

A New Way of Being Class: Reimagining Theological Education in Africa Today

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This paper will be structured in the form of a “prayer” in St. Ignatius’ *