financial capacity. Wealthier parishes in affluent neighborhoods such as Karen or Westlands often raise substantial revenue through tithes, fundraising, and private sponsorships. Meanwhile, parishes in informal settlements struggle to cover even basic expenses, let alone finance ambitious social projects.

A parish priest from Mathare parish observed:

> *"On Sunday, the collection might be just a few thousand shillings, barely enough to buy candles and pay the catechists. Yet people still expect the Church to run schools, feed children, and build clinics. Our faith is strong, but our pockets are empty"* (R156)

This disparity has implications for social change. As Njoroge (2018) argues, financial inequality within dioceses often translates into unequal access to education, health, and development programs. While some parishes flourish with modern facilities, others remain under-resourced, deepening social inequalities that the Church aims to address.

Respondents frequently pointed to this contradiction. A lay woman in Kibera noted:

> *"We are told the Church is rich, but here we never see that richness. Our children sit on the floor in schools. Meanwhile, I visit parishes in the city center and see state-of-the-art buildings. It feels like two different Churches"* (R8)

1.3.3 The cost-of-service delivery

Running schools, hospitals, and community programs in Nairobi is expensive. Teachers, nurses, and social workers must be paid, infrastructure maintained, and supplies procured. Yet, unlike government institutions, Church-run facilities rarely receive full state subsidies.

A Catholic hospital administrator explained:

> *"We charge fees, but our clients are mostly poor. They cannot pay much, and yet medicine must be bought. We depend on donations, but these are unreliable. Every year we face deficits. Without subsidies, the work is a constant struggle"* (R83)

Caritas Kenya's annual report of 2019 confirm chronic under-funding, with many programs surviving on project-based donor funding rather than sustainable local revenue (Caritas Kenya, 2019). The lack of long-term financing undermines program continuity, leading to frequent project closures when funding cycles end. This pattern has been observed in slum-based feeding programs, HIV/AIDS care initiatives, and vocational training centers (Kenya Catholic Secretariat, 2016).

1.3.4 Dependency on external donors

The Church's historical reliance on foreign donors has created structural vulnerabilities. When donor priorities shifted to other regions, Kenyan programs suffered. According to Gifford (2009), this dependency limited the Church's autonomy, as it had to align projects with donor agendas.

A respondent involved in women's empowerment programs confirmed this:

> *"Donors wanted us to run workshops on gender, HIV, or climate change, which were important. But when we wanted to focus on housing for the poor, they said no funding. So sometimes we followed their agenda, not our people's needs"* (R113)

This tension reflects broader critiques in development literature. Haynes (2007) argues that donor-driven agendas often distort local priorities, creating programs that are externally relevant but locally unsustainable. Conversely, Linden Mayer and Kaye (2009) suggest that donor partnerships also exposed Kenyan church organizations to global best practices and accountability standards, strengthening professionalism in project management.

1.3.5 Mismanagement and corruption

Another challenge raised by respondents was mismanagement of Church resources. While the Catholic Church is often perceived as transparent, several respondents pointed to cases where funds were misused or poorly accounted for.

A parish council member noted:

> *"We fund raised for a school project, but later we heard the money was misused. Such cases destroy trust. People stop giving because they fear their sacrifices will be wasted"* (R87)

Academic literature corroborates these concerns. Gifford (2009) documents cases where diocesan financial scandals weakened public confidence. Mutua (2008) similarly argues that the Church's moral authority in politics is undermined when it fails to demonstrate accountability within its own structures. However, other scholars caution against overgeneralizing, noting that financial mismanagement within the Church is less widespread than in political institutions, and that internal auditing mechanisms have improved significantly since the 2000s (Kahumbi, 2016).

1.3.6 Human resource limitations

The Church has faced constraints in mobilizing skilled personnel. Nairobi's rapid urbanization created immense social needs that outstripped available human resources.

