

Importance of the Celebration of the First Harvest Day in St. Mary Virgin of the Poor SCC in Rwanda: A Pastoral Reflection on Small Christian Communities and Inculturation

By Jean Marie Theophile Ingabire

Part I: Practicum

Introduction

In traditional Rwanda, each year in July Rwandans celebrated the “First Harvest Day” called *Umuganura* in the Rwandan language. It was the day of the exhibition of joy, and sharing of meals (food and drinks) with those who did not have enough crops because of different reasons such as sickness, old age, immigration etc. The first harvest day was a great feast in the kingdom and for all Rwandan people. On that feast the King exhibited the harvest from different parts of the country. He shared with his people and enjoyed with them. This day also was for recognizing the king as the owner of "fertility," and in return, as a sign of gratitude, the people offered the king baskets of crops.

Some parishes in Kibungo Diocese have restored the celebration of the first harvest day with the aim of thanksgiving to God the Giver of life and fertility. Thus, it is celebrated in the mass of thanksgiving to God the Father and to His Son Jesus Christ, the King of peace, with the joy of the Holy Spirit. Christians organize collections of the harvest to help them share meals in sub-parishes as the Kinyarwanda proverb goes: *Biryoha bisangiwe (the more you share, the more delicious)*. In the mass some part of the offerings is reserved by the parish for different projects. One of the SCCs, called St. Mary the Virgin of the Poor (*Bikira Mariya Umubyeyi w'Abakene*), has borrowed this custom but for the new objective: supporting the poor. This SCC is located in Kameya Sub-parish of Rusumo Parish, one of the Parishes of Kibungo Diocese where I have been in pastoral ministry for 12 years.

1. "See": Experience of First Harvest Day for Supporting the Poor in the SCC

Since 2008 members of St. Mary Virgin of the Poor SCC have adopted the custom of celebrating the first harvest day with the aim of supporting the poor (orphans, widows, old aged and sick) among them. This custom is still practiced today, but also in the neighbouring SCCs: St. Peter, St. Agatha and St. Mark in Kameya Sub-parish. They meet once every three months to share experiences and collaborate as off-springs of St. Mary the Virgin of the Poor SCC.

On Thursday the 15 May 2008, I was invited to the mother SCC and the three other SCCs were also invited. The purpose of this visit was the celebration of Mass for inauguration of their plan of introducing the First Harvest Day with aim of supporting the poor among them. Before mass there was a moment for worshipping the Lord with songs and dances. When I arrived I first participated in the worship and then celebrated the mass at 3:00 p.m.

After mass, each SCC had a presentation of their members. St. Mary Virgin of the Poor (63 members): 13 women, 11 men, 11 young boys, 13 young girls and 15 children; St. Peter (53 members): 13 women, 11 men, 7 young girls, 2 young boys and 20 children; St. Agatha (53 members): 15 women, 8 men, 13 young girls, 10 young boys and 7 children; . Mark (51 members): 12 women, 6 men, 10 young 10 girls, 7 boys and 16 children. After the presentation each SCC provided information on those in urgent need of material support based on priority (first those who are very poor compared to others). A total of 42 individuals were selected regardless of their religion or faith. Usually the whole month of July in Kibungo Diocese is called "Month of Mercy and Charity" for it is a special time of collections for supporting the poor through the Diocesan Caritas. But, the said SCC members decided to extend the collections to the month of June and July because it is normally the season for harvest of sorghum in the whole area of Rusumo Parish. The coordinators of the SCCs asked me to prepare the reflection on the gospel of *Matthew 25:31-40* as a guide in creating awareness. They suggested that I visit them again for the Celebration of Mass for the First Harvest Day.

As promised, on 8 August 2008 I went to celebrate Mass in St. Mary Virgin of the Poor SCC where the other SCCs (St. Peter, St. Agatha and St. Mark) and their invited guests from the whole parish and the 42 beneficiaries selected were present at the Mass. The choir formed from 24 youth of the said SCCs prepared the Liturgy so the mass was meaningfully celebrated. During the offertory I was touched to see so many offerings in money and crops. It was the special offering for Diocesan Caritas as they planned. After mass there was entertainment, singing, dancing, and sharing meals, in the form of the so called *Ubusabane* ("Conviviality" in the Rwandan language). During this event there was also the distribution of various gifts to the poor including clothes, conservable foods and money to cover health insurance, among other things.

