

Emphasizing Forgiveness in SCCs in East Africa

By John Bosco Odongo, CM

Part I: My Experience in St. Jude Thaddeus Small Christian Community in Nairobi, Kenya on 25 January, 2015

SEE

Bible sharing and meeting of St. Jude Thaddeus Small Christian Community (SCC), Ruben Outstation of St. Mary's Parish Mukuru (at Mukuru Slums), Archdiocese of Nairobi, Kenya. Language used was a mixture of Swahili and English for the few members who newly joined this Small Christian Community and did not know Kiswahili. At Mr. Wandera Samuel's home there were 30 participants: 12 men and 18 women. The ethnic groups are mixed (Luo, Kamba, Kikuyu, Luhya, and so forth). The reading used was the gospel of the following Sunday (Fourth Sunday of Ordinary Time, 1 February, 2015). This Gospel was from *Mark* 1:21b-28 ("The Man with an Unclean Spirit"). Two verses were cited. 20 *Bible* reflections were given. 18 Petitions ("Prayer of the Faithful"). The *Bible* reflections were given by 12 women and 8 men. There was a song at the beginning of the *Bible* reflection (*Tukipenda Wenzetu kati Yetu Mungu Yupo*, a Swahili song) The Gospel was read two times with a short silence in between. The person who coordinated the program called upon Mr. Wandera to welcome people into his house and say the intentions of the prayers on behalf of his family. Each member of the SCC of St. Jude Thaddeus was called upon to say his/her intention too. This would be put together before God when they would be praying together as one family of God.

The reflections were not deep. A member brought to the attention of the members that the wife of Mr. Moses Ambale was sick and needed the immediate attention of the group as a way of showing love. She was admitted at Kenyatta Hospital. Two members of this SCC were not talking to each other for over six months now, and they couldn't do any task together no matter how serious the duty assigned to them was. These were Mr. Benson and Mr. Wilfred. There was a need to set up a date for their monthly recollection on that very day. Members were asked to think of what date was appropriate for it and decide on the topic to be handled by the recollection master. They were also to think of how they could help the poor in their neighborhood. Finally they were to discuss how to get the amount of money asked of them for the *Harambee* of the school and the car of the priest. The real figure was to be gotten from the chairperson of the outstation the following Sunday, 1 February 2015.

JUDGE

Very little time was given for silence in between the *Bible* readings to reflect on what the Lord was telling individuals and the group. The group is highly united. They love each other in times of peace and sorrow. They are able to come together and help the needy among them convinced God is calling them to do so. They are convinced that God has called them to live together as a family. They openly with light spirit bring their troubles to share with the group and work out solutions together. The members are free with each other. They listen genuinely, actively and consciously to each other. Some of them seem not to be well versed

with the culture of the group since they are new in the group. The leaders are good people, respectable, loving to all, working well with all the ethnic groups. They are servants of all.¹ They did not manage time well. The children were very tired at the end and lost interest. However, this SCC is a good example of a new way of being Church.²

ACT

The members decided to go to visit Christine, the wife of Mr. Moses Ambale at Kenyatta Hospital on Tuesday at 2 p.m. Each member was to contribute 50 shillings each to buy medicine for Christine at hospital. I challenged them to have silence in between scripture readings since it would help them come up with what God is speaking to them. Moreover, silence is prayer; it is listening to God. A committee of four people was set to hear the case of the members who were not talking to each other and to solve it on Thursday and let the group know how they solved the issue. The date for recollection was set to be 9 March 2015 and the venue would be Resurrection Gardens. The recollection master would be one of the seminarians from DePaul (either Michael Gichoho, CM or John Bosco Odongo, CM). The theme for the recollection would be “forgiveness”. They agreed to be giving a contribution of 40 Kenya shillings every month to help the poor in their neighborhood.

Part II: Emphasizing Forgiveness in SCCs in East Africa: Selected Concrete Specific Cases in Uganda, Kenya and Tanzania

In Kenya here I have been to many SCCs³ within the slums of Saboti (Mt. Elgon Area) in Western Kenya; Mukuru slums; Kibera slums; Thigio Parish in Limuru; and Kamulu Parish in Embakasi over the last eight years of my seminary formation. In Uganda I have been to most of the Small Christian Communities in Lira Roman Catholic Diocese, Christ the King Teboke Parish, St. Mary’s Outstation: SCCs of Alica, Abongokere, Akaoidebe, Abeibuti, Amwak, and Anyinganyinga. In Tanzania, I have been to Epiphany Parish, Masanga among the Kuria people. In all of the above places in East Africa I had pastoral experiences that left me with questions as to whether members of the Small Christian Communities are able to forgive as Jesus did or not. So in most of my apostolic activities among the Christians in the Small Christian Communities, I decided to create an environment where they would talk freely about how they would respond to the following texts of Holy Scripture:

Matthew 6:12, 14-15⁴:

6:12: And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors;

6:14: For if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father also will forgive you;

6:15: but if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses. Luke 23:34: “...Jesus said, “Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do...”

¹Cf. Ukweli Video, Kenya Conference of Catholic Bishops, “The Church in the Neighborhood”, DVD.

²Cf. J.G. HEALEY, *Building the Church as Family of God*, 125.

³SCCs are being used to mean Small Christian Communities.

⁴Mainly the Biblical references will be taken from the *Revised Standard Version* unless otherwise stated.