A Caritas social worker explained:

> *"We had only two trained counselors for the entire slum parish. People came with trauma, with HIV, with domestic violence. We wanted to help, but we were overwhelmed. Human resource was as big a challenge as money"* (R34)

The shortage of clergy has also strained the Church's social programs. With one priest sometimes overseeing multiple parish social justice work, it becomes hard to balance with sacramental duties. Respondent15, a priest in Kayole, admitted:

> *"We are few and overstretched. On Sunday, I say five Masses. During the week, I run to schools, visit hospitals, attend funerals. Where is the time to lead civic education or organize justice programs? We need more hands, but vocations are few"*. (R15)

1.3.7 Contradictions in financial discourse

Respondents offered contradictory views on whether financial constraints truly limited the Church. While some lamented scarcity, others argued the Church still commanded significant wealth compared to grassroots communities.

A Nairobi journalist remarked:

> *"Let's be honest, the Catholic Church is one of the richest institutions in Kenya. The problem is not always lack of money, but how money is prioritized. More is spent on buildings and less on empowerment"* (R16)

This criticism resonates with Njoroge's (2018) finding that Church financial priorities often favor visible infrastructure (such as cathedrals or parish halls) over less tangible but equally crucial initiatives such as civic education or community empowerment. However, defenders argue that infrastructure projects also serve long-term social needs by creating stable spaces for worship, education, and community life.

1.3.8 Comparative perspectives

Comparisons with other African contexts show that financial constraints are a common challenge for churches engaged in social Change. In Uganda, for example, Catholic schools and hospitals face chronic underfunding, forcing them to rely heavily on international Catholic agencies (Ward, 2016). In Zambia, the Church's social programs collapsed when donor support declined, illustrating the dangers of unsustainable dependency (Phiri, 2000). Yet, in some cases, financial scarcity has encouraged innovation. In Tanzania, self-reliance initiatives within the Church, such as agricultural projects and microfinance schemes, have provided alternative income streams (Mallya, 2015).

Kenya's Catholic Church has attempted similar initiatives. The establishment of the Caritas Microfinance Bank in 2015 was a significant step toward financial sustainability (Caritas Kenya, 2019). However, interviews suggest awareness of such institutions remains low at the grassroots.

A parish youth leader admitted:

> *"We hear of Caritas Bank, but we don't know how it helps the poor. Maybe it helps dioceses, but for us in the slums, nothing has changed. Loans are still hard to get"* (R144)

Financial and resource constraints have been a central limitation in the Catholic Church's pursuit of social change in Nairobi County. Chronic under-funding, over-reliance on donors, urban–rural financial disparities, mismanagement, and human resource shortages all combined to hinder program sustainability. While some respondents emphasized scarcity, others highlighted contradictions in resource prioritization, suggesting that the challenge was not only the quantity of funds but also their allocation. The case of Nairobi demonstrates that for faith-based organizations, financial health is inseparable from social mission: without resources, the prophetic voice risks becoming muted, and service delivery becomes precarious. At the same time, these challenges have also stimulated debates about self-reliance, accountability, and creative approaches to financing. As the next section will explore, resource constraints often intersected with internal divisions and clerical politics, further shaping the limits of the Church's social engagement.

1.4 Internal Divisions and Clerical Politics

Gifford (2009) further observes that these ideological rifts limited the Church's effectiveness, as the state exploited internal differences to weaken its influence. Clerical politics not only weakened the Church's ability to present a unified prophetic voice but also undermined the credibility of its social engagement.

A lay Catholic youth leader described the impact of such divisions:

> *"When bishops contradicted each other, we did not know whom to believe. One Sunday we would hear a homily denouncing corruption, the next Sunday another priest would say the Church should stay out of politics. This confusion weakened the message and discouraged us from taking action"* (R142)

While the Catholic Church in Kenya has often been celebrated for its unity of doctrine and hierarchical structure, its role in promoting social change in Nairobi County between 1963 and 2023 was frequently complicated by internal divisions and clerical politics. These divisions manifested at multiple levels: between conservative & progressive clergy, between clergy & laity, between diocesan leadership and parish initiatives & even among

bishops themselves. Respondents and documents analyzed for this study consistently identified internal divisions as a major obstacle to sustained social change.

