

Small Christian Communities (SCCs) as New Way of Being Church in Africa

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1. Introduction

The Church, understood etymologically, as an assembly of people called together, is “One” but is organized or subdivided in a hierarchical call way starting from the biggest assemblies which are the archdioceses to the smallest assembly, the family, which is the cell of the Church. Going upwards in the organization of the Church, after the family comes the small Christian community: the Small Christian Community (SCC) is formed of families. The 1994 First African Synod of bishops insisted on the importance of the small Christian communities (SCCs) due to their contribution in living out the teaching of the Gospel and said that the small Christian communities are a new way of being Church.

This paper, following from the point made by the bishops at the synod, on what concern small Christian communities, intends to investigate on the Small Christian Communities as a new way of being Church in the African continent.

2. The Small Christian Communities (SCCs) as new way of being Church in Africa

2.1. Background of the understanding of the SCCs as new way of being Church

It was during the first synod for Africa that the small Christian communities came to be suggested as a new way of being church in Africa. The Bishops came back, again and again to the SCCs as the way of being Church, which means that we must divide our parishes and our communities into small groups where people can come together and share their lives together and read the Gospels together and ask themselves together about the will of Jesus to their lives. And so everyone can deepen his Christian faith. The bishops made it clear that together as community the people can join what they believe to what they live in the SCC. Within it, they can become active and participate in the life of the Church because they develop new ministries, lay ministries, ministry of catechesis, ministry of reconciliation, ministry to marriages, ministry to healing, ministry to the poor, ministry of justice within the Christian community and outside it.¹ Arguing in the same line of thought with the African bishops McGarry and his friends note that:

The Small Christian Communities predated the fruit of the renewed ecclesiology of Vatican II (1962-1965). The first small communities began to appear already in 1956 in Brazil, six years before the opening of Vatican II and in statements of the Catholic Bishops in DRC in 1961. Certainly after Vatican II Small Christian Communities were seen all over the world as presenting an ideal way of being the church in the way the council had envisaged. They were recognized as the work of the Holy Spirit leading the members of the Catholic Church into all truth, as Christ has promised.’’²

2.2. Understanding the SCCs as New way of being Church in Africa

In the past thirty years the Spirit has shown a new way of being church in the movement of SCCs. These vary from place to place but have certain features that are common.³ As the name implies, they are small so that people can really come to know one another and establish supportive relationships, in contrast to the rather impersonal links among people that are common in parish communities. According to the pastoral Constitution to the Synod for Africa

¹ Cf. C. MCGARRY, P. RYAN, *With the Dogmatic Constitution Lumen Gentium*, 265

² Cf. MCGARRY, R. MEJIA, V. SHIRIMA, *A Light on our path, A Pastoral contribution to the Synod for Africa*, 134.

³ Cf. C. MCGARRY, R. MEJIA, V. SHIRIMA, *A Light on our path, A Pastoral contribution to the Synod for Africa*, 134.

the SCCs are: “centered on the word of God, read or studied in the actual context of the members’ lives, and prayer, with the celebration of the Eucharist when possible; pastoral service and a conscious effort to live the demands of the Gospel characterize them.”⁴ Many SCCs try to address the reality of peoples’ lives in order to find creative responses that will liberate them, allowing them to be more truly themselves and more free for service to others. Such service builds the community.

Following from what is said above; the fact that SCCs can be called a new way of being the church in Africa is not an irrational fact. Some facts may justify this: the Small Christian communities can be recognized and evaluated. Firstly, they meet in their homes. Solidarities usually meet in the Church or hall. The members of Small Christian communities meet on neighborhood basis and usually rotate their place of gathering so that each has a turn in hosting the group. The meetings need to be held on a regular basis, you cannot form community by meeting once a year, usually they meet once a week, or once a fortnight.⁵ Here the small Christian community is seen as Family of God (*Ujamaa*).⁶

Secondly, the basis of their meeting is Gospel sharing. Through common reflection and sharing they meet the person of Jesus Himself. They become ever more aware of the presence of the risen Lord in their midst and each other. This regular sharing on the Word leads them into a personal relationship with Christ who truly is the foundation of their community.⁷

Thirdly, the members of a Small Christian Community look to one another’s needs. They see that the lonely, sick and impoverished of their neighborhood experience the caring love of the Lord through His disciples. They are involved in the affairs of their locality, as they wish to put into practice the love they have received from Christ through one another.⁸

Fourthly, each Small Christian Community is in unity with the Universal Church. Visits are made between the communities. They take turns in preparing and leading the Sunday liturgy. They sometimes meet to work or discuss together. Also, each community is in close contact with the central parish. They have a representative on the Pastoral council. They engage in the training and join others for days of recollection and prayer. The full time pastoral ministers regularly visit the small communities so as to strengthen their ties with the parish as whole and

⁴ Cf. MCGARRY, R. MEJIA, V. SHIRIMA, *A Light on our path, A Pastoral contribution to the Synod for Africa*, 134.

