

Catholic Faith Identity of High School Students in Nairobi, Kenya

Part I -- SCC as a Special Group for Faith Sharing

SEE

This Faith Sharing Meeting was attended by 29 students who belong to the State House Girls High School Catholic students in Nairobi, Kenya. Participants were students from the school, under the chaplaincy of St. Paul's (Catholic) Chapel of Nairobi University. In addition two participants were Salesian seminarians from the seminary of Don Bosco Utume. The meeting was on Sunday afternoon 2 February, 2014 from 3:00 p.m. to 4:30 p.m. The venue for meeting was the room near the dining hall just next to the school canteen. Language during the meeting was English with occasion interjection in Swahili just to emphasis the point.

The meeting began with praise and worship, then an introduction given by Elizabeth Mtia, the student coordinator for the Catholic Sunday afternoon meeting. She welcomed everyone to the meeting with particular mention of the seminarians from Don Bosco and Grace, a guest student from the Protestants. The coordinator went on to animate the meeting to the end. The theme was "family" with emphasis on how students need to appreciate the role of parents in bringing them up in faith like the family of Jesus, Mary and Joseph. To do this she narrated a story to illustrate family relations among parents and children.

After the *Bible* reflection they had only one major business --preparation for the pending trip. There was the rosary, divine mercy prayers and an announcement on the care of the purchased radio.

JUDGE

Much of the praise and worship was lively and all took part easily; it took considerable amount of time (close to 20 minutes into the meeting time). There were a lot of movement as Form Four students had to rush for some tuition. Other disturbance came from the school canteen which is located just outside the meeting place. During the sharing we realised that the animator spoke a lot more than the rest. Elizabeth didn't do enough to invite others to take part in the sharing. We realised too the animator decides what to share with the group and so many come to the meeting without knowledge of what they will actually share. In the presentation the animator narrated a story which was rather too long of slightly over 10 minutes. However, I must acknowledge that she is a very good narrator and we all were kept attentive. It's good to note too that Elizabeth's presentation was influenced by the homily at the morning mass on presentation of Jesus in the temple (*Luke 2:22-40*) as she kept referring to that (but no scripture reading).

Other matters discussed: Brainstorming on a place for their annual trip; there was a unanimous agreement to visit Resurrection Garden. Other decisions quickly taken were the

care for the newly purchased radio and the timings for rosary and divine mercy prayers.

ACT

The chairperson Anne Koki was given the responsibility to meet the matron Miss. Chege and the school authorities over the trip to Resurrection Garden and to report to the rest in the next meeting. A quick decision was taken regarding the care for the newly purchased radio: that only one appointed person should operate it. On prayers of rosary and divine mercy they decided to keep having them daily, that is, immediately after lunch for divine mercy and the rosary after evening meal. This is a strange decision from students as far as we are concerned; we are not sure whether it's necessary for everyday rosary and divine mercy since they are in school. For now we can only suspect this gesture is suspiciously motivated as a way to prove to outsiders that Catholics too are a worshipping community. However, it's too early to pass judgment insofar as such prayer time happens in our absence. We will continue consulting with individual students for us to give proper guidance to the students on the same.

Suggestion: We suggested praise and worship be done early when they are waiting for all to gather and when the meeting begins there should be one or two songs related to what will be discussed followed by a simple opening prayer. Next meeting Cathleen volunteered to animate.

Part II – Reflection: Catholic Faith Identity for Students in an Environment that is Not Catholic

State House Girl's High School (Nairobi) has a population of over one thousand students. We acknowledge here that the school has a very strong influence from religious groups by the fact that they have allowed religious meetings and services held in the school not only on weekends but weekdays as well. Furthermore, the main religious groups --the Protestants, Muslims and Catholics -- have school teachers who are matrons and patrons. Catholics in the school are very few in comparison to the Protestants. Moreover, the Christian union body which is meant to encompass all Christian groups is largely Protestant in every sense.

Since our presence in the school we have realised a lot of interaction among Christian groups to the point of having occasional joint Sunday services in the year. We have to mention here that not only Catholics attend the Protestants meetings such as *Bible* study but Protestants too come to Catholic meetings. Notwithstanding these interactions it came to our attention that this was a disservice to the true Catholic identity during the worship, liturgy, etc. Moreover, our Catholic minority were subjected to systematic confrontation to their fundamental Catholic truths during *Bible* studies conducted by visiting pastors. On the outside such joint meetings or *Bible* study sessions are attractive as they do not directly attack Catholic faith. But it has come to our attention that in fact such meetings have been detrimental to the faith of our Catholic students. For instance, the *Bible* studies gatherings are fundamentally Protestant.