1.4.1 Ideological divisions within the clergy

One of the most significant sources of internal division was ideological. During the Moi era in particular, bishops and priests were divided over how far the Church should go in confronting the state. Some took a bold, prophetic stance, while others advocated for caution and quiet diplomacy. A retired priest in Nairobi explained:

> *"We admired the courage of Archbishop Ndingi and Fr Kaiser. They spoke the truth, even at risk of death. But not every priest was ready to do the same. Some felt the pulpit should not be used for politics. The result was a divided Church—half bold, half silent"* (R97)

Academic literature supports this observation. Mutua (2008) argues that while the Catholic Church was one of the most influential voices in Kenya's democratization, its stance was often inconsistent, with some bishops aligning themselves closely with the ruling party.

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1.4.2 Competition for influence and authority

Clerical politics also played out in the form of competition for influence and authority within dioceses. In Nairobi, where resources and visibility were concentrated, rivalries sometimes emerged between clergy over leadership positions, parish assignments, or access to donor funding. A parish council member recalled:

> *"We saw priests fight over which parish they would be sent to. Everyone wanted parishes in the city center because of resources. In the slums, no one wanted to go. This politics weakened social projects because energy was spent on personal interests rather than community service"* (R 138)

Similar observations have been made in broader African contexts. Haynes (1996) notes that clerical politics is a common challenge across African churches, where competition for leadership often undermines collective witness. In Kenya, Hornsby (2012) argues that such rivalries were exacerbated by state interference, as political leaders sometimes sought to influence clerical appointments or reward compliant clergy with favors.

1.4.3 Ethnic and regional tensions within the hierarchy

Another dimension of division was ethnic and regional politics within the Church hierarchy. Kenya's ethicized political environment often spilled into church structures, influencing appointments, promotions, and alliances.
A respondent from Nairobi city explained:

> *"Even in the Church, tribalism is real. Some bishops favored priests from their own communities. This caused bitterness. It also affected how projects were allocated. If your ethnic group was not represented, your parish might be sidelined"* (R9)

Scholars such as Gifford (2009) and Njoroge (2018) have documented the ethnicization of church politics in Kenya, warning that it compromises the universality of the Catholic mission. While the Church officially condemns ethnic favoritism, in practice, respondents insisted it remains a reality. A Catechist in Kawangware lamented:

> *"When the Church reflects the same tribalism as politics, it loses moral authority. We hoped the Church would be different, but sometimes it repeats the same mistakes"* (R110)

1.4.4 Tensions between clergy and laity/ lay

Divisions were not confined to clergy alone. Tensions between clergy and laity/ lay faithful also hindered social change initiatives. Lay leaders frequently felt sidelined in decision-making, with clergy reluctant to share authority.
A Catholic Women's Association leader explained:

> *"We were told to organize women's empowerment programs, but every decision had to pass through the priest. Sometimes we felt our ideas were dismissed simply because we were lay people. This discouraged many women from active participation"* (R32)

This critique is supported by academic studies on Catholic governance structures. Lindenmayer and Kaye (2009) argue that while lay participation has increased in principle since Vatican II, in practice clerical dominance remains strong in many African dioceses. Conversely, Appleby (2000) highlights that lay empowerment, particularly through small Christian communities, has been one of the Church's most transformative contributions, suggesting a tension between hierarchical rigidity and grassroots innovation.

1.4.5 Gender dynamics and clerical resistance

A particularly sensitive form of division concerns gender. Respondents highlighted that priests and bishops often resisted lay women's leadership in social programs.

A women's rights activist interviewed noted:

> "We pushed for the Church to take gender justice seriously, but many priests dismissed it as a Western agenda. Women were welcomed in the pews but excluded from decision-making tables. This contradiction limited the Church's credibility on human rights" (R10)

Scholars confirm these dynamics. Gifford (2009) criticizes the Catholic Church in Kenya for failing to adequately address gender inequality within its own structures, while Mutua (2008) argues that the Church's silence on women's rights undermines its broader advocacy for justice. However, some scholars, such as Ward (2016), suggest that Catholic women's groups have nonetheless found creative ways to influence social change from the margins, demonstrating agency despite clerical resistance.

1.4.6 Resource allocation and clerical favoritism

Another recurrent theme was resource allocation. Respondents observed that clerical politics influenced which parishes received development projects.

