

# **Small Christian Communities as Channels of Reconciliation in Rwanda: Case Study of St. Louis de Montfort SCC in Kagugu**

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## **Introduction**

As consequences of the tragic events in the recent history of Rwanda, the Catholic Church lives in an injured and deeply shaken society -- a society marked by fear, dread, hatred, lies and violence, feelings of frustration, dissatisfaction, lack of liberty and human rights abuses. All these situations generate distrust among people and complicate the inter-ethnic relations, dialogue, pacific cohabitation, unity and reconciliation. This situation can be considered an effect of the story in which Rwanda has been inscribed. Hence, there is a need for a new story to mobilize the energies of Rwandan people, to transform their suffering and to redirect their aspirations towards a more human community. Based on my experience in St. Louis de Montfort Small Christian Community (SCC), I argue that the SCCs are the best milieu for such a story. Using the pastoral cycle methodology, I will try to show how the SCCs are the effective channels for reconciliation in Rwanda.

### **1. See: My Practicum in St. Louis de Montfort Small Christian Community, Kagugu**

St. Louis de Montfort SCC is one of the SCCs of Kacyiru Parish in the Archdiocese of Kigali. This SCC is located in one of the populated place of Kigali called Kagugu. They have their regular meetings every Friday from 6:00 to 7:30 p.m. When I am on my holidays, this is where I go. Friday, 22 July 2016, when I was in my long holidays I went for the Small Christian Communities meeting in St. Louis de Montfort. There were ten women, four men and only two young people. As it happens in their normal gathering, we started with a word of prayer, and then one of the ladies read the Gospel. After the reading of the Gospel, there was a moment of silence and thereafter, one man started sharing on the Gospel reading. The sharing took about 5 minutes.

After the sharing of the Word of God, there came a part they call *Gusangira ubuzima* (“life sharing”). In this part, each and every SCC member had his/her turn to share what was his/her joys, hopes, struggles and anxieties of the week in a story-telling manner. From time to time, people were making reference to the Word of God that we had just

shared. During this time each group of two people reported how they fulfilled the mission they were given the previous Friday. The content of the mission was to go and visit the sick members of the Small Christian Community.

Due to the Rwandan context, each SCC has a number of trained people in conflict management and peace building. They are called *Abagabuzi b'amahoro* ("peace sharers"). In St. Louis de Montfort SCC those who were trained in this area were sent to help in settling issues in some families that were struggling. What touched me the most was the two groups were sent to talk separately to two different individuals, a Hutu and a Tutsi. Though they were members of that same Small Christian Communities, they couldn't talk to each other because of their bitter memories resulting from the ethnic violence and genocide that ravaged Rwanda. According to the reporters, on several occasions the Small Christian Community had tried to reach out to those two members, one from Hutu Ethnic group and the other one from Tutsi Ethnic Group in order to build up reconciliation and liberation. "It has not been an easy job," one of them said. But with the report of that day, the journey to forgiveness, reconciliation and liberation was promising. The two members, each on his part, had accepted to come to reconcile. They promised that they would come together to the Small Christian Community meeting on the next Friday.

## 2. Judge: My Experience Through the Lens of Faith

A famous Spanish poet said, "Pilgrim, there is no road; open it with your steps." After the genocide in Rwanda, there was no road. It was important for the Catholic Church to act as leaven, to help to reconcile, to build cohesive, peaceful and unified communities. In short, the church was called to open the road. From our experience, SCC is that step with which the church is to open the road.

During the genocide tragedy, the church faced many problems. Some of the perpetrators were Catholics and had been ardent church-goers. They showed that the doctrine taught in school and in our catechesis did not prepare them for a test of such unnamed massive evil. The case encountered in our practicum in St. Louis de Montfort SCC is one such example.

The Rwandan society, to deal with the healing of trauma, hired the psychological and psychiatric specialists. Nevertheless, it is clear that if you fail to sleep or cannot eat well, the art of a specialist will not help you. In the *Gusangira ubuzima* ("life sharing") practiced in the SCCs, all these essential and basic needs in life are discussed.

Moreover, the weekly meetings enabled the SCCs to be a leaven of reconstruction and reconciliation. The above mention case in St Louis de Montfort is again another eloquent example.

This practice in the SCCs paved a way to the establishment of a new system of *Gacaca courts (inkiko Gacaca)* to settle the 1994 genocide cases in 2001. This system harked back to the Rwandan tradition of settling disputes in village assemblies, where everyone involved has a chance to speak.<sup>1</sup> These community courts handled the thousands of people accused of less serious crimes during the months of genocidal violence.