⁵ Cf. A. PRIOR, OFM, *Towards a Community Church, the Way ahead for today’s Parish*, 27.

⁶ Cf. ONWUBIKO O., *The Church in mission, in the light of Ecclesia in Africa*, 29.

⁷ Cf. A. PRIOR, OFM, *Towards a Community Church, the Way ahead for today’s Parish*, 27.

⁸ Cf. A. PRIOR, OFM, *Towards a Community Church, the Way ahead for today’s Parish*, 27.

the Universal Church. The Church as a communion of the communities is an ideal which will never be fully achieved. However, like the Christian challenge to love and forgive, it remains as a guiding star on which we set our sights. It is also a standard by which we can measure all our pastoral programs.⁹

In these descriptions, many aspects of the renewed ecclesiology of Vatican II are present and can become a living reality in the communities which, in their turn become a true expression of the church at its most basic level. The communities are ecclesial: they are not an alternative to the church; they exist in the church and for the church, as a leaven to ferment it, as salt to give it savor. Nor do they conceive themselves as an elite within the church but rather as people who try to live their Christian life as fully as possible, knowing that they share responsibility for the life and mission of the church.¹⁰

2.3. Sacraments in the life of the SCCs: new way to transformation

An important aspect of the apostolate of Church in general is the celebration of sacraments. A new way of being church cannot overlook the sacramental aspect. The small Christian communities prove to be the new way of being church also in the fact that the sacraments are conferred to the believers with the recommendation, if not the approval of the SCC. This is another aspect which marks the small Christian communities as new way of being church. In fact, SCCs have the responsibility to recommend its members to receive the sacraments. Catholic parents who want their children to be baptized need a letter of recommendation from their SCC. Some of the preparations for sacraments take place in the SCCs itself, for example, preparing children for the first communion.¹¹

The contribution of small Christian communities in the preparation of the faithful to the celebration and reception of sacraments is witnessed in various ways. For instance, in the Diocese of Goma in the Democratic Republic of Congo DRC), some SCCs have started the Ministry of Accompanying the Adult Catechumens. SCCs choose a member of the SCC to accompany him or her through the stages of the Christian Initiation of Adults. The catechumen is invited to participate in all the activities of the SCC. In fact, as Healey notes, “Personal

⁹ Cf. A. PRIOR, OFM, *Towards a Community Church, the Way ahead for today's Parish*, 27.

¹⁰ Cf. C. MCGARRY, R. MEJIA, V. SHIRIMA, *A Light on our path, A Pastoral contribution to the Synod for Africa*, 134.

¹¹ Cf. J. G. HEALEY, MM, *Building the Church as Family of God: Evaluation of SCCs in Eastern Africa*, 131.

relationships and friendships are an important part of helping people who are preparing for baptism to feel at home in their local Christian community. Growth in faith is an experience of living in a believing community.”¹² Sometimes the whole SCC accompanies its catechumens, an example of community ministry. Here, all the SCC members are responsible for the spiritual and pastoral life of their own small community. This approach is closely related to the African values of community, joint responsibility, “togetherness” and sharing.¹³

More than helping in the preparation to the celebration of sacraments, some of the sacraments are celebrated in the SCC especially the Eucharist, the sacrament of Reconciliation, the sacrament of Baptism, the sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick and the sacrament of Matrimony. The celebration of these sacraments makes the SCCs to express their identity in Africa as a new way of being Church. A serious on-going challenge for SCCs is to help many of their members to regularize their marriages in a Catholic ceremony. Many SCCs have a campaign to help their members to overcome some of the main stumbling blocks such as to finalize the dowry and raise money for the expenses of the marriage celebration.¹⁴

2.4. Small Christian Communities and testimony of life

The Word of God proclaimed in the Church is meant to transform the life of the believers. Small Christian Communities have proved to be the new way of being church by involving the average members of the parish in the task of transforming the local situation in the Spirit of Christ. The meditation of the Gospel in the small communities can easily link faith and life. It is in these small communities that the average person will more readily speak about the inhuman conditions they experience, and it is these very neighborhood communities which can try to do something themselves about problems as they arise. This makes us to say with Onwumbiko that: “community per se, in African spirit, is built on the principles of familyhood, sharing, togetherness, known in East Africa as *ujamaa*.”¹⁵

The value of fraternal communion which marked the first communities of Christians as described in *Acts 4:32* set a good example to be followed by the small Christian communities if they have

¹² Cf. J. G. HEALEY, MM, *Building the Church as Family of God: Evaluation of SCCs in Eastern Africa*, 131.