Acts 7:60: St. Stephen "... knelt down and cried with a loud voice, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them..."

To drive the point home, I have always given an example and a question to the members of the Small Christian Communities saying: "Supposing after the meeting of the Small Christian Community immediately someone comes and tell you that he or she has caught your husband or wife with another sexual partner in your marital bed. Would you kneel down and say **"Father, forgive them for they know not what they do?"** This seems to be the easiest statement to say but very difficult to put into praxis. I realized this from the reactions of the Christians at the above SCCs. The responses has been these way: "Brother, I will first kill the other person cheating on me...and then I can forgive,"⁵ "Oh, Brother, I will not have time to reason to tell you the truth, it is very difficult to forgive in this situation. For me, I will just take up my luggage and go home. I cannot tolerate nonsense. It is impossible."⁶ "Forgiving in this sense is extremely difficult *Fratelli*"⁷, "It is not easy to forgive in the case of adultery for sure. I don't want to pretend, Brother"⁸ "Ah...only Jesus can forgive in this case because he is God..."⁹"Wow...wow...wow...it is impossible to forgive..."¹⁰ I cannot even believe such forgiveness can happen in our time.¹¹

At St. Jude Thaddeus, I was challenged by a lady who said she can easily forgive. She narrated a story of how she forgave those who robbed them at night and up to now the thieves themselves fear her and her husband. They forgave them and left them like that without any accusation but they told them they will appeal to God only. According to her this has made them prosper in a lot of things within the slums of Mukuru.¹²The above responses made me to think deeply on whether the gospel values has really sunk in our people or whether it is just difficult or even impossible to forgive. Indeed it is difficult but it is possible to forgive. This is because if we ask God to give us his grace, he will grant to us so that we will be able to forgive. For with God nothing will be impossible (*Luke 1:37*). Certain gospel values are impossible for human beings but for God it is possible. Jesus said "...with God all things are possible" (cf. *Matthew 19:26*). Moreover, forgiveness is essential for Christian living. Joyce Myer once said "do yourself a favor and forgive"¹³. Thus, when you forgive, you are not actually helping the one who has hurt you but yourself.¹⁴

Forgiveness still stands out as a criterion for our Christian way of life today. If one is not able to forgive it becomes quite difficult to know whether one really follow the commands of Jesus to love and even to pray and bless those who persecute him or her.¹⁵According to St. John Paul II "there can be no peace without justice, no justice without

⁵T. WALUBELLA, "The Difficulty of Forgiveness", Skype conversation with the author.

⁶T. GESANDA, "Forgiveness", Personal notes; see also T. Walubella, "The Difficulty of Forgiveness", Skype conversation with the author.

⁷*Fratelli* is the word being used frequently by the Christians at Masanga in Tanzania to mean "brother." This was used by T. GESANDA, "Forgiveness", Personal notes.

⁸J. AWINO, "Forgiveness impossible", personal notes.

⁹G. OPIO, "Forgiveness" Personal notes.

¹⁰ J. KARIUKI, "Unforgiveness and Suspicion in 2008", personal notes.

¹¹Cf. J. AWINO, "Forgiveness impossible", personal notes.

¹²Cf. M. OKELLO, "Forgiveness in Small Christian communities in East Africa", phone call.

¹³T. MORRIT, "Joyce Myer on forgiveness", Phone call.

¹⁴Cf. D. OWERA, "Forgiveness and its effects", personal notes.

¹⁵Cf. T. MORRIT, "Joyce Myer on forgiveness", Phone call.

forgiveness.”¹⁶ Moreover, for Mother Teresa of Calcutta (1910-1997) “if we really want to love, we must learn to forgive.”¹⁷

During the Post-election violence in Kenya (the months of January and February, 2008) many Christians participated in the killings and hatred and failure to forgive. Many Small Christian communities were shut down in Mukuru slums because tribalism couldn't be dealt with by the members. There were suspicion, hatred, revenge and violence of various forms. These and many other reasons affected the normal functioning of the Small Christian Communities. The Kenya Catholic bishops said “we must now acknowledge this, turn to God and beg His mercy and forgiveness. We have failed to love one another”.¹⁸ Our God is merciful and forgiving hence we ought to forgive one another as he had done to us (*Psalm 86; Ephesians 4:25-32*)¹⁹. Jesus even went ahead to stress the need to forgive “seventy times seven” (*Matthew 18:22*). Thus, forgiveness is indeed a necessity for us Christians in our different Small Christian Communities. It is important to reflect on this every time of our lives to make the teachings and actions of Christ regarding forgiveness sink deep into our hearts and lives and become our mark of existence.²⁰

Concluding, if St. Stephen was able to do as Jesus did, then we can do the same. God's grace will see us through. We must keep on trying every day. With Christ, we will conquer.²¹

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¹⁶Kenya Episcopal Conference Commission, “Forgiveness”, 5.

¹⁷ Kenya Episcopal Conference Commission, “Forgiveness”, 4.

¹⁸Cf. J. KARIUKI, “Unforgiveness and Suspicion in 2008”, Personal notes; see also Kenya Episcopal Conference Commission, “Forgiveness”, 1.

¹⁹ Cf. Kenya Episcopal Conference Commission, “Forgiveness”, 1, 3.

²⁰Cf. J. AMAJI, “Forgiveness”, Skype conversation.

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