

**TANGAZA COLLEGE
THE CATHOLIC UNIVERSITY OF EASTERN AFRICA**

**Practicum on St. Bonaventure Small Christian Community in
Zambia and Reflection on the Pastoral Response to the Issue of
Single Parent Families in the Catholic Church**

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Introduction

The first part of this paper is the practicum on St. Bonaventure Small Christian Community (*citente/icitente* means Small Christian Community in Bemba, the most spoken local language in Zambia. It is a group largely composed of professionals, that is, skilled workers and it is thus called young professionals. I chose this group based on Activity No. 5 of the “Checklist of 16 Common Activities of Small Christian Communities (SCCs) in Africa Today.” Activity No. 5 is concerned with a special SCC that addresses various topics ranging from the *Bible* to church matters to social issues.¹ St. Bonaventure SCC is organized on the said principle. It is worth noting that the practicum will follow the ‘see, judge and act’ method of the pastoral spiral.

Meanwhile, the second part of the paper is a reflection on the issue of ‘single parent families.’

Part I -- Practicum

1. Concrete Experience: ‘See’

St. Bonaventure SCC is a special group of a faith-sharing community of Immaculate Heart of Mary Parish from Kapiri Mposhi in the diocese of Kabwe, Zambia. It is called special because it was formed to cater to the needs of young adults who feel out of place to belong to a SCC composed of adolescents (14-20) and those of adults aged 40 and beyond. Hence, the members of St. Bonaventure SCC are between the ages of 21 and 36, and most of them are unmarried. They meet every Sunday from 2:30 pm to 3:30 pm. The meeting I attended was held on 14 August, 2016 during my pastoral assignment. As of 14 August 2016, registered members were 20 and those in attendance were 13: 8 women and 5 men. The agenda was as follows:

- i. Opening prayer
- ii. Welcoming remarks and introductions
- iii. Faith Sharing on single parent families
- iv. Sunday offering
- v. Participation in Diocesan Youth Day/membership fees
- vi. Roll call
- vii. Closing remarks and Prayer

It is worth stating that the topic of faith sharing on this day was ‘single parent mothers.’ Nine people (6 women, 3 men) participated in this discussion using English and Bemba.

¹ J. G. HEALEY, *Building the Church as Family of God*, updated 3 January, 2017, p. 659. <<http://bit.ly/2ks8EWC>> Accessed: 29/01/17.

2. Evaluation: ‘Judge’

Generally, St. Bonaventure SCC is well-organized and the meeting was conducted systematically and actively. However, two shortfalls are worth noting. The first one is that the members seemed to have been in a hurry to finish the business of the day. For this reason, the sharing on the topic of the day was too quick and shallow. In addition, the members did not consult any pastoral document, the *Bible* or authority of the church during the discussion. The second observation is that the members were apparently more concerned with item ‘v’ on the agenda and on the finances of the SCC than on other pertinent issues such as faith sharing.

3. Recommendations: ‘Act’

As noted above, St. Bonaventure SCC does not only share on scripture but also on other vital matters of life. Owing to this fact, I would recommend that whenever they are discussing social issues such as abortion they need to be familiar with the moral and social teachings of the church in these matters. This then necessitates the guidance of the parish priest or another person vested in church teachings during discussions of the said issues so as to prevent unorthodox sentiments. Secondly, the SCC needs to find another suitable day of meeting or increase time so as to avoid rushing through the program.

Part II -- Pastoral Response to Single Parent Families

1. Introduction

One of the fastest growing challenges facing the Catholic Church today is single parent families or what is been called alternative family models opposed to the husband, wife and children family setting. Single parent family is a family that is headed by one spouse, that is a man or woman. The concern to reflect on this issue was influenced by the topic ‘single mothers’ that was shared by the St. Bonaventure SCC on 14 August, 2016 as noted earlier in Part I. As a matter of fact, it came up during the sharing that the majority of the members of St. Bonaventure are single parents who had children without getting married. Against this backdrop, this reflection will discuss the causes and challenges of single parents and the pastoral response to this issue.

