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Catechesis and spiritual formation for students at the Sapientia Catholic University of Goma from 2016 to 2026

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ABSTRACT

In the university pastoral ministry at Sapientia Catholic University in Goma, it is important to emphasise spiritual formation, which is the foundation of the lay faithful's socio-political engagement. All too often, the behaviour of political figures, senior managers, lecturers and students is marred by

corruption, the pursuit of money and power, lies and deceit, because they did not initially receive a sound spiritual, moral and human formation. Their behaviour is not in harmony with their faith. Hence the need to provide students, lecturers, administrative staff and support staff with spiritual formation and a sound grounding in the Church's social teaching, so that they may bear witness to their faith within their families and

in their professional environments through catechesis, Catholic Action movements and prayer groups.

Keywords: Catechesis, Spiritual formation, Student, University environment, Catholic.

1. Introduction

The university is a privileged setting for intellectual, human, moral and social formation. Its mission is not limited to the transmission of knowledge and the acquisition of professional skills; it also contributes to the integral formation of the person, the development of values and the cultivation of a sense of responsibility. In Catholic institutions, this mission includes a spiritual dimension which aims to foster dialogue between faith, culture and scientific knowledge. In this context, John Paul II, in the Apostolic Constitution **Ex corde Ecclesiae** (1990, no. 38), emphasises the importance of university pastoral care, which is called upon to help members of the academic community integrate religious and moral principles into their personal and professional lives.

University pastoral care thus constitutes an important dimension of the Church's educational and evangelising mission. It is carried out in particular through catechesis, liturgical celebrations, prayer groups, spiritual guidance and initiatives promoting Christian commitment. The document **The Presence of the Church in the University and in University Culture** (1994) recalls, in this regard, the importance of the Church's presence in the academic world and of dialogue with contemporary culture. Similarly, the *Directory for Catechesis* (Pontifical Council for Promoting the New Evangelisation, 2020) provides guidelines for the transmission of the faith that takes account of cultural contexts and people's needs. In **Christus vivit**, Pope Francis (2019) also emphasises the accompaniment of young people, their active participation in the life of the Church, and the need to take their aspirations and difficulties into account.

In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the Catholic Church plays a historic role in the field of education. Its involvement at various levels of education demonstrates its commitment to the formation of young people and the promotion of human and Christian values. In line with this, the National Episcopal Conference of Congo (CENCO), through its *Pastoral Guidelines for Universities and Higher Education Institutions in the DR Congo* (2013), provides a framework for those involved in university pastoral care. These guidelines emphasise the importance of organised pastoral work tailored to the realities of the university environment.

This study focuses in particular on La Sapiientia Catholic University in Goma, situated in North Kivu province, in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. In a regional context marked by social and security challenges, the issue of spiritual accompaniment deserves special attention. Catechesis and prayer groups can provide spaces for reflection on faith, listening, sharing and Christian growth. However, their actual contribution to the spiritual formation of students and staff must be examined on the basis of pastoral practices and the perceptions of those involved, rather than being assumed in advance.

This research is rooted in our experience of involvement in university pastoral care at the Sapiientia Catholic University of Goma since the 2016–2017 academic year. As researchers and those involved in student pastoral care, we aim to place this experience in dialogue with ecclesial guidelines and a scientific analysis of the practices observed. Our experiences serve here as a starting point for reflection, without superseding the methodological requirements of research.

Consequently, the main question guiding this study is as follows: how does catechesis contribute to the spiritual formation and faith accompaniment of students and staff at the Sapiientia Catholic University of Goma during the period 2016–2026?

The overall objective is to analyse the contribution of catechesis to spiritual formation and the nurturing of faith within this university community. More specifically, the aim is to describe the main catechetical activities organised, to examine how students and staff perceive their contribution to spiritual life, and to identify the opportunities and challenges involved in implementing them within the local context.

The value of this research is threefold. From a scholarly perspective, it contributes to reflection on the relationships between catechesis, integral formation and university pastoral care. From a pastoral perspective, it can help to better understand the spiritual needs of members of the university community. From an institutional perspective, it is likely to provide useful insights for improving pastoral support activities. The study therefore aims to examine, drawing on ecclesial references and available field data, the ways in which catechesis contributes, its limitations, and the conditions likely to foster a university pastoral ministry that is attentive to people's realities.

2. Methodology

This study adopts a descriptive and analytical approach based on documentary and testimonial evidence, supplemented by a descriptive quantitative analysis. It constitutes a case study focusing on the experience of catechesis and university pastoral care at the Sapientia Catholic University of Goma, in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. It aims to describe catechetical activities and to examine, on the basis of available documents and the testimonies gathered from, their perceived contribution to spiritual accompaniment and Christian formation in the university setting.