A social worker with Caritas recounted:

> "We saw how resources were allocated not always by need, but by who had influence in the diocesan office. Poor parishes were neglected for of lack powerful advocates" (R42)

This concern reflects wider critiques of bureaucratic centralization within the Catholic Church. According to Kahumbi (2016), diocesan politics often determine access to financial resources, limiting the ability of marginalized parishes to address pressing social needs. However, other scholars argue that centralization ensures accountability and prevents the misuse of funds at the parish level (Caritas Kenya, 2019). This debate underscores the complexity of balancing equity with accountability in church governance.

1.4.7 Impact of divisions on credibility

Respondents mostly emphasized that internal divisions damaged the Church's public credibility.

A journalist covering religious affairs explained:

> "The state took advantage of clerical divisions. When one bishop condemned corruption, another would praise the government. This inconsistency weakened the Church's prophetic voice. People began to doubt whether the Church truly stood for justice" (R81)

This aligns with Branch's (2011) observation that state actors often exploited clerical disagreements to delegitimize the Church. By highlighting pro-government voices within the Church, the regime was able to undermine the credibility of more critical clerics.

1.4.8 Comparative perspectives

Comparisons with other African contexts further illuminate the role of clerical politics. In Uganda, for example, divisions between conservative and progressive clergy weakened the Catholic Church's stance against Idi Amin's dictatorship (Ward, 2016). In Zimbabwe, church leaders were similarly divided over whether to confront Robert Mugabe, leading to inconsistent advocacy (Chitando, 2009). These examples suggest that clerical politics is a widespread phenomenon in African Christianity, not unique to Kenya.

Internal divisions and clerical politics have profoundly shaped the Catholic Church's capacity to implement social change in Nairobi County. Ideological disagreements, competition for influence, ethnic favoritism, gender tensions, and resource allocation disputes all weakened the Church's unity and credibility. Respondent testimonies reveal that these divisions were experienced not only at the episcopal level but also in parishes and lay organizations. While some scholars emphasize that such divisions reflect the broader socio-political realities of

Kenya, others argue they undermine the very moral authority that gives the Church its prophetic power. Ultimately, internal fragmentation stands as one of the most enduring challenges to the Church's social mission, complicating its role as a unified advocate for justice and human dignity.

1.5 Relations with the State and Other Religious Actors

Between 1963 and 2023, the Catholic Church's efforts at social change in Nairobi County were deeply shaped by its relations with the state and with other religious actors. The Catholic Church, as one of the largest and most influential religious institutions not only in Nairobi county but also in the entire Kenya, could not operate in isolation. Its advocacy for justice, human rights, and development frequently brought it into both collaboration and conflict with successive governments. Similarly, the rise of Pentecostal and evangelical movements, alongside interfaith collaborations with Protestant churches and Muslim organizations, created both opportunities for ecumenical solidarity and competition for influence. This section critically examines these dynamics, showing how the Church's relationships with political and religious actors facilitated or constrained its mission of social change.

1.5.1 Relations with the State: From Collaboration to Confrontation

At independence, relations between the Catholic Church and the state were largely cooperative. President Jomo Kenyatta recognized the role of missionaries in education and health, and the government supported Church institutions by subsidies and policy endorsements (Gifford, 2009).

A retired clergy member recalled:

> *"In the 1960s, we worked closely with the government. Schools, hospitals, and social services were built hand in hand. The state saw us as partners in nation-building"* (R97)

However, this relationship shifted under Daniel Arap Moi's authoritarian regime (1978–2002). As the Church increasingly spoke against human rights abuses, detention without trial, and electoral manipulation, relations with the state grew tense (Mutua, 2008). Archbishop Ndingi Mwana a'Nzeki's public condemnation of state-sponsored ethnic clashes in the Rift Valley exemplified this confrontation. A respondent who was a young activist in the 1990s observed:

> *"When Ndingi spoke, the whole country listened. He confronted Moi openly. But that also made the government suspicious of the Church. Priests were watched, some harassed, others denied permits for gatherings"* (R97)

State documents and parliamentary debates confirm that the government often accused the Church of meddling in politics, while bishops insisted they were fulfilling their prophetic duty (Kenya National Assembly, 1991). This tension reached its peak in the 1990s, when the Catholic Church joined other religious and civil society actors in demanding multiparty democracy (Branch, 2011).

