

Prayer in a Small Christian Community: A New Way to Build and Live the Catholic Church in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC)

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I. INTRODUCTION

The main role of the Catholic Church is to announce the Kingdom of God to the people of God. In this text I am going to share with you about a group of lay people in Our Lady of Africa Parish in Goma Diocese in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) who through the charism of the Assumptionist Congregation pray together and give testimony in their life for the glory of God. This is a Small Apostolic Group that call themselves the Lay Assumptionists Community. They use a new way of being the church that helps them to be active in their Christian life and transform themselves. This Small Apostolic Group is like a Small Christian Community (SCC). It also works closely with the local neighborhood (geographical) Small Christian Community in the parish. Two themes constitute the body of this text: *Bible* Sharing in the Lay Assumptionists Community (as a SCC) and the celebration of the sacrament of Baptism in the Lay Assumptionists Community.

II. THE BIBLE SHARING IN THE LAY ASSUMPTIONISTS COMMUNITY (as a SCC)

The *Bible* says that the Word of God is heart food (*1 Peter* 2: 2). In the same way, the prophet Amos says: “Your mouth should not be alone in taking nourishment; your ears also should hunger for the Word of God” (*Amos* 8: 11). We have to nourish our heart also not only the flesh. Three big points are going to help us in this exercise: *To See* (be near the group for understanding better their life); *To Judge* (analyze what we have seen in order to be able to give solutions afterwards) and *To Act* (when we have understood the issue, we can act by giving good ideas for the good of the group)

1. See

Life of Lay Assumptionists

Assumptionists are a religious congregation who were founded by Honorable Father Emmanuel D’Alzon in France (Nimes) in 1845 for welcoming the Kingdom of God in the hearts of members and around them through their lives in serving God. This congregation has many collaborators among them the Lay Assumptionists. This group has as mission to participate as lay people in the charism of the Assumptionists by prayer and acting for people in the name of God. Some are in Assumptionists’ works (schools, radios, etc.) while others have their own businesses, but all have in mind to serve God through other people. “For Father Emmanuel D’Alzon, the lay Assumptionist spends more time in the world doing activities close to people. For that it is easy for him to announce the Reign of God through his activities.”¹

The Prayer of Lay Assumptionists

¹ F. SAHANI (LA), *Les laïcs assumptionnistes à Goma*, (Goma : Sereva, 2010), 14.

Lay Assumptionists' prayer has three levels: *Parish level* (Our Lady of Africa Parish, Goma Diocese, RDC), *Jumuiya* (Swahili for "community") *level* and *family level*. I am going to talk about the *Jumuiya* (a community of 15 persons²) level because it is the activity which I participated in. Every Wednesday they have prayer during which there is a Christian topic and *Bible Sharing* connected to their faith. On 11 February, 2015 from 5 PM until 6: 30 PM, we had prayer during which we had *Bible Sharing*. Before presenting the *Bible Sharing*, here are the stages of the prayer in the *Jumuiya* of Lay Assumptionists:

- a. **Opening prayer** by the member who welcomes people in his/her house;
- b. Each member present says something about his or her **experience** of Christian life during the past week;
- c. **Reminder on the teaching of the past meeting**. It is made by one of the secretaries;
- d. **Theme of the day** followed by the enrichment by questions, answers and comments;
- e. **Bible sharing** about the Gospel of the next Sunday.
- f. **A.O.B** (Any Other Business);
- g. **Closing prayer** made by the head of the *Jumuiya* or a substitute.

The Bible Sharing

During the *Jumuiya* meeting, after the theme of the day, one member guides the group in a Holy Spirit song before reading the biblical text (next Sunday's Gospel). Then one person reads the Gospel loudly. After that we have three minutes of silence. The sharing begins. Everyone has to say something and the secretary write the main ideas from each of the members. At the end he or she gives a summary of these ideas to help everyone understand the Gospel better.

We shared about the passage. The sharing was interesting because everyone was giving ideas according to his or her background formation: an interpretation according to a teacher, a doctor, a tax person, a lawyer, etc.... After the sharing everyone has an open mind about the Gospel.

2. Judge

Since the beginning of this new way of being Church -- "Living Christian Communities"³ -- in DRC in 1961, Christians are more engaged in their Christian life and they help the whole church to do its mission. They are very courageous to help in the development of the church. They are close in the usual activities in the district. Sometimes we find some priests who do not prepare well their homilies and have little respect for the people. Today some are beginning to teach themselves by being together.

The word *Jumuiya* "expresses brotherhood or sisterhood, communion, unity, integration and harmony."⁴ *Jumuiya* is the place of life for members to share what is good for their global life and a way to make the church close to Christians. Lay people have many Christian qualities. They have good ideas that can help even the whole church to be stronger in matters of the apostolate. They need only accompaniment. When I went for the *Bible Sharing* of that small

² F. SAHANI (LA), *Les laïcs assumptionnistes à Goma*, (Goma : Sereva, 2010), 24.

³ Joseph G. Healey, *Building the Church as Family of God: Evaluation of Small Christian Communities in Eastern Africa*, (Eldoret: CUEA Press, 2014), 3.

⁴ Joseph G. Healey, *Building the Church as Family of God*, 52.

community of Lay Assumptionists, I realized that lay people are very creative. The people in charge of the church must respect them and have a good program for their formation and their Christian life.