2. "Judge": SCC Members' Creativity Should Be Encouraged

St. Mary Virgin of the Poor, St. Peter, St. Agatha and St. Mark SCCs are characterized by the same zeal, enthusiasm and creativity that I have admired. I have realized that they are committed to the spirit of the Church as a Family of God: a family "whose members believe in, and are committed to, Christ and strive to share all aspects of their lives, such as faith, commitment, worship, ideas, intuitions, friendship, material possessions and good works."¹ Through the creativity of the said SCCs, I have learnt to be humble and flexible accepting what they recommended to me, for example the celebration of mass for inauguration and for the First Harvest Day and reflection on the Word of God (*Matthew 25:31-40*) as the pillar that will help them in campaign for collections. Through the reflection on the Word of God, each SCC member is awakened to the reality that the last exam for everybody in order to enter the Kingdom of God will be referred to what he/she has done for the sake of those in need. I am convinced that what has been done sets a pattern of the "New Way of Being Church."²

3. "Act": Celebration of the Day of Supporting the Poor Every Year

The creativity of St. Mary Virgin of the Poor that introduced the celebration of the First Harvest Day for supporting those who are in need became known throughout the whole Diocese. Thus, the Bishop of Kibungo Diocese has recommended - even nowadays --

¹ JAMES O'HALLORAN, *Small Christian Communities: A Pastoral Companion*, p. 44.

² JOSEPH HEALEY & JEANNE HINTON (eds.), *Small Christian Communities Today*, p. 4.

to all the SCCs to celebrate the Day of Supporting the Poor every year. Some parishes also use the celebration of the First Harvest Day for that purpose. It is a day the SCC members celebrate with entertainment, singing, dancing, sharing meals and supporting the poor and distributing to them various aids such as clothes, domestic material, conservable foods, money for tickets and other supports for those who had the sick relatives in the hospitals and for those who have relatives in prison.

Conclusion

This Practicum has tried to show the reality that is needed everywhere. Rwandan cultural custom has values that can help in the sense of creativity and innovation. Celebrating the First Harvest Day with aim of supporting the poor is a model from St. Mary Virgin of the Poor SCC. It has only inspired the whole parish but also Kibungo Diocese in Rwanda with implementation of celebrating every year a day to support the poor. If the SCCs members are aware of their call to help the sick, to feed the hungry and to clothe the naked (cf. *Matthew 25:31-40*), they are also to seek the means to achieve it. May there be other customs that could animate the life of the SCCs even more.

Part II: Pastoral Reflection on Small Christian Communities and Inculturation

Introduction

This work is motivated by the Tangaza University College course in Nairobi, Kenya -- "SMALL CHRISTIAN COMMUNITIES AS A NEW MODEL OF CHURCH IN AFRICA TODAY" -- that invites the students to examine how Small Christian Communities (SCCs) are a New Model of the Church in Africa and a New Way of Becoming Church in Africa Today. Our intention is to trace the key pastoral priorities of the SCCs in order to highlight SCCs' involvement in Justice, Peace and Reconciliation in Africa and to document the practical, pastoral implications of SCCs in Africa.³ Being aware that the SCCs are both beneficiaries of evangelization and evangelizers themselves,⁴ we are now awakened to present the SCCs as the locus of inculturation. This topic is limited to three points: SCCs according to AMECEA, SCCs as incarnated church and finally SCCs as an inculturated model of the church.

1. SCCs According to AMECEA

AMECEA has contributed a lot in the implementation of the SCCs in Eastern Africa. For everyone who desires to be relevant in Christian life in a practical manner especially in pastoral ministry that engages the whole people of God: Priests, religious and laity may be inspired by the work of great importance realized by AMECEA for its pastoral priority accorded to the SCCs.⁵

³ Cf. Tangaza University College, School of Theology: *Academic Handbook, 2016-2017, p. 105.*

⁴ Cf. POPE PAUL VI, *Apostolic Exhortation Evangelii Nuntiandi, No. 58.*

⁵ Cf. JOSEPH G. HEALEY, *Building the Church as Family of God: Evaluation of Small Christian Communities in Eastern African, pp. 2-3.*

