

Christian Charity in Small Christian Communities (SCCs) in Kenya

Introduction

This paper is as a result of my experience and reflection on working with St. Gabriel Small Christian Community at St. Benedict Catholic Church, Ruaraka in the Archdiocese of Nairobi, Kenya. This paper will contain two parts. The first part will be about the Small Christian Community practicum write-up based on the pastoral cycle of see, judge and act. The second part will be my reflection on Christian charity in Small Christian Communities with my case study being St. Gabriel Small Christian Community. We shall therefore begin with the first part.

Part I

1. See

St. Gabriel Small Christian Community normally hold their *Bible* sharing and meeting every Sunday at 9:20 am to 10:20 am after the first mass which begins at 7:30 am. This was a *Bible* sharing and meeting of St. Gabriel Small Christian Community held on Sunday, 25 August, 2013 from 9:20 am to 10:20 am in the parish hall. The main language used for communication was Kiswahili. The meeting began on time with a word of prayer from Mr. Peter. By the time the meeting was beginning, we were about 12 people, but others joined in after five minutes and at the end we were 24 people; 14 women, 7 men and 3 youths. This community comprises a mixture of various ethnic groups, both poor and rich.

After the prayers there was reading of the Gospel for the next Sunday (22nd Sunday in Ordinary Time, 1 September 2013). We read from the Gospel of *Luke* 14:1, 7-14 three times and then people mentioned the phrases or words that touched them from the reading. After this the floor was opened for reflections but only two people, a man and a woman, gave a reflection. After this there were prayers of the faithful which were spontaneous. Various members prayed for various issues like governance in the country, sickness among the *Jumuiya* members, peace in the country and in the world. This showed their concern on what is taking place around them.

2. Judge

I realized that there was no period of silence in between the readings to allow the Word of God to sink down into the hearts and minds of the people. Only two people gave their reflection on the Gospel showing that many were shying away from sharing the Word of God. Yet "ignorance of the Scripture is ignorance of Christ" as St. Jerome said. They spent little time sharing on the scripture while a lot of time was spent on discussing the agendas of the meeting which that day centered on money for they were contributing towards one of the youth who had lost his mother.

The issue of other members joining in after prayers: I felt that it was something we need to improve on as we should start together as a family with prayer. *A family that prays together stays together*. Small Christian Communities ought to follow the example of early Christians who devoted themselves to gathering together in the temple area and breaking bread in their homes (Cf. *Acts* 2:46). I later pointed out to them that the Scripture should be at the center of our meeting as Laurenti Magesa would say, "Small Christian Communities are Scriptural communities."

3. Act

The chairlady was charged with the responsibility of ensuring that the money that was collected for the funeral be sent to the member who lost his mother. The members also organized to visit some of the members who were sick. Members of St. Gabriel Small Christian Community agreed that at the next meeting they would discuss on how to visit a children's home. Meanwhile Mr. Maina was charged with the responsibility of identifying one of the children's home around. I encouraged them that this was a noble idea and that we should follow it to the end. They organized two people who were to lead the *Bible* sharing for next Sunday. The meeting ended with a prayer from Mrs. Mary at 10:25 am.

Part II: Christian Charity in Small Christian Communities (SCCs) in Kenya

As we said at the introduction, this section will focus on my reflection on Christian charity in Small Christian Communities based on St. Gabriel Small Christian Community to which I belong. Before we move on we may need to say something about the Christian tradition.

1. Christian Tradition

From the very beginning of creation God has always willed that we take care of creation and to serve one another as we are created in his image and likeness. Man in himself is not a solitary creature, "man, in fact, is not a solitary being, but a social being, and unless he relates himself to others he can neither live nor develop his potential" (*SDC*, 110). By the fact that God created male and female in the beginning shows that he wanted us to live in communion with each other. The early Christians too embraced the spirit of communion with each other by devoting themselves to meeting together in the temple and breaking of bread in their homes (cf. *Acts* 2:46). This is what the modern Small Christian Communities should mirror as a new way of being Church.

2. Christian Charity

Christian charity in the Small Christian Communities is a new way of being Church as people tend to look for witness through actions other than words. About charity in Small Christian Communities, Pope Paul VI gives as an insight in *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, "they come together to worship, deepen their faith, fraternal charity, prayer, bringing each other together

with a purpose of listening to and meditating on the Word (cf. *EN*, 58). This clearly shows that Small Christian Communities should be communities of love not only to the members, but to the society as well.