This purely Protestant approach was at play in the questions that our Catholic students sought to clarify from us. The so-called memory verses that students learn from the *Bible* study at most were *polemical* thereby suggesting that some beliefs in the Catholic Church are not biblical. Furthermore, we realised too that there was a growing rigid boundary between what they call the “all sacred” and the “all profane.” For instance, in the case of music they were told and convinced that a Christian should only listen to Gospel songs. And as it were gospel songs meant songs by Protestant singers. This fact spilled over to our Catholic liturgy as songs were mixed with those of Protestants. And not surprisingly the half hour or so of praise and worship before every Sunday Eucharist celebration is whole round of Protestant praise and worship.

With this background our immediate response was creation of the forum for Catholic students every Sunday afternoon to meet to discuss questions on Catholic faith. To the greater extent our Protestant friends inspired this to the extent that our choice of themes for discussion was as a result of this encounter. Our response was *apologia* and *polemic* (art of defending and attacking) in every sense. Thus our meetings became like military training bases of how to defend the Catholic faith. This involved exposing *lacunae* of the Protestants line of thinking. This we did well with adequately researched topics from the *Bible* and the Catholic tradition. Our job was meant to arm the students with such biblical and doctrinal ammunition to respond to attacks by the Protestants. And as such one of the memory verses we taught the students has to do with defence of faith (1 *Peter* 3:15).

This process went on for some two academic semesters (August 2013 - March 2014), yet little did we realise that ours was merely an exercise of intellectual prowess if not the showcase of our grasp of classroom theology back in the seminary at the Salesian Theological College (Nairobi). Everything we had done came to nothing when one of the highly influential and committed leaders of the school Catholic community confronted us. Looking so disturbed she said to me in private: ‘For my four years in this school I have been praying rosaries every day, doing divine mercy, attending masses every Sunday. But I never felt anything.’ She said she had the real spiritual experience and now she didn’t know what to do next. By this she meant considering leaving the Catholic Church. As if this was not enough, she went on to say that at our Sunday afternoon Catholic meetings “we are always learning about Catholic doctrine but nothing spiritual.”

With this confrontation we realised that we were fighting the wrong enemy as it were. The real issue was from within our own system of gatherings: prayer, worship, etc. Much as there was an infiltration of Protestants way of worship we could as David did to Saul ‘returning good for evil’ (1 *Samuel* 24:4-8). Therefore, we asked important questions: What is it that we are not doing? What is it that we can do? What is it that our Protestant friends are doing that we can learn from? Our original approach had a particular rhythm that runs short of addressing the deepest needs, desires and aspiration of our students. Now whether such aspiration means some spiritual experience or the experience of Jesus matter little for now, but only that our approach calls for change. How then can students still be Catholic and still have that spiritual experience?

At this point of crisis we came across the Lumko Method during our Small Christian Community class at the seminary that we quickly adopted. This is the seven step method of *Bible* sharing. The Lumko Method developed in South Africa and is to be contrasted with

Bible study that is a more intellectual exercise. It will lead students to a greater spiritual experience. Using this same Lumko Method our discussion on Catholic doctrine will be given a spiritual approach, thus capturing the spirit of the particular Catholic doctrine. Indeed the “faith is caught rather than taught.” The only sure way students they will catch or experience faith is by practicing it or doing it. This is the reason why the Lumko *Bible* sharing method will help the students experience faith. In the past we tried teach them faith (*Bible*), but this was an exercise in futility as at most it remained intellectual exercise.

Surprisingly a colleague of mine in the apostolate from South Africa is well aware of the Lumko Method as he used it in his apostolate with the youth back home. We had orientation to the Lumko Method in our SCCs class for our whole group of 30 students. We plan to have further exercises with the high school leaders so that before we go for our holiday they will be able to animate the rest of the group until we return in August, 2014. We have no doubt this communal and prayerful approach to the *Bible* will restore Catholic group identity and unity amid growing challenges from the Protestants that Catholics don’t know the *Bible*. Furthermore, this method will lead the students to realise that the *Bible* should not be used for either defence or attacking others, but be a tool for the personal experience of faith.

With all simplicity we want to acknowledge here that we too (animators) need further practice and training in such tools for prayer as the Lumko Method, *lectio divina*, etc. The good news is that other than our theological training, our Salesian community in the seminary provides us an opportunity for such growth in our weekly *lectio divina*.

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