1.5.2 Clerical Ambivalence toward State Relations

Not all Catholic leaders embraced confrontation. Several respondents noted that some bishops maintained close ties with political elites, enjoying privileges; deterring them from speaking out.

A Nairobi journalist explained:

> *"Some bishops were invited to State House, given cars and land. They could not then criticize the same leaders who rewarded them. This divided the Church's witness"* (R16)

This ambivalence is reflected in scholarship. Gifford (2009) notes that while parts of the Church were prophetic, others were co-opted. Hornsby (2012) similarly observes that Moi strategically cultivated relationships with compliant religious leaders to neutralize criticism. Yet, defenders of diplomatic engagement argued that quiet dialogue with the state sometimes yielded more results than public confrontation.

A diocesan official stated:

> *"We do not always need to shout. Sometimes, by sitting with government quietly, we achieve reforms that confrontation would block"* (R30)

1.5.3 Relations in the Kibaki and Uhuru Era

During Mwai Kibaki's presidency (2002–2013), relations improved initially, as the catholic Church supported constitutional reforms. The 2010 Constitution, which expanded rights and limited presidential powers, was partly

the result of Church involvement in civic education and lobbying (Berman & Lonsdale, 2014). However, tensions emerged over the inclusion of reproductive health rights and Kadhi courts, which the Catholic Church opposed (Otieno, 2010). A lay respondent explained:

> *"The Church taught us to support justice, but when it came to the constitution, it told us to vote 'No.' Some of us felt betrayed because we had fought for reforms for years"* (R145)

Under President Uhuru Kenyatta (2013–2022), relations fluctuated. The Church criticized corruption scandals, such as the National Youth Service saga, but was sometimes accused of being too lenient on leaders due to ethnic and political alliances.

A respondent noted:

> *"When the president was Catholic, some bishops kept quiet about corruption. People wondered if ethnicity was stronger than truth"* (R132)

1.5.4 Relations under the Ruto Administration

With the rise of William Ruto in 2022, a new dynamic emerged. Ruto's strong alliances with Pentecostal and evangelical churches shifted the balance of religious influence. Respondents described this as a challenge for Catholic Church visibility.

A youth leader observed:

> *"Since 2022, the president is always seen with Pentecostal pastors. Catholics seem sidelined. Our bishops speak, but government listens more to evangelicals"* (R6)

This shift reflects global literature on religious competition in Africa. Haynes (2007) argues that Pentecostal churches' close ties with political elites often outshine older denominations, altering state-religion dynamics. However, some respondents noted that Catholic institutional strength in education and health still gave it leverage in policy negotiations, especially around social services

1.5.5 Ecumenical Relations with Protestant Churches

The Catholic Church's relations with Protestant denominations were both collaborative and competitive. Struggle multiparty democracy-1990s, Catholic, Anglican, and Presbyterian bishops issued joint statements through NCCK. However, ecumenical unity was not always easy.

As parish priest and his assistant (respondents) recalled:

> *In those days, we were united. Catholics, Protestants, Muslims—we all wanted freedom. That unity scared the government, but it gave the people courage"* (R57)

> *"When we worked with NCCK, we realized Protestants had different approaches. They spoke more directly, sometimes without caution. Catholics were slower, more hierarchical. This created misunderstandings".* (R54)

Scholars have highlighted these differences. Gifford (2009) argues that Protestant churches were often more flexible and confrontational, while the Catholic Church, due to its global hierarchy, was more cautious. Yet, the shared goal of justice frequently bridged these differences, especially in moments of crisis (Branch, 2011).

1.5.6 Relations with Muslim Leaders.   In

Nairobi, Muslims form a significant minority, interfaith collaboration was experienced. A respondent recalled cooperation between Catholic and Muslim leaders on issues such as peace-building and civic education. A Muslim respondent from Eastliegh explained:

> *"We sat with Catholic bishops to preach peace after election violence. We may differ in faith, but we all wanted stability for our communities"* (R60)

The Interfaith Council on COVID-19, established in 2020, further illustrated this cooperation, bringing Catholic, Protestant, and Muslim leaders together to guide public health measures (Interfaith Council, 2020). However, tensions arose, over constitutional debates on Kadhi courts.