3. Act

The formation of people is going well when each part (trainers and learners) is doing its responsibility. The pastor gives something; the people have to develop it. Jesus was saying that “from the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence and men of violence take it by force” (*Matthew 11:12*). Each Christian has to participate to his salvation. Every day we have to make sure that we are growing in Christ. But the big responsibility is on the side of persons in charge of the church. The priests have to do well their responsibilities. When God chooses them, it is not for a joke but for a ministry among his people. “Come, I will send you to Pharaoh that you may bring forth my people, the sons of Israel, out of Egypt.” (*Exodus 3: 10*) God is always near us for help. We have to call him for the support of our Christian life. Without God the priest can fail in his job; it is the same with the lay person. We cannot succeed without calling on God.

III. THE CELEBRATION OF THE SACRAMENT OF BAPTISM

1. Introduction

According to Robert Jones, “baptism is the initiatory sign by which we are admitted to the fellowship of the Church, [...] into Christ we may be accounted children of God.”⁵ Baptism is a special sacrament in the Catholic Church. It opens for us the possibility to receive the grace from God. Baptism gives to a Christian an identity as a new convert. When we celebrate it, it is a great joy in the family.

The SCC is the way through which every member passes when asking for the sacraments. In our case we are talking about the baptism of a baby whose the parents are full members of the Lay Assumptionists Community. The church advises us that “Catholics parents who want their children to be baptized need a letter of recommendation from their SCC.”⁶ For our child here, the apostolic lay group collaborated with the local *Jumuiya* that brought the request to the parish. The parish priest accepted to administrate the sacrament in the *Jumuiya* room.⁷

2. Celebration in the Jumuiya

The Lay Assumptionists Community is known in Our Lady of Africa Parish in Goma, DRC. All its members in the parish, in supporting their brothers and sisters, put on the uniform with the image of Father Emmanuel d’Alzon. Every person can see the presence of that group in the area. The mass began with the presentation of the group by the head of the local *jumuiya*, and the priest explained the sense of prayer in the *Jumuiya* and the stress on community today. The main celebration was normal. The difference was at two levels: the Word of God and the Sacrament.

⁵ See Robert Jones, *A Brief History of Christian Baptism: From John the Baptist to John Smyth*. <http://www.sundayschoolcourses.com/baptism/baptism.pdf>. Accessed February 10, 2017.

⁶ Joseph G. Healey, *Building the Church as Family of God*, 131.

⁷ In the DRC each *jumuiya* has a room for meetings. Per week there are two meetings. On Tuesdays we meet in the *jumuiya* room and on Thursdays in the house of one of the lay members. The Lay Assumptionists Community meets on Wednesdays in one of the members’ houses.

3. The Word of God

The baby is the one who came with the *Bible* carried by four young people on a kind of bed. When I asked, they told me that the child was participating at the liturgy. We had two readings; the gospel was from *John* 13: 4-17 (“the washing of the disciples’ feet”). After the reading we had two minutes of silence. Then the priest invited us to share according to our inspiration. Good words came from people. I remember one mother saying:

The Gospel asks us to wash each other’s feet. It is a must if we want to be brothers and sisters in this community and in the Catholic Church. Today we are around this baby. Children imitate the examples of their elders before taking their own way. The Gospel gives us this work. We have to give a good example to this child by having good behavior between us. Let us build a good world now for another good future.⁸

This experience was good for all the people.

4. The Sacrament of Baptism

The second difference was during the sacrament itself. We followed the entire rite only the manner of doing some stages changed:

- a. During the Litany of the Saints we added the name of some of the dead members of the *jumuiya*.
- b. During the Baptism we experimented with the inductive method once again. The priest called the couples of the godparents of the baby, the parents of the baby, one of the neighbors, a couple who are responsible in the group of Lay Assumptionists and the responsible of the *jumuiya*. These couples formed two lines behind the godparents who had taken the baby. The priest, before the sacrament, advised these couples to be responsible for the faith and the life of this child. According to his explanation, godparents represent the entire Eucharistic Community and they are the spokespersons for the baby who cannot speak. The parents of the baby are directly responsible for their baby, but they have to share with others in the education of the baby for the good of the church and of the whole society. The neighbors, in the African culture, are the first brothers and sisters. We have to collaborate very well with them. The responsible of the Lay Assumptionists represented the whole group that presented the baby through the *jumuiya*. The couple of the *jumuiya* represents the parish in the area. They are the first collaborators of the parish.

The priest did the baptism with the whole group being behind the godparents. Even the stage of the post-baptismal anointing with chrism, the giving of the white garment and the giving of the lighted candle. This part showed us the sense of the unity in our life. During the thanksgiving song, people offered many things to the baby. I saw a *Bible* and a chair to sit when he is reading that *Bible*. The mass continued normally until the end. We had a soda to share together after the celebration. The joy was great for all who were there for the event.

⁸ One member of the Lay Assumptionists’ commentary.

5. Conclusion

A prayer celebration well done in the parish church or in the *Jumuiya* helps people to pray well and to benefit more from that celebration when it talks directly to the people by using the local values of the community.

6. CONCLUSION

In the Catholic Church, Small Christian Communities are very important for the Christian life. They help Christians to deepen their relationship among themselves and their relationship with God. The experience we had in Goma Diocese in DRC was very helpful. In the *Bible* Sharing in the Lay Assumptionists Community (as a SCC) we saw how well-formed Christians can help others to be good Christians in the church through a prayer group. In the celebration of the sacrament of Baptism the Lay Assumptionists Community was connected to the local *jumuiya*. We saw that when we actualize the liturgy in the community according to the local African culture, people understand well and can practice well the Gospel in their life.

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