

Small Christian Communities Changing Lives in South Sudan: Testimony from an African Missionary in St. Joseph's Parish, Narus, Torit Diocese

By Emmanuel Obi, SPS



Weekly meeting of a Small Christian Community in St. Joseph's Parish.

Looking back at the simple beginning of the formation of Small Christian Communities (SCCs) in St. Joseph's Parish, Narus in the Catholic Diocese of Torit, South Sudan, I cannot but affirm with conviction the popular saying, *the journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step*. After mass on my first Sunday in Narus two years ago, my predecessor, Father Tom Gilolly had gathered some members of the Parish Council to introduce me to them. After the general introduction, one of the members in his speech tried to explain to me that I must have noticed that at mass the majority of the congregation were students because of the presence of the three schools within the parish.

“However,” he said, “you will come to know as you spend more time with us that, most of the adult population in this community will say they are Catholics but they hardly attend church activities.” After a few more people had spoken on the same subject, we all decided that the Parish Council chairperson and two of the youth members should accompany me some days in the evenings during the week to go around the community to visit some of the members, so that I can be introduced to them as their new priest.

By 5 p.m. on Wednesday of that week, the chairperson of the Church Council Zeiko Zacharia, one of the volunteer Catechists Stephen Aletea and three members of the youth came to the parish house to take me out for the home visitation. That became our mission. Most

evenings, for the next two weeks, we were out knocking from door to door, and being introduced to the local people.

On my part I would offer an invitation to the members of each of the homes we visited to come and join us for worship at the church. Surprisingly, most of them would answer positively, that they would come. After the first week of the visitations, four Toposa women who had not been coming to church regularly, turned up for mass the following Sunday. But before turning up for that Sunday mass, they came on Saturday evening to join the youth for the choir practice in preparation for the following day's Eucharistic celebration.

Towards the end of the second week of the visitations, one of the youth suggested to us that instead of just moving from house to house chatting with members of the families, we spend time in prayer in each of the homes that we have identified lapsed Catholics. We felt that it was a very good idea and decided to do as he had suggested. We started praying the Rosary and sharing the Gospel Readings for the following Sunday mass in each of the homes we visited. Before leaving, we would always invite them to join us at prayers in the next home we were to visit the following day. Surprisingly, we discovered that people were very excited to welcome us to pray in their homes and some of those we had visited and prayed in their homes started coming for Sunday Eucharistic celebrations, making it a point of duty to attend prayers at the other homes we visited during the week.

As other activities like teaching of catechism to the school children and choir practices were also calling for our attention, we decided to officially make Wednesday evenings weekly the time for home visitation and prayer. The home to be visited and prayed in that week was to be announced during the announcements at the end of our Sunday masses. While we were doing the rounds of visitations, we were equally registering the names and addresses of each of our members in the different areas of Narus. After about six months, the number of people attending the weekly prayer meetings had increased so significantly that it was becoming difficult to make the rounds.

Coincidentally, while we were still thinking of what to do, an invitation letter came from the Pastoral Office of the Diocese of Torit that we should send two members from our parish to attend a workshop on the formation of Small Christian Communities in Torit. The workshop was organized by members of Solidarity for South Sudan, a group whose members are drawn from different Religious Congregations all over the world to help the Church in South Sudan in Pastoral Formation of the Laity and Capacity Building.

We interpreted the invitation as the proverbial "handwriting of the Holy Spirit" leading us in the right direction, at a time when we were still wondering what we would do with our increasing number in the weekly prayer meeting group. We decided to send two of our active members, Maria Lokonoe and the Late Emmanuel Lopeyok (God rest his soul in peace) to attend the workshop. When the two returned from the workshop, they shared their experiences with the group, particularly how they were encouraged to start the formation of Small Christian Communities within the parish.

Since we had registered members earlier according to the areas they were living in, we decided that it would be good to implement their learning from the workshop. However, we observed some reservations among some of the members who questioned the need for sub-dividing the large group saying, “Father, you had brought us together as a prayer group, why do you want to divide us again?” I was particularly touched by this question and upon reflecting further, I came to the realization that not everyone had understood the idea of Small Christian Communities, which we were trying to sell to them. Perhaps we needed more time to bring everyone on board. We decided instead to embark on proper education of the whole group on why we needed Small Christian Communities for a better pastoral care of all the members of the church.

While this formation was going on, we selected six members, two from the three designated areas in Narus to give them training on leadership of Small Christian Communities. Three months later, when we presented the need for sub-dividing the larger prayer group to form three distinct Small Christian Communities, the trained leaders were able to convince all members present and they all agreed that we needed the three groups according to the designated areas.

Since then, precisely from June 2016, we have been blessed with three Small Christian Communities namely, St. Theresa, St. Mary and St. Monica. Members meet every Sunday, Tuesday and Wednesday evenings. As they gather in the homes of their respective members, they pray the Rosary, and share the Word of God meditatively together. At the end of their prayers, the owner of the home introduces his or her family to everyone present -- telling all present about some significant and recent events in the family, to enable the members present to share in their joys, struggles and hopes. Sometimes they also share with the group whatever they have like a glass of water or a cup of tea.

The experience of the Small Christian Communities in Narus, growing from a simple beginning to become a beacon of hope to the community can be compared to the parable of the mustard seed; something insignificant turning out to become an anchor of hope. In a country where majority of people are traumatized and pushed to the verge of despair as a result of the effects of a protracted civil conflict, insecurity, violence, hunger and economic hardship, the Small Christian Communities are offering an avenue through which communal solidarity is experienced in an environment where there has been mutual suspicion.

Narus as a border town came into existence as a refugee settlement during the Southern Sudan Wars with the Khartoum Government. It has a cosmopolitan characteristic as every ethnic group in South Sudan can be found within Narus. However, most people live together according to their tribal units, thereby causing some kind of mutual suspicion. When we started moving from one home to the other to pray, sometimes the owners of the homes, moved with joy, would express their gratitude that people from other ethnic groups were visiting them and even sharing a meal with them, something that was uncommon to them before. Sometimes, others shed tears of joy as they could no longer control their emotions to have people visit them and share their home and even share a meal with them. On one occasion, a woman told me she was surprised to see me eat in her home, for she did not know that priests can eat in other peoples' homes.

The Small Christian Communities in Narus have become not only tools for evangelization as they have drawn more adults to participate in church activities, but have also offered psychological and social support to the members of the Christian community. They have become rallying points of support during funerals as well as weddings.

Whenever a member of any of the Small Christian Communities loses a loved one, it is very common now to have their leaders gather the members together to ensure they make some contributions to support the grieving member. Most of all, they find time to arrange for prayers and visitations to console the grieving member.

At other social events like marriages and birthdays in the families of their members, the members of their Small Christian Communities are equally there to support such members, sharing in their joy too. Whenever any member has exercised an unusually prolonged absence from church activities, other members tend to make sure they find time to pay such a member a visit. Recently, members of the Small Christian Communities have asked the parish leadership to organize a retreat for all the adult members of the parish to help in their renewal of faith. If anyone had told me two years ago when we started the home to home visitations, knocking from door to door, being introduced as the new priest in Narus, that that singular activity will grow to become three distinct groups of Small Christian Communities, offering spiritual, psychological and social support to the community, I doubt that I would have believed the person.

Looking back now, I have learned that every single step in a race counts, same as the popular saying that goes, *the journey of a thousand miles, begins with a single step*. To God be the glory!

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