St. Gabriel Small Christian Community agreed as members that they were to do some works of charity by visiting a children's home. At first they were hesitant as they did not know how to go about it. At this juncture I shared with them how I did that with a group of youth by collecting clothes that were no longer used in our homes and even from our neighbors. We even announced in the church for people to donate clothes for children. From this they realized that it is something that they could do so they agreed to contribute to buy some food stuffs and also collect some clothes from their homes. This was going to be an act of charity outside the Small Christian Community and even outside the church.

The responsibility of identifying a children's home was left to Mr. Maina. Plans were made and we finally visited Good Samaritan Children's home in Huruma (Nairobi) on 9 February 2014. This home is being run by a certain woman named Mary who is not a Catholic. On the day of going we gathered in the church compound after mass and begun our journey to the place. Some opted not to go with us as they said that they had other commitments, something which surprised me as we had planned the day for months. All in all we went and found the place in a deplorable condition and carrying a capacity of over 500 children from as young as two months old to 18 years old. The woman told us she depends on well-wishers to run the home and educate the children and that many, around 1,000, had finished school and even graduated in the university and were now working and also supporting others in that home.

What we saw there touched many of us and some even shed tears and thanked God saying at least they have a reason to thank God as he had given them so much. They realized that there is no need of complaining about their condition as others were more in need than them. This led many to resolve that they should do charitable works more often -- if not after every three months, then at least twice a year. I share this experience here to show how Small Christian Communities through works of charity can bring change not only in the church, but in the society at large. In this way they will be participating in the church's missionary activity of evangelization. They should engage in evangelizing themselves so as to bring the Good News to others and they should be committed in living the love of Christ (cf. *EA*, 89). Therefore, Small Christian Communities can be a new way of carrying out the new evangelization.

3. Pastoral Response

In this section we try to give some response regarding the issues that we have talked about. From the Christian Tradition it is clear that it is the responsibility of every member of the church to seek to be in communion with others as we are not solitary beings. This communion is best achieved through the Small Christian Communities. It is here that the local church finds its strength. Small Christian Community is like a family. Therefore the Small Christian Community is a domestic church. This is something which the Christians need to be sensitized on.

It is good that the Christians be taught the importance of Small Christian Communities as early as during instructions for baptism, and also during the practice of

ongoing catechesis for those already baptized who do not belong to Small Christian Communities. This will ensure that a strong foundation of faith is built and they will in turn be able to evangelize others. The members of Small Christian Communities, on the other hand, should be taught the importance of witness through life, "for the church, the first means of evangelization is the witness of an authentically Christian life, given over to God in a communion that nothing should destroy and at the same time given to one's neighbor with limitless zeal" (cf. *EN*, 41).

Small Christian Communities are tools that the church can use to foster new evangelization through works of charity as was the case with St. Gabriel Small Christian Community, and also through spreading the Good News. Parishes in Africa should create a mechanism that will ensure that Small Christian Communities are involved in the evangelization activities of the church. It is they that will be able to identify their local situation and know the kind of approach that is needed. In this way their role as a new way of being church will be taken care of.

4. Conclusion

The paper in the two sections has tried to give what Small Christian Communities are made of, that is, *Bible* sharing and meeting, as well as the practice of Christian charity that will in turn influence the church's missionary activity of evangelization. This clearly shows the importance of Small Christian Communities in our church today. We therefore need to work together to build strong Small Christian Communities as this is where the heart of the church lies.

Abbreviations

EA *Ecclesia in Africa*
EN *Evangelii Nuntiandi*
SDC Social Doctrine of the Church

Bibliography

The Holy Bible. Revised Standard Version, An Ecumenical Edition, London: 1973.
Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church, Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa 2005.
 JOHN PAUL II, Apostolic Exhortation "Ecclesia in Africa" on the Church in Africa (14 September 1995), Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa 1995.
 POPE PAUL VI, Apostolic Exhortation "Evangelii Nuntiandi" on Evangelization in the Modern World (8 December 1975), Washington, D.C: United States Catholic Conference, n.d.

Benson Thaddaeus Odhiambo, C.M.
 (seminarian from Ghana)
 Tangaza University College
 Nairobi, Kenya
benexthadd@yahoo.ca