

INTERVIEW WITH BROTHER CHARLES SIANGA KABETA OF THE BROTHERS OF THE SACRED HEART IN ZAMBIA



Interview conducted by Quentin Wodon

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EXCERPTS:

- “We need to empower Catholic learning institutions to develop their infrastructure. This is a challenge in Africa. Catholic Schools are often overwhelmed with pressure for demands to enroll pupils. Classes that are supposed to handle an average of 35 pupils end up with 45 or 50 pupils due to high demand.”
- “We need to share ideas and strategies and better recognize the interdependence of Catholic education learning institutions globally. We also need to invest in modern technologies that advance learning and innovations that would be palatable to all learners of different skills.”

Could you please explain your current responsibilities and how you are engaged in Catholic education?

I am Brother from the Brothers of the Sacred Heart, one of the Congregations involved in our African Province of Eastern and Southern Africa which covers Lesotho, Kenya, Uganda, Zambia and Zimbabwe. Our Congregation was founded by Father Andre Coindre in Lyon, France in 1821. This year, we will celebrate our Congregational bi-centenary (200 years) as well as a diamond jubilee (65 years) of evangelization through education in Zambia.

In Zambia we own two schools: St. Francis Secondary School, a single sex (boys) boarding school (Grades 8 to 12) and a former community school for school drop-outs that has risen up to a full-fledged aided school from pre-school to Grade 12. I have lived and worked in both school communities and since 2015 I serve as Board of Management Chairperson in both schools. Additionally, from November 2013 to March 2020, I worked as National Education Secretary for the Zambia Conference of Catholic Bishops monitoring all Catholic learning institutions in 11 Dioceses.

Box 1: Interview Series

What is the mission of the Global Catholic Education website? The site informs and connects Catholic educators globally. It provides them with data, analysis, opportunities to learn, and other resources to help them fulfill their mission with a focus on the preferential option for the poor.

Why a series of interviews? Interviews are a great way to share experiences in an accessible and personal way. This series will feature interviews with practitioners as well as researchers working in Catholic education, whether in a classroom, at a university, or with other organizations aiming to strengthen Catholic schools and universities.

What is the focus of this interview? In this interview, Brother Charles Sianga Kabeta from the Brothers of the Sacred Heart talks about the challenges and opportunities faced by Catholic schools in Zambia and his hopes for the Global Compact on Education.

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What do you believe are the current strengths of Catholic education and in particular the strengths of the activities you are involved in?

Most Catholic learning institutions in Zambia foster consistent organization and discipline. They are inclusive, welcoming children from all religious denominations, races, and cultures. Catholic schools are often preferred by parents. Students do well at each level, from pre-school to tertiary education. As such, the Catholic Church has contributed academically and vocationally to empowering citizens it has educated. My own background and education has enabled me to understand and appreciate the why and importance of Catholic education.

In which areas could Catholic education be improved and how, especially again with regards to the activities that you are personally engaged in?

We need to empower Catholic learning institutions to develop their infrastructure to be able to welcome those in needs without leaving anyone behind. This is a challenge in Africa. Catholic Schools are often overwhelmed with pressure for demands to enroll pupils. This affects the normal classroom capacity (pupil-teacher ratios that tend to be high). Classes that are supposed to handle an average of 35 pupils end up with 45 or 50 pupils due to high demand. Funding for Catholic education is important but Grant Aid has proven to be insufficient and at times erratic. Catholic education also must adhere to the social teachings of the Church and it is important to periodically assess the teaching methodologies and recommend best teaching and learning practices.

Have you observed recently interesting innovative initiatives in Catholic education? If so, what are they and why are those initiatives innovative?

Having attended the 2019 OIEC education congress in New York, I think that Catholic schools must define their educational objectives in line with the thematic areas that were discussed at the Congress, with a particular focus on educating towards fraternal humanism. We need to share ideas and strategies and better recognize the interdependence of Catholic education learning institutions globally. We also need to invest in modern technologies that advance learning and innovations that would be palatable to all learners of different skills (promotion of both academic and vocational/technical education which in the Zambian Curriculum Framework is known as a two tier system).

Recently, with the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, we saw the need to develop alternative modes of learning for instance virtual learning through the internet, mobile networks, Zoom conferencing, and television and social media. This was a positive development despite challenges faced in remote areas whose communication

networks are not established yet. Learning was not halted completely as some learners were able to learn from home and exchange learning materials, receive work or lessons and submit their assignment to teachers online.

How do you understand the call from Pope Francis for a new Global Compact on Catholic education? How do you think you and your organization could contribute to the Pope's vision?

My understanding of the call of Pope Francis is that it is an invitation to all collaborate in the education mission. The Pontiff's invitation equally refers to parents and teachers to find avenues and time to look afresh at the fundamental human rights of children to an education of quality. The Global compact aims to empower learners with a particular focus on the poor, those who are less privileged and those who may learn more slowly to accord them equal opportunities to succeed at their own pace.

At the level of my congregation, this year at the end of September we will celebrate the bi-centenary of our Foundation in Lyon in 1821 in France. In preparation for this celebration, I am helping establishing a new Catholic school (pre-School to Grade 12). God willing and if resources are available, this would be an opportune time to implement Pope Francis' vision. The school will be 74 km away from Lusaka in an area that is in need of improved services and social amenities. Currently, as a result of long distances from surrounding villages to the few existing schools, many children and especially girls do not pursue their education. The school will have a boarding facility and it will include the provision of agricultural-based skills growing a variety of crops, rearing livestock and farming fish within the premises of the school to ensure three meals to learners.

What events, projects, or activities could be suggested to strengthen a common identity for Catholic education at a global level? What are your ideas?

Suitable events, projects, and activities that would enhance and strengthen a common identity for Global Catholic education could be tailored to:

- Exchanging best practices and teaching pedagogies that foster the Catholic ethos and values based on Catholic Social teachings;
- Making proper usage of modern technologies in education without a negative impact of social media;
- Sharing resources through fraternal humanism so as to uplift the educational standards of the less privileged societies;
- Make periodic seminars and workshops for life skills along academic education as a way to respond to contemporary challenges of life and needs;
- Sharing teaching and learning materials between the haves and the have nots; and

- Creating a Catholic global education system that is equitable and inclusive and that contributes to the Sustainable Developmental Goals for education, gender equality, decent work and economic growth, reduced inequalities, and climate action.

What are some of the priorities in terms of training and capacity building for school principals, teachers, alumni, parents, or other groups to strengthen Catholic education in your country or area?

To me, the priorities in terms of training is to foster synergies that will enable all key stakeholders to buy in and share in a common vision for Catholic education. In my previous functions, I encouraged cooperation among the school management, the parents-teachers committee and the alumni for planning, material and resource mobilization and infrastructure development.

Could you please share how you ended up in your current position, what was your personal journey?

As I mentioned it earlier, I have been active in the field of Catholic education for many years, and until recently I served as National Education Secretary for the Zambia Conference of Catholic Bishops. Currently, I am writing a book to share some of my experience and ideas. The book will outline essential approaches and principles of how best to run a Catholic school with a deliberate focus on inclusive and equitable education in order to embrace every child without any disparities between the rich and the poor or between urban and rural children.

Finally, could you share a personal anecdote about yourself, what you are passionate about?

My passion as a religious brother is truly Catholic education and trying to make sure that all children can go to a Catholic school! This is why I am engaged in the establishment of the new school I mentioned.



Photos: activities of a few Zambian Catholic Education learning Institutions.