The study focuses on the Sapientia Catholic University of Goma and covers the period from the 2016–2017 academic year to the 2025–2026 academic year, corresponding to the statistical data presented in the institution's catechesis report.

The information is drawn from institutional and ecclesiastical documents relating to university pastoral care, available statistical data on catechumens and the sacraments received, as well as two written testimonies from members of the university staff who took part in the catechetical programme. The pastoral experience within the institution also contributes to the contextualisation of the study. The main methods employed are documentary analysis and the examination of testimonies.

The statistical data are presented using descriptive statistics, notably the annual numbers of catechumens and the breakdown of sacraments received. The testimonies are examined using a thematic approach, considering the participants' motivations, their spiritual journey and their perception of the benefits of catechesis in their personal and professional lives. The information gathered is then linked to the Church's guidelines on university pastoral care in order to identify the main lessons to be drawn from the experience studied.

The study is limited to a single institution and is based on a small number of testimonies. The experiences reported cannot therefore be generalised to the entire university population, nor are they sufficient to establish a causal link between catechesis and changes in behaviour. The use of testimonies by name complies with the consent of the individuals concerned and the applicable confidentiality requirements. The results are thus interpreted in light of the documentary, testimonial and descriptive nature of the research.

3. The situation in the academic world and at the university

Since the founding of Lovanium University, the Catholic episcopate has been concerned with evangelisation and spiritual guidance within the university environment. The development of other higher education institutions, notably in Lubumbashi and Kisangani, has reinforced the need for reflection on the organisation of university pastoral care. In this context, the Church has gradually sought to clarify the nature of its presence amongst students and other members of the academic community.

According to the bishops of Zaire (1972), the university environment was characterised in particular by the predominance of a secular organisation and by an emphasis on the values of nationalism. This historical analysis helps to explain the challenges the Church faced in its endeavour to maintain a dialogue between the Christian faith, culture and the country's socio-political realities.

The testimonies of certain chaplains and students reported in pastoral documents also highlight difficulties encountered in the academic environment, notably religious indifference, a decline in Christian practice, corruption, discrimination based on community affiliation, and abuses of power in relations between lecturers and students. These observations must, however, be contextualised and examined on the basis of verifiable data, in order to avoid any generalisations about all higher education institutions or academic stakeholders.

Pastoral documents also draw attention to the influences to which young people may be exposed during their university studies, particularly when their prior religious education has been limited or when their socio-economic circumstances make their academic journey more challenging. These situations highlight the need for spiritual guidance based on dialogue, discernment, respect for freedom of conscience and a better understanding of students' concerns.

It is nevertheless important to recognise the positive resources within the academic environment. Young people are characterised in particular by their capacity for learning, their creativity, their dynamism, their desire to participate in social change and their openness to dialogue. These potentialities provide a foundation for university pastoral care that prioritises listening, the formation of conscience and responsible commitment.

The Church's presence in the university environment is therefore of particular importance. The Congregation for Catholic Education, the Pontifical Council for the Laity and

the Pontifical Council for Culture (1994) emphasise that some students attend university without finding sufficient guidance there to reflect on the meaning of life, values and their future. University pastoral care is thus called upon to contribute to a holistic formation that takes into account the intellectual, ethical, human and spiritual dimensions of the person.

This mission does not concern students alone. It is also directed at lecturers, researchers, administrative and support staff, as well as others who participate in university life. It aims to foster an environment conducive to dialogue, solidarity, professional responsibility and the deepening of faith, whilst respecting everyone's convictions.

4. Mission and Purpose of University Pastoral Care

The university is an important setting for the Church's educational and evangelising mission. University pastoral care aims to make the Christian message present in the academic world and to foster dialogue between faith, science and culture. It accompanies members of the university community on their spiritual journey and helps them to integrate their religious convictions, their studies and their social responsibilities.

In the Apostolic Constitution **Ex corde Ecclesiae**, John Paul II (1990) states that university pastoral care offers members of the academic community the opportunity to integrate religious and moral principles into their studies and activities, in order to foster unity between faith and life (no. 38). It thus contributes to the specific mission of the Catholic university.

University pastoral care also has the mission of proclaiming the Gospel, supporting those who wish to deepen their faith, and offering guidance that respects freedom of conscience. It is therefore not limited to liturgical or catechetical activities, but encompasses all initiatives that contribute to integral formation, dialogue and commitment to the common good.