A Catholic laywoman noted:

> *"We wanted justice, but when the issue of Kadhi courts came, suddenly we were divided. Catholics and Muslims could not agree".* (R44)

Scholars confirm this dual reality. Ndzovu (2014) notes that Muslim-Christian relations in Kenya oscillate between cooperation on social issues and tension over constitutional recognition.

1.5.7 Competition with Pentecostal Churches

Perhaps the greatest religious challenge to Catholic influence in Nairobi has been the rise of Pentecostal and evangelical churches. These churches, often charismatic and media-savvy, attracted urban youth with promises of prosperity and healing (Meyer, 2010). Respondents frequently described this as competition.

A Catholic youth explained:

> *"Our Church is big, but sometimes it feels slow. Pentecostal churches attract youth with music & testimonies. Some of my friends left for they felt Catholic was too formal"* (R78)

Pentecostal churches also developed close ties with political elites.

A Catholic social worker lamented:

> *"We work on justice & peace quietly, but politicians prefer Pentecostal pastors who bless them loudly on TV. This makes our work invisible, even though we reach more poor people through schools & hospitals"* (R56)

Literature supports this perception. Marshall (2009) argues that Pentecostal churches have become politically influential across Africa by aligning themselves with ruling elites. By contrast, Catholicism's hierarchical structure makes it slower to adapt but more stable. (Haynes, 2007).

1.5.8 Contradictory Views among Respondents

Respondents were not unanimous on whether relations with the state and other religious actors strengthened or weakened the Church. Some saw interfaith cooperation as empowering.

A parish pastoral council member explained:

> *"When we stand together with Anglicans and Muslims, the government listens. Unity is strength"* (R70)

Others, however, saw it as diluting Catholic identity. A conservative Catholic Christian observed:

> *"Working too closely with others confuses our people. Catholics should remain Catholic. Ecumenism is good in theory, but in practice it weakens us"* (R11)

This contradiction reflects broader academic debates. While Appleby (2000) champions interfaith cooperation as a pathway to peace, Gifford (2009) cautions that ecumenism can obscure doctrinal clarity and weaken Catholic distinctiveness. Relations with the state and with other religious actors profoundly shaped the Catholic Church's role in promoting social change in Nairobi County between 1963 and 2023. At times, collaboration with the state advanced nation-building; at other times, confrontation with authoritarian regimes strengthened the Catholic Church's prophetic witness. Ecumenical and interfaith cooperation provided platforms for unity and peace-building, yet also revealed theological and political tensions. Competition with Pentecostal churches reshaped religious influence, particularly in the Ruto era. Respondent testimonies highlight the ambivalence of these relationships: while some saw them as sources of strength, others perceived them as compromises of Catholic identity. Ultimately, these interactions underscore that the Catholic Church's social mission cannot be understood in isolation but only in relation to the broader religious and political ecosystem in which it operates.

1.6 Globalization and Changing Religious Landscape

Globalization, understood as the intensification of global inter connectedness through flows of people, ideas, capital, media, and technology, has had profound implications for the Catholic Church's efforts at social change in Nairobi County between 1963 and 2023. Nairobi, as Kenya's capital and a regional hub, was at the center of these transformations. The rise of digital technologies, international aid, global Catholic networks, migration, and the spread of competing religious movements reshaped the Catholic Church's mission in both empowering and constraining ways. Respondents consistently emphasized that globalization altered not only the material conditions of ministry but also the spiritual expectations of the faithful.

As one Nairobi priest summarized:

"Globalization brought us both opportunities and temptations. It gave us resources to serve, but it also exposed us to ideas that confused our people. The Church had to constantly adapt" (R98)

1.6.1 The Impact of Globalization on Catholic Institutions

One of the most visible effects of globalization on the Catholic Church in Nairobi was the growth and modernization of institutions. Respondents highlighted that Catholic schools, hospitals, and universities benefited significantly from global partnerships.

A Catholic education administrator explained:

> *"Donors from Europe & America helped us build classrooms, laboratories, and libraries. Without globalization, our schools wouldn't have the quality they now enjoy"* (R31)

The Catholic University of Eastern Africa (CUEA), for example, was founded with support from the Vatican and international partners, positioning Nairobi as a hub of Catholic higher learning in Africa (CUEA, 2020). Similarly, hospitals such as Mater and St. Mary's relied on global funding networks for infrastructure and medical equipment. Scholars such as Linden and Appel (2012) argue that these institutions became not only sites of evangelization but also nodes in global networks of knowledge and health.