2. Causes of Single Parenthood

There are several causes of single parenthood in the church and society at large. Some of these reasons were discussed at St. Bonaventure SCC’s meeting that related to death of a spouse and separation or divorce of spouses. However, the majority of single parents at St. Bonaventure SCC are those who had children through cohabitation and casual premarital relationships. Others, particularly women, deliberately choose to have children outside

marriage and are apparently comfortable being single parents owing to the abuses they faced in their past relationships.²

3. Challenges of Single Parents

In line with the discussion of the members of St. Bonaventure *jumuiya*, single parents especially single mothers face pastoral, financial, social and cultural challenges. In respect to pastoral challenges, some parish priests are reported to forbid single parents, mainly those who have children through premarital relationships, from being godparents. Others prohibit singles parents from taking up leadership roles on account of their compromised religious standing. In some isolated instances, it is observed that single parents are refused the sacrament of Holy Communion because of having contravened the 6th commandment and are still perceived to be in the state of sin.³

In connection to the foregoing, single parents face social and cultural stigma since it is still a taboo in certain parts of African for one to have children before the right time for marriage. Actually, such a person is seen as a disgrace to the family, and as a result they are sidelined from important family activities like instructing initiates during initiation ceremonies, i.e. puberty for girls. Finally, single parents notably women encounter financial burdens in regard to feeding and educating their kids since they lack the support of their spouses and usually families reject them.

4. Pastoral Response

The *Bible* does not have explicit references to single parents. However, several texts in the *Old Testament* talk about God's love for the plight of orphans, widows and the poor in general, i.e. Psalm 68:5. In imitating God's compassion, the church has to a certain degree assisted single parents by incorporating them in public worship, social support and other ecclesial functions. On the contrary, it is also true that the church has showed strong a stance on single parents, particularly those who have conceived outside marriage, as presented in the pastoral challenges facing single parents such as being turned away from Holy Communion.

To avert this *status quo*, Pope Francis has reiterated the need to channel the unfettered mercy of God to the ailing members of the church through the sacrament of reconciliation and genuine reincorporation into ecclesial life. This is not to say that the pope is undermining the sanctity of marriage by being sympathetic to single parents especially those who fornicated. Rather, through the pope's quest to reincorporate these persons, he is implicitly promoting the inviolable value of marriage. How is this possible?

In the document of the III Extraordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops in 2014 known as the *Lineamenta* (document released in preparation for the synod of bishops)

²ANTHONIA M. E - AGAPETUS A. B, "The Social and Religious Challenges of Single Mothers in Nigeria," p. 242.

³ MUKUKA, S., "Pastoral Impact of Single Mothers, personal notes.

on the challenges of the family, the church notes the need to create a new family ministry that looks at the needs not only of married people but also single parents (*III Extraordinary General Assembly*, 25). This comes in the wake of many young people and others who have distrust for marriage commitments and hence are opting to stay single or cohabit. Concerning these people, “the church has the responsibility of helping them understand the divine pedagogy of grace in their lives and offering them assistance so they can reach the fullness of the God’s plan for them” (*III Extraordinary General Assembly*, 24).

In order to realize this noble responsibility, it follows that the church needs to create a special ministry for single parents. This is a ministry that will help single parents to understand the sanctity of marriage, and the need to either enter marriage or dedicate oneself as a single parent to the Christian calling. Like any other ecclesial ministry, single parenthood ministry should be tasked to conduct seminars, retreats, prayer meetings and social events. As a special ministry, it should also offer pastoral counselling and if circumstances suggest economical support for poor parents. This ministry can be launched at both the diocese and parish levels. A parish form of single parents’ ministry has been formed in some parishes in western countries such as “The Mission of the Catholic Single Parents Association” at St. Thomas More Parish in Austin Diocese, USA.⁴ This association provides emotional, practical, and social support in a faith-based setting to a diverse group of men and women who are divorced, widowed, separated, never married, or are otherwise functioning as single parents.⁵ Associations of this kind can be very helpful to St. Bonaventure SCCs members in regard to making them feel part of the church and to assist them to value marriage or to live faithfully and fruitfully as single Christians.

5. Conclusion

The urgency to respond to the needs of single parents through the aforementioned ministry proves more necessary and paramount today. The case of the growing number of single parents at St. Bonaventure SCC is only a fraction of the greater number elsewhere in other Small Christian Communities and in the parish at large. It is thus envisioned that single parents’ ministry would actually provide stable spiritual and moral support to single parents and in the end reorient the intention of those who deliberately opt to cohabit or have children in premarital affairs towards the sacrament of marriage.

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⁴ ST. THOMAS MORE CATHOLIC CHURCH, *Catholic Single Parents*, <<http://bit.ly/2jWA8H5>> Accessed 29/01/2017.

⁵ Ibid.

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