5. The Purpose of University Pastoral Care

The university is a privileged place for reflection, research and the exchange of ideas. It is also a space where fundamental questions are raised concerning existence, values, responsibility and the meaning of human commitment. For the Church, these realities represent opportunities for dialogue and for proclaiming the Gospel.

From a Christian perspective, university pastoral care pursues three complementary aims: to accompany those discovering the faith, to support those wishing to deepen their Christian commitment, and to strengthen the spiritual life of those whose faith is going through periods of fragility.

These aims are reflected in three main dimensions. The first is missionary: it consists of presenting the Gospel and fostering the discovery of the faith whilst respecting personal freedom. The second is pastoral: it aims to support believers in their spiritual journey and their participation in the life of the Church. The third concerns doctrinal and spiritual formation: it enables a deeper understanding of the faith and helps to guide personal, professional and social choices in the light of Christian values.

Ultimately, university pastoral care seeks to foster a personal appropriation of the principles of the Gospel and their application in daily life, whilst encouraging dialogue between religious convictions, scientific knowledge and the demands of social life.

6. The tasks of university pastoral care

The tasks of university pastoral care can be grouped into five complementary areas.

Firstly, the development of Christian life. This includes the preparation for and celebration of the sacraments, liturgical celebrations, spiritual retreats, days of reflection, prayer vigils and pilgrimages. Celebrations may also be organised to mark the opening and closing of the academic year or graduation ceremonies.

Secondly, the deepening of Christian culture. This can be achieved through theological lectures, seminars, round-table discussions, reflection groups and the provision of religious literature. These activities aim to foster a better understanding of the faith and to raise awareness within the university community of issues concerning the Church and society.

Thirdly, moral and ethical formation. This includes reflection on general and professional ethics, preparation for family and social life, as well as personal guidance. It aims to develop discernment, integrity, respect for human dignity and a sense of responsibility.

Fourthly, the promotion of apostolic and charitable engagement. University pastoral care encourages participation in Catholic movements and associations, collaboration with diocesan structures, solidarity initiatives and charitable works. It invites students to put their skills at the service of vulnerable people and the common good.

Fifthly, addressing human and material needs. Depending on available resources and identified needs, initiatives may be developed to direct students in difficulty towards support schemes, particularly regarding accommodation, study grants and one-off assistance.

Particular attention may also be paid to international students and students from different religious traditions. Welcoming them, listening to their needs and respecting their beliefs contribute to an open, supportive university community that is mindful of diversity.

7. Organisation of university pastoral care in the dioceses

The organisation of university pastoral care requires coordination between diocesan leaders, chaplains, academic authorities, lecturers, students and other members of the university community. Activities may include, in particular, periodic retreats, talks during Advent and Lent, liturgical celebrations and initiatives for ethical formation.

University education alone does not guarantee the acquisition of ethical skills or the exercise of responsible leadership. It is therefore appropriate to combine academic training with reflection on academic integrity, social responsibility and professional ethics.

The Congregation for Catholic Education, the Pontifical Council for the Laity and the Pontifical Council for Culture (1994) recommend that, in university towns, consultative bodies be established bringing together, in particular, Catholic priests, academics and students. Such bodies can advise the bishop, help to shape pastoral guidelines and promote the coordination of local initiatives with activities organised at national or international level.

8. University chaplaincies

A university chaplaincy is a structure providing spiritual and pastoral support for members of the university community. It may bring together students, lecturers, researchers and staff members through liturgical, catechetical, educational and charitable activities. Its organisation depends on the applicable ecclesiastical provisions and the guidelines of the competent diocesan authority.

University chaplaincies are a privileged means of making the Church's presence accessible within higher education institutions. Benedict XVI (2011) explicitly encourages bishops to promote the establishment of chaplaincies in universities and educational institutions, including public institutions (no. 138).

This guidance is in line with that of the Second Vatican Council (1965), which recommends the establishment of Catholic centres and groups within non-Catholic universities, in order to offer young people appropriate spiritual and intellectual support (no. 10). The aim is to support Christian

formation whilst enabling students to develop their capacity for reflection and discernment.

John Paul II (1990) also emphasises that university pastoral care must promote the integration of faith and life (no. 38). Movements and associations dedicated to spirituality and the apostolate can, in this regard, contribute to students' formation and their active participation in the life of the Church (no. 42).

From this perspective, the university chaplain carries out a mission of listening, accompaniment, teaching and pastoral leadership. He works in collaboration with the institution's management and other relevant stakeholders, whilst respecting freedom of conscience and the dignity of the person. Catholic groups and associations can complement this mission by fostering fraternity, solidarity and Christian commitment.