1.1 AMECEA: Model of Relevant Understanding of the SCCs in African Culture

It is fundamental to talk about SCCs and inculturation with reference to the AMECEA. First of all, "AMECEA" is an acronym for Association of Member Episcopal Conferences in Eastern Africa. It is "service organization for the National Episcopal Conferences of nine English-speaking countries of Eastern Africa, namely Eritrea, Ethiopia, Kenya, Malawi, South Sudan, Sudan, Tanzania, Uganda, and Zambia."⁶ The enterprise of AMECEA is very important in the implementation of the SCCs in African culture as this statement confirms: "The founding fathers of AMECEA had a vision of implementing Vatican II's ecclesiology of communion in Eastern African developing SCCs as a concrete expression of, and realization of, in the Church as Family Model which reflects the ecclesiology of communion of Vatican II."⁷

1.2 Description of the SCCs in AMECEA Region

The precious work of Joseph Healey, founder of the Regional Catholic Bishops Association Social Communications Office based in Nairobi,⁸ is a pillar for understanding the SCCs in the nine AMECEA countries and beyond: "SCCs are not a program or project, but a way of life. That is why we resist giving a definition of a SCC. It is better to describe SCCs in a variety of ways in relation to their local contexts in Eastern Africa."⁹ For this reason, Healey gives us some helpful descriptions of the Small Christian Community: "A SCC is a small neighbourhood, parish-based group in an urban or rural area in Eastern Africa that is a pastoral model of church that transforms the parish into a communion of communities and an instrument of evangelization. A SCC is a small group of around 10-15 people who meet weekly usually in their homes (sometimes in a parish, a school or another institution), to reflect on the *Bible* especially the Gospel and connect it to their daily lives in Eastern Africa. A SCC is the church in the neighborhood where Christians share the same local situation with other neighbors not only during weekly meetings but on a day-to-day basis."¹⁰ These descriptions are valid and appropriate to the nine AMECEA countries, but also to other African countries in their Christian cultural realities. These descriptions attempt to present the SCC as incarnated church.

2. SCC as Incarnated Church

Let's first try to understand the term "church". The "Church" ("Assembly", "Gathering", "*Ekklesia*") has been used since the time of the *New Testament* to designate the social organization of the followers of Jesus Christ. There is no doubt that the Church, Assembly, Gathering or "belonging to the Lord" was called into being as result of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth.¹¹ From this brief explanation it is easy to trace the roots of SCCs and how the SCCs are representative of the Church People of God.

2.1 The roots of the SCC in the Scriptures

⁶ Ibid. p. 2.

⁷ Ibid. p. 5.

⁸ Cf. p. 310.

⁹ Cf. JOSEPH G. HEALEY, *Building the Church as Family of God: Evaluation of Small Christian Communities in Eastern*, pp. 10-11.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 11.

¹¹ Cf. GREG HERRICK, *Ecclesiology: The Church* <https://bible.org/seriespage/8-ecclesiology-church>, accessed on 28 February 2017.

The roots of the SCC are to be found in the Scriptures especially the *New Testament*, and in the lifetime of Jesus Christ with his disciples. It is fundamental to emphasize where Jesus used to be only with his disciples explaining to them the mysteries of the Kingdom, teaching them to pray and appointing them to preach the Kingdom (cf. Lk 9:12-6; Lk 12:17-20; Mk 4:10-13; Lk 11:1-13). The SCCs will be as the gathering of those who hear the Word of God and act on it (cf. Lk 8:21).¹²

The life of the Christians in the early church after the first Pentecost is meaningful for the foundation of the SCCs: "They devoted themselves to the teaching of apostles, and to the communal life, to the breaking of the bread and to the prayers..." (*Acts 2:42-47*). It was a community of believers characterised by one heart and mind, and sharing their possessions in common (cf. *Acts 4:32-37*). Jesus Christ is the initiator of the communitarian thrust of the Catholic Church, for "he formed a community of disciples, consisting of men and women, around himself, and as part of that community set about the task of preaching the good news."¹³ As James O' Halloran explains in his book titled *Living Cells -- Small Christian Communities*, the vision of community begins with the Blessed Trinity because God is Trinity: the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Loving and sharing comes in the humanity of brothers and sisters created by God in his own image (cf. *Genesis 1:26-27*).¹⁴

2.2 SCC as Representative of the Church People of God

The church is defined by Vatican II as "People of God, the Body of the Lord and the Temple of the Holy Spirit,"¹⁵ where Trinitarian Communion observed in the roots of the SCCs is highlighted. The Universal Church has a local representative that is the SCC. Thus, every model found in the Universal Church is to be found in the SCCs. Therefore, we can say that the SCC is the incarnated church. Further on we could even dare to say that the Universal Church is made in flesh and dwells in the SCCs.