However, globalization also made these institutions vulnerable to market logics.

A respondent lamented:

> "*Our schools have become expensive, out of reach for the poor. Globalization brought high standards, yes, but also commercialization. The Catholic mission of serving the marginalized risks being lost*" (R65)

This tension is echoed in Gifford's (2009) critique that globalization has sometimes aligned Catholic institutions with neoliberal economic trends that prioritize efficiency over accessibility.

1.6.2 The Influence of Digital Media and Communication

Another major dimension of globalization was the rise of digital technologies. Respondents mostly described how social media, television, and the internet transformed evangelization and activism.

A Catholic youth leader explained:

> *"Today, young people get catechism lessons on YouTube and follow priests on Facebook. Sermons are shared on WhatsApp. Evangelization has moved online"* (R53)

This digital shift allowed the Church to reach wider audiences but also created challenges. A parish priest observed:

> *"Global media exposes our youth to secular values—consumerism, individualism, even atheism. Catholic Church must counter global voices that preach opposite teachings"* (98)

Scholars confirm these concerns. Campbell and Tsuria (2021) argue that digital religion reshapes authority structures, as believers increasingly access religious content outside traditional hierarchies. In Nairobi, this meant that young Catholics often blended Church teaching with global pop culture, leading to both creativity and conflict in identity formation.

1.6.3 Migration and Transnational Catholicism

Globalization also influenced Nairobi through migration flows. Many Kenyans migrated abroad for work or study, while foreign clergy and missionaries continued to serve in Nairobi.

A respondent explained:

> *"Our priests go to study in Rome or America, and when they return, they bring new ideas. At the same time, missionaries from India and Nigeria now serve in Nairobi parishes. This exchange enriches the Catholic Church but sometimes causes tensions"* (R16)

Transnational Catholic organizations such as Caritas Internationalis, Jesuit Refugee Service, and Catholic Relief Services also became prominent actors, linking Nairobi's social work to global Catholic networks (Caritas Internationalis, 2019). These organizations provided funding and expertise, particularly during crises such as the 2007–2008 post-election violence and the COVID-19 pandemic but, respondents cautioned that reliance on international aid created dependency.

A diocesan finance officer explained:

> *"We depend too much on foreign donors. When they cut funds, our projects collapse. Globalization has made us beggars instead of builders"* (R53)

Scholars such as Deneulin and Bano (2009) note that such aid dependency risks undermining local ownership of development initiatives.

1.6.4 Globalization and Religious Competition

Perhaps the most striking impact of globalization on Nairobi's Catholic Church was the changing religious landscape, particularly the rapid growth of Pentecostal and evangelical movements. These churches, often with links to global prosperity gospel networks, attracted urban youth with promises of wealth, healing, and empowerment (Meyer, 2010).

A respondent observed:

"Pentecostal churches use global media better than us. They invite American preachers, stream services on TV, and promise miracles. Many Catholics leave the church because they feel Pentecostals speak the language of modern life" (R102)

This competition forced the Catholic Church to adapt. A Nairobi priest explained:

> *"We cannot ignore Pentecostals. They challenge us to make our liturgy more engaging, our preaching more relevant, and our youth programs more attractive. Without this pressure, we might have remained complacent"* (R98)

Gifford (2004) and Marshall (2009) argue that globalization has facilitated the spread of Pentecostalism as a dominant religious force in Africa, challenging older churches. Yet, other scholars note that Catholicism retains resilience due to its global identity, sacramental depth, and institutional stability (Appleby, 2000).

1.6.5 Global Discourses on Human Rights and Justice

Globalization also introduced new discourses on human rights, democracy, and gender equality. Respondents noted that international norms influenced Catholic activism in Nairobi.