9. Introduction to the Sapientia Catholic University of Goma

La Sapientia Catholic University in Goma is situated in the city of Goma, the capital of North Kivu province, in the east of the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Its development forms part of an educational initiative launched by the Diocese of Goma to meet local needs in terms of religious, pastoral and academic training.

According to available historical records, the Goma Institute of Religious Sciences (ISRGO) was established in 2005 to train pastoral workers and religious education teachers. The evolution of this institution led to the creation of the La Sapientia Catholic Higher Institute, followed by the development of the La Sapientia Catholic University of Goma. These transformations reflect a desire to broaden the range of training on offer and to strengthen the skills necessary for the development of local communities (Nyirindekwe, 2021). In this context, the La Sapientia Catholic University of Goma provides a relevant framework for studying the relationships between academic education, spiritual guidance and the transmission of the faith. An analysis of its pastoral practices can contribute to a better understanding of the place of catechesis in university life and the possibilities for adapting spiritual guidance to the needs of students and other members of the academic community.

10. Developments in catechesis at Sapientia Catholic University in Goma from 2016 to 2026

No.	Year	Number of catechumens	Baptism	First communion	Confirmation
1	2016–2017	26	4	2	19
2	2017–2018	26	6	4	16
3	2018–2019	13	2	1	10
4	2019–2020	17	3	0	14
5	2020–2021	13	2	1	10
6	2021–2022	24	2	1	21
7	2022–2023	24	3	0	21
8	2023–2024	14	1	1	12
9	2024–2025	38	14	1	23
10	2025–2026	33	10	2	21
TOTAL		228	47	13	167

Source: Report on catechesis at Sapientia Catholic University in Goma from 2017 to 2026.

Looking at this table, we can see that it was 10 years ago that the university chaplaincy last provided catechesis. The total number of student catechumens who attended the instruction sessions was 228, of whom 47 were baptised, 13 received their First Communion and 167 received the sacrament of Confirmation.

In addition to the figures outlined above, there are students who were prepared for engagement and who received the sacrament of marriage. Staff members who had been living without religious sacraments were able to regularise their situation through the sacrament of marriage, and their children were baptised. Other young students were able to enter

seminaries to become nuns and priests in various congregations.



Image 1: Confirmation of a young assistant, Christian Bisimwa Mapendano, in 2023 by the Vicar General, Monsignor Henri Chiza Balumisa, current Rector of the Sapientia Catholic University of Goma.



Image 2: Blessing of rosaries by the Vicar General for the baptised young students.



Image 3: The anointing of the catechumens in 2024 by His Excellency Monsignor Willy Ngumbi Ngengele, Bishop of the Diocese of Goma and Grand Chancellor of La Sapientia Catholic University in Goma.



Image 4: The catechumen students wearing white robes after their baptism in 2024.



Image 5: The celebration of the sacrament of Baptism for students at the Catholic University of La Sapiencia in Goma in 2024 by His Excellency Bishop Willy Ngumbi Ngengele.



Image 6: Father Cléophas Khéni Butuka preparing students for confession.

11. Testimonials

Testimony 1

My name is Bisimwa Mapendano, and I am a teaching assistant at La Sapiencia Catholic University in Goma.

During my youth, I belonged to a Protestant community. It was whilst studying at Sapiencia Catholic University that I gained a deeper understanding of the Catholic Church, particularly through the weekly Eucharistic celebrations organised for students and university staff.

In 2023, driven by a desire to deepen my understanding of the Catholic faith, I undertook a catechetical programme alongside another teaching assistant and several students. This programme was organised by the university's chaplaincy service, under the guidance of Father Cléophas and Sister Daphrose. After a year of catechesis, I had the grace to receive the sacraments of the Eucharist and Confirmation. Having already been baptised in a Baptist church, I also benefited from the supplementary rites for baptism in accordance with the Catholic tradition.

Receiving these sacraments marked an important milestone in my spiritual journey. It enabled me to become more deeply rooted in the Catholic faith, to strengthen my relationship with God, and to live out my Christian commitment with greater conviction, serenity and perseverance.

Through this testimony, I wish to express my deep gratitude to La Sapiencia Catholic University, particularly its chaplaincy service, for its spiritual guidance and its commitment to the human and Christian formation of young people. In my view, my own journey stands as a living testimony to the fruits of this pastoral and educational mission within our university community.

Assistant BISIMWA MAPENDANO

Testimony 2

My name is Christian BAUMA KABATSI. I joined La Sapiencia Catholic University in Goma in 2021, initially as the focal point for the Sake campus; and subsequently as Central Usher at the Genèse campus in Goma, a role I still hold today.