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. T. STREISSGUTH, *Rwanda in Pictures*, 35.

Nevertheless, as the former President of the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, Archbishop F.X. Nguyen Van Thuan once said, while addressing the members of Maputo Conference in 2000:

Reconciliation and post-conflict resolution are techniques. But we will only truly use these techniques effectively when we truly become ministers of Christ's love to all we encounter in our reconciling task. That love can change the hearts of all sides. Without that change of heart the peace plans, the map drawing, the humanitarian intervention will be without the true heart.<sup>2</sup>

For the Church in Rwanda, to become the real and true “salt of the earth” and the “light of the world”, SCCs is the way. It is easy to rebuild the walls, or to put the roofs back after conflict, but the calling the community together should precede. And there is no better way of doing that in the church than through SCCs.

The sharing of life experiences in SCCs in the aftermath of the genocide created solidarity and people realised how common were the hardships and struggles that were affecting the community. Hence, though in informal way, the community members started acting as counsellors in one another's physical, mental, economical and spiritual life.<sup>3</sup> Through this tremendous realization in the SCCs, the situation of despair like the one in which the Rwandan people is living, ceases to inspire fear and indifference, but rather it becomes a “magnificent new opportunity for the development of genuine Christian hope.”<sup>4</sup>

This is the road in which the Church in Rwanda needs to move forward, joyful and alive, so as to make manifest the praise of God. This affirmation, that is also an invitation, is possible if all the Christians listen to Jesus Christ who challenges them through his Word, to allow themselves to be reconciled with God and neighbor. The reading and meditation of the Word of God root us more deeply in Christ and guide our ministry as servants of reconciliation, justice and peace (*Africae Munus*, 16). Now the question to ask is how can this be realised? What action should we take?

### 3. Act: Rediscovering the Role of SCCs on the Path to Reconciliation

Though there is a great achievement in SCCs concerning faith and morals, it is noticed among the faithful of the Catholic Church in Rwanda today a bit of indifferentism and ignorance of the essentials of the faith; dichotomy or dual affiliation.<sup>5</sup> For instance,

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<sup>2</sup> SECAM – CELAM, *Peace, Fruit of Reconciliation*, 36.

<sup>3</sup> A. OMOLO, “Small Communities Light Up Neighbourhoods in Kisumu,” in J.G. HEALEY, J. HINTON, eds., *Small Christian Communities Today. Capturing the new moment*, 110.

<sup>4</sup> Albert Nolan, *Hope in the age of despair*, 5

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Benedict XVI, *Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation: Africae Munus*, November 19 (2011), no. 93.

some Christians still have recourse to practices of satanic power, including the phenomenon of witchcraft, an attitude which is incompatible with the Christian teaching. This makes a big gap between the faith and behavior of Christians. Many believers are lax Christians whose ordinary life does not bear witness to their Christian faith. Thus, the SCCs should also be a place of learning about our faith and of mutual correction when one goes astray.

As I mentioned above, the attendance of the youth in the Small Christian Community is poor. There is a need of devising a strategy to attract them so that they have the sense of belonging.

There is need to form the lay faithful so as to enable them assume competently their civic responsibilities and to live the social implications of the Gospel. SCCs should be a kind of school where people learn humanity.

## **Conclusion**

To conclude, my experience in the St. Louis de Montfort Small Christian Community taught me this: If the church in the current Rwandan situation is to be the true communicator of the meaning of the Christian message. If she is to be truly “an expert in humanity”. If she is to be totally honest before God about the real feelings concerning the Rwandan situation. Then the Small Christian Communities way is surely the new way of being the church. It is not an extra option. Indeed, to announce God’s plan and to denounce evils in society will not bear long standing fruits if the church fails to commit herself in the name of God on the side of people.

And Small Christian Communities is the best way to realise it. As Archbishop Fouad El-Hage urges us: Let us take on reconciliation as our new way of working. It does not just happen through honeyed words. It requires expertise, professionalism, proper training and great care... It does not necessarily require large amounts of funds, it requires metanoia... There is nothing which is more Christian: “Blessed are the peace makers”, and as Saint Paul writes to the Corinthians: “It was God who reconciled us to Himself through Christ and gave us the work of handing on this reconciliation” (2 Cor 4:18-19).<sup>6</sup>

This new way of being the Church offers us the seeds. It is up to us to plant and plough and take care of these seeds until the tree bears the longed for fruits of reconciliation, justice and peace.

## **Bibliography**

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<sup>6</sup> SECAM – CELAM, *Peace, Fruit of Reconciliation*, 42.

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