¹³ Cf. “Faith ‘Caught’ Rather Taught”, Story No. 64 in the African Stories Database,” African Proverbs, Sayings and Stories Website: <http://www.afriprov.org/African-stories-database> retrieved on 10th February, 2015.

¹⁴ Cf. Servant of God Cardinal Maurice Otunga liked to give the example of the SCC in Nairobi Archdiocese that donated the bride’s wedding dress.

¹⁵ Cf. O. A. ONWUBIKO, *African Thought, Religion and Culture*, Enugu, Snaap press, 7.

to be the new way of being Church. In fact, as the text reads: “The whole group of believers was united, heart and soul; no one claimed for their own use anything that they had, as everything they owned was held in common.” (*Acts 4:32*)¹⁶ Where small communities fall into the danger of being merely administrative units or mere prayer groups, the parish should seek ways of developing them beyond that stage.

3. The Church as Family and the Small Christian Communities (SCCs)

The SCCs, a new way of being the church, incarnate in the church the support which arises from the joy of belonging to a family. Since the Christian life is human life, by necessity it takes place in the context of family. Acts of solidarity, an expression of Christian charity, are occurring in exemplary fashion in these communities.¹⁷

The church models herself as family. She must work so that the family as the domestic church might reflect the Holy Family, where total self-giving for each other is marked by respect, openness to others and collaboration (Cf. Mt 2:13-14, 19-23). Couples and the family require particular attention. Traditional marriage sometimes obliges Christians to live on the periphery of Christian communities. By nature, the question of Christian couples affects the family.

The understanding of the Church as family is a fruit of the First African Synod. When we talk of family in Africa the following elements readily come to mind: unity, solidarity, participation and co-responsibility; family-based and centered education, fecundity; the family as a place where life is welcomed, nurtured and revered; shared in common with the living and the being together, fraternity, mutual aid, trust, reconciliation through rites; non-gender based respect for age, tradition and authority; and hospitality.¹⁸ When translated into the model of the Church these positive values offer us a living, vibrant and promising ecclesiology of the church as family.¹⁹

The fathers at the synod outline a theology of the church as family which, for practical purposes, could be treated on three basic levels. According to them:

¹⁶ Southern African Catholic Bishops' Conference, *We are the Church*, 6.

¹⁷Cf. The First African Synod, Pope's Opening Homily Message of the AMECEA and IMBISA Bishops, 21.

¹⁸Cf. C. MCGARRY, SJ, J. CARRENO MXY, et alii, *What Happened at the African Synod?*, 36.

¹⁹Cf. C. MCGARRY, SJ, J. CARRENO MXY, et alii, *What Happened at the African Synod?*, 37.

“the first level is the doctrinal level. In an analogical way we sometimes speak of God as family, that is the Trinitarian Family: Father, Son and the Holy Spirit. This family is a mystery of unity and of communion in diversity... and the second level is scriptural. The commandment to love one another, all men and women (John 13:34; 15:12)”²⁰.

This injunction is echoed and concretely applied to life in the “way the Africans understand and live community life (and) perceive family life. Therefore, the model of the church as family emerging from this African internalization of the love of God and neighbor is that of a church constituted by unconditional love, and not by the walls of the house. The third aspect is situated at the level of an African understanding of the Eucharist. The Eucharist meal is the centre of unity, a place of gathering of the children of God. From the African perspective, the church as family receives its fundamental identity in the Eucharist not only because it is a sharing in the Body and Blood of Christ, and in the life of the family, but because it constitutes the centre around which the family gathers in order to evoke its ancestral memories.”²¹

The idea of the church as family is a new teaching for us which, all indications, bears profound consequences for life of the African church. on this point the synod fathers deserve special commendation for highlighting the numerous pastoral implication, adaptations and applications of the model of church as family. Let us consider some of these: The church as family is Home to all co-members; the church as family is Universal and Blessed with Diversity; the church as family is lived in the SCCs; it is celebrated in the Christian family and it is the place of Dialogue.²²

5. Conclusion

This paper has discussed the small Christian communities as new way of being the church. It has brought it to the surface that the SCC are a new way of being church because they are self ministering. They involve all the members in forming a community of faith and contribute in bringing home the lost ship. The Small Christian Communities are a place where the Gospel is meditated and lived, the sacraments are celebrated and lived and the life of the

²⁰ Cf. C. MCGARRY, SJ, J. CARRENO MXY, et alii, *What Happened at the African Synod?*, 38.

²¹ Cf. C. MCGARRY, SJ, J. CARRENO MXY, et alii, *What Happened at the African Synod?*, 39.

²² Cf. C. MCGARRY, SJ, J. CARRENO MXY, et alii, *What Happened at the African Synod?*, 39.

church is experienced. It is the Church found in the Small Christian community and the family that makes the parish.

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