As a member of the university's academic and administrative staff, I was aware that the university chaplaincy organised catechesis for the benefit of students; though this held little interest for me.

In 2023, a student asked me to be his godfather for his baptism. Unfortunately, I was unable to accept his request, as I had not yet received the sacrament of Confirmation. Looking back, I had received the sacrament of First Communion in 2009. Instead of completing the three sacraments of Christian initiation, I found myself on a different path.

In 2024, an announcement was made during Mass stating that those who were to undertake catechesis at the university would receive their sacraments at the university itself, rather than in their home parishes as had previously been the case.

Realising that I had been asked to be a godfather, I thought it would be a good idea to join the catechism programme at Sapientia Catholic University in Goma for Confirmation. I registered with Reverend Sister Daphrose, who strongly encouraged me. Having realised this, another fellow assistant joined the catechism programme for baptism. That same year, we received the graces of all the sacraments of Christian initiation.

We realised that the sacraments we had received had entrusted us with a mission: that of being witnesses to Christ wherever we are. Having served as an altar server for ten years, but unable to join the Catholic action groups at the parish due to our busy work schedules, I sought the grace to serve the Lord as a catechist at the university.

The university chaplain responded favourably to this request, not only by sending me on mission to assist at a Eucharistic celebration, but also by inviting pastoral leaders from the Diocesan Centre for Pastoral Care, Catechesis and Liturgy to provide us with training under the theme: 'Towards a maturity of faith'.

This is our second year accompanying students as catechists. We have come to realise that the sacramental context at university finds its meaning in the conversation between Jesus Christ and Nicodemus (John 3:1–21). For many students, the sacraments remain a mystery; one that God himself must reveal to his children through his servants.

Certainly, catechesis in the university setting has enabled me to deepen my faith and to better understand the Gospel within student and professional life. It is an opportunity to develop values such as honesty, respect, solidarity and a sense of responsibility.

Through sharing the Word of God and moments of prayer, I have learnt to reconcile my work with my Christian life. I also reconcile my studies with my Christian life.

In short, catechesis is also a community of fellowship that fosters mutual support amongst students and encourages each person to become the salt and light of the world, just as God asks of us.

Assistant: Christian BAUMA KABATSI

12. Pastoral Recommendations and Guidance

For the Church, the academic world is a privileged sphere for evangelisation. The mission of university pastoral care is to ensure the Church's presence in all universities and higher education institutions so that they may become places of witness, where Jesus Christ can be encountered and known, where one can live in his presence; places that reconcile science and the faith- ; places of research and discovery of the truth about humanity in relation to God. We therefore recommend that Bishops and provincial episcopal conferences:

- Establish chaplaincies, university parishes and Catholic university centres;
- Provide comprehensive training for pastoral workers in chaplaincies;
- Appoint competent university chaplains who possess the requisite qualities, are spiritually and psychologically sound, and are animated by an apostolic spirit.
- Provide the chaplaincy with genuine and substantial support and guarantee it appropriate funding and suitable premises.

Conclusion

University pastoral care refers to the specific work of the Church within the academic world. It aims to fulfil its evangelising mission amongst the entire university community, in particular students, the academic and scientific staff, administrative staff and support staff. It thus constitutes a privileged setting for the encounter between the Christian faith, intellectual formation and the socio-cultural realities of the academic environment.

Universities and higher education institutions represent important spaces for apostolate and evangelisation, in which the Church is called to contribute to the transformation of social and cultural life in the light of the Gospel. Authentic evangelisation, however, cannot be limited to the transmission of religious knowledge: it must take into account the history, social structures, aspirations and concrete realities of the people to whom it is addressed.

From this perspective, the Church's presence in the academic world forms part of the process of inculturation of the faith, which is an essential requirement of evangelisation. The

proclamation of the Gospel therefore requires Christian communities capable of conveying the Good News of Christ to those who study, teach, conduct research or carry out their duties within the university. This commitment is of particular importance, insofar as the university is a privileged setting for the production of knowledge, critical reflection and cultural creation (Congregation for Catholic Education et al., 1994, p. 25, no. 3).

Ultimately, university pastoral care, as part of the Church's overall pastoral care, requires close collaboration between priests, consecrated persons, the laity, the academic and scientific community, students, and administrative and support staff. Its effectiveness depends on the active participation of all these stakeholders, with a view to fostering the integral formation of the person, bringing together the intellectual, human, ethical and spiritual dimensions. It is thus called upon to contribute to the maturing of faith, the development of a sense of responsibility and the promotion of Gospel values within the university community.

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