2.3 SCC as Actualization of the Church Communion

The SCC is a real concretization and actualization of the Church as communion from the foundation. Healey presents well this reality: "The Small Christian Community, Model of the Church is based on the Church as communion (*koinonia*). This is part of Trinitarian Communion Ecclesiology and a 'communion of communities' ecclesiology."¹⁶ This communion is to be present starting from the bottom to the top, meaning from the SCC that is a communion of families up to the Global Church that is a communion of national and continental bishops' conferences.¹⁷

2.4 SCC as Communion of Domestic Churches

Vatican II calls the family "Domestic Church" for from the wedlock of Christians comes the family in which new citizens of human society are born, who by the grace of the Holy Spirit received in baptism are made children of God.¹⁸ Admittedly, the family is the

¹² Cf. JAMES O'HALLORAN, *Small Christian Communities -- Pastoral Companion*, p. 16.

¹³ Cf. JAMES O'HALLORAN, *Small Christian Communities -- Pastoral Companion*, p. 16.

¹⁴ Cf. JAMES O'HALLORAN, *Living Cells -- Developing Small Christian Communities*, p. 93.

¹⁵ Vatican II, *Dogmatic Constitution Lumen Gentium on the Church*, No. 17.

¹⁶ JOSEPH G. HEALEY, *Building the Church as Family of God: Evaluation of Small Christian Communities in Eastern Africa*, p. 27.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Cf. Vatican II, *Dogmatic Constitution Lumen Gentium on the Church*, No. 11.

most basic of the human and ecclesial communities.¹⁹ Therefore, when building the SCCs, great care must be given to the family to ensure that it is a place where the Gospel is received and lives, and from where it radiates.²⁰ Hence, the SCC is really a communion of domestic churches. In the African context, St. John Paul II appeals to each African Christian family to become a privileged place for evangelical witness, a true “domestic church,” a community that believes and evangelizes.²¹

3. SCC as an Inculturated Model of the Church

Ecclesia in Africa emphasizes the need for the evangelization of the culture that will imply "inculturation as a process that includes the whole of Christian existence."²² The basic place of inculturation is the SCCs understood as an "inculturated model of the church."²³ Two points will serve as example of this reality: Insertion of the Gospel message into culture and the SCC names.

3.1 Insertion of the Gospel Message into Culture

According to *Ecclesia in Africa*, an appropriate definition of inculturation is "the ultimate transformation of authentic cultural values through their integration in Christianity and the insertion of Christianity in the various human cultures."²⁴ This ultimate transformation is made through the Gospel. First of all, "the word that the church proclaims is precisely the Word of God made man, who is himself the subject and object of this Word. The Good News is Jesus: the Word became flesh and dwelt among us (Jn 1:14). So the Word of Jesus Christ proclaimed to the nations, must take root in the life situation of the hearers of the Word. Inculturation is precisely this insertion of the Gospel message into culture as the incarnation of the Son of God was also an incarnation in a particular culture."²⁵ We Africans are blessed for the possibility to share the Gospel within the SCCs in our mother tongue especially our faith through the names of the SCCs and our greetings in our African languages.

3.2 Specific Names of SCCs and Greetings in African Culture

Healey presents some specific names for SCC in the African languages which show how "SCCs in Africa are increasingly an inculturated model of the Church."²⁶ For example: *Jumuiya* or *Mkamilishano* (the Swahili, Eastern and Central Africa words); *Mwaki* (the *Kikuyu*, Kenya word); *Duol* or *Kidieny* (the *Luo*, Kenya and Tanzania words); *Kabondo*, *Ebibiina* by *'abasseekimu* (the Luganda, Uganda words)...²⁷ Add *Umuryango-remezo* (*Imiryango-remezo*) in my country Rwanda, where the name can be translated as a “Basic Community”/”Basic Communities.” The African names of SCCs have meanings relating to

¹⁹ Cf. JOSEPH G. HEALEY, *Building the Church as Family of God: Evaluation of Small Christian Communities in Eastern Africa*, p. 27.