A women's rights activist explained:

> *"Through UN platforms & NGOs, we learned the language of rights. The Church began to talk about gender justice, even if reluctantly. Global debates gave us courage to challenge clerical patriarchy"* (R105)

Documents confirm this influence. The Catholic bishops' pastoral letters on justice in the 1990s and 2000s increasingly adopted rights-based language, aligning with global human rights frameworks (KCCB, 1993; KCCB, 2014). However, tensions also arose, particularly on issues e.g reproductive health and LGBTQ+ rights, where Catholic teaching conflicted with global norms.

A conservative respondent noted:

> *"Western ideas about sexuality confuse our youth. The Church must resist globalization when it goes against the Gospel"* (R133)

This reflects broader scholarly debates. While Deneulin and Bano (2009) argue that global rights discourses empower marginalized voices, others such as Huntington (1996) warn of cultural clashes when Western norms are imposed on African societies.

1.6.6 Contradictory Experiences of Globalization

Respondents provided divergent assessments of globalization. Some saw it as very positive.

A university chaplain said:

> *"Globalization opened the world to Nairobi County Catholics. Our students attend World Youth Day, exchange ideas with peers from Europe, and bring back new energy. This keeps our Catholic church vibrant".* (R154)

Others, however, viewed it as corrosive. A parish moderator lamented:

> *"Before globalization, our youth respected traditions and elders. Now they follow TikTok influencers more than priests. Globalization has weakened our culture and faith"* (R32)

This contradiction illustrates what Robertson (1992) describes as the dual nature of globalization, simultaneously homogenizing cultures and producing local resistance ("globalization").

1.6.7 Comparative Perspectives

The Nairobi County experience is mirrored elsewhere. In South Africa, globalization enabled churches to mobilize international solidarity against apartheid, while in Nigeria, it fueled the rise of Pentecostal mega-churches that overshadowed Catholic and mainline denominations (Marshall, 2009). In Latin America, liberation theology

initially thrived on global networks of solidarity but later declined under Vatican pressure and competition from Pentecostalism (Levine, 2012). These parallels highlight both the opportunities and challenges globalization poses for Catholic social engagement. Globalization profoundly reshaped the Catholic Church's role in Nairobi County between 1963 and 2023. It facilitated the growth of institutions, expanded communication through digital media, and connected Nairobi County to global Catholic networks. At the same time, it intensified competition with Pentecostal movements, created dependency on foreign aid, and introduced cultural conflicts over human rights and morality. Respondent testimonies reveal the ambivalence of globalization: it empowered the Church's mission yet also threatened its identity and credibility. Ultimately, the Catholic Church in Nairobi demonstrates both resilience and vulnerability in navigating the global religious landscape, illustrating how local faith communities are deeply entangled in global processes of change.

1.8 Conclusion

This study has critically examined the major challenges and limitations faced by the Catholic Church in implementing social change initiatives in Nairobi County between 1963 and 2023. The analysis revealed that political interference and state repression often restricted the Church's prophetic voice, while financial and resource constraints hindered sustainability of projects. Internal tensions between evangelization and social activism complicated the Church's identity, sometimes diluting its effectiveness. Similarly, relations with the state and other religious actors oscillated between fruitful collaboration and rivalry, shaping the Church's credibility in the public sphere. Globalization further transformed the religious landscape, offering opportunities for growth International Journal of Arts and Social Science www.ijassjournal.com ISSN: 2581-7922, Volume 8 Issue 12, December 2025 Muema Catherine Kalungu Page 15 through digital media, education, and international networks, yet also fueling competition from Pentecostal churches, cultural conflicts over morality, and dependency on foreign aid. Respondent testimonies underscored the ambivalence of these experiences: some saw globalization, interfaith collaboration, and activism as sources of renewal, while others perceived them as threats to Catholic distinctiveness. Ultimately, the findings highlight that the Catholic Church's mission of social change in Nairobi is both resilient and vulnerable, deeply embedded in broader political, economic, and cultural dynamics. To remain effective, the Catholic Church must continually adapt, balancing evangelization with justice while safeguarding its unique identity. While the Catholic church has experienced a lot of challenge in involving herself in social change as discussed above. However, this has not deterred the church from accomplishing her mission as she has overcome some of these challenges by seeking dialogue with the government to overcome the challenge of political instability. The church has embraced Ecumenism, which is a dialogue with other church faith that is the catholic church has been on the forefront in advocating for interfaith discussions.

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