²⁰ Cf. SR THERESE JOSEPHINE ZEMALE, *Christian Witness through Small Christian Communities*, p. 10.

²¹ Cf. POPE JOHN PAUL II, *Apostolic Exhortation Ecclesia in Africa*, no.92.

²² *Ibid.*, no. 78.

²³ JOSEPH G. HEALEY, *Building the Church as Family of God: Evaluation of Small Christian Communities in Eastern Africa*, p. 52.

²⁴ POPE JOHN PAUL II, *Apostolic Exhortation Ecclesia in Africa*, No. 78.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, no. 60.

²⁶ JOSEPH G. HEALEY, *Building the Church as Family of God: Evaluation of Small Christian Communities in Eastern Africa*, p. 52.

²⁷ Cf. *Ibid.*, pp. 52-53.

communion, community, family, unity, harmony, sharing, brotherhood/sisterhood and solidarity.²⁸ For instance, a devoted servant of the SCCs in Eastern Africa can call himself/herself *Mwanajumuiya* (“Member of the SCC”) for creating the spirit of brotherhood and sisterhood.

Moreover, SCC members have the greetings that express the conviction, zeal and enthusiasm they have for their church. Such Christian greetings and the responses in the SCCs in Swahili culture include: *Tumsifu Yesu Kristo: Milele na Milele!* (“Praise be to Jesus Christ: now and forever!”); *Juu! Juu! Yesu, Chini! Chini! Satani* (“Up! Up! Jesus, Down! Down! Satan”); *Jumuiya Ndogo Ndogo, Oyee* (“Small Christian Community, Cheers”). In Rwanda, the common greeting is *Yezu Kristu Akuzwe: Iteka ryose* (“Glory be to Christ Jesus: Forever!”).

Conclusion

The model of implementation of the SCCs in African culture is inspired by AMECEA. Its description for SCC that is based on the fundamental understanding of the SCC as a New Way of Being the Church People of God and is the key for knowing the SCC as an incarnated church. The SCC has its roots in the Scriptures especially the *New Testament*. As a concrete representative of the church in its models, the SCC is considered as inculturated Church in the sense of its role of insertion of the Gospel in all aspects of culture in daily life of faith and its expression. But, for we pastors of the People of God, do we have enough zeal and sensitivity to belong to the SCCs and be closer to them?

BIBLIOGRAPHY

1. *African Bible*, Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 1999.
2. JAMES O’HALLORAN, *Small Christian Communities -- Pastoral Companion*, Columba Press, USA, 1996.
3. JAMES O’ HALLORAN, *Living Cells -- Developing Small Christian Communities*, Maryknoll, New York, 1988.
4. JOSEPH G. HEALEY, *Building the Church as Family of God: Evaluation of Small Christian Communities in Eastern*, AMECEA Gaba Publications -- CUEA Press, 2013.
5. JOSEPH G. HEALEY AND JEANNE HINTON, *Small Christian Communities Today: Capturing the New Moment*, Paulines Publications Africa, 2006.
6. POPE JOHN PAUL II, *Apostolic Exhortation Ecclesia in Africa*, Nairobi: Pauline Publication, 1995.
7. POPE PAUL VI, *APOSTOLIC Exhortation Evangelii Nuntiandi, On Evangelization in the Modern World*, Pauline Publications Africa, 1992.

²⁸ Cf. *Ibid.*, p. 52.

8. THERESE JOSEPHINE, *Christian Witness through Small Christian Communities*, AMECEA Gaba Publication, 1992.

9. *Manual of the Small Christian Community (Agatabo k' Umuryango-remezo) in Kibungo Diocese*, Pallotti Press, Kigali, 1995.

10. *Tangaza University College: Notes On Ecclesiology*, (2015-2016/B).

11. *Tangaza University College: Notes on Small Christian Communities as a New Way of the Church in African Today* (2016-2017/B).

12. *Tangaza University College: School of Theology, Academic Handbook*, 2016/2017.

13. Vatican II, *Dogmatic Constitution Lumen Gentium on the Church*, promulgated on November 21, 1964.

Rev. Jean Marie Theophile Ingabire
Nairobi, Kenya and Kabungo Diocese, Rwanda
ingajematheo4@gmail.com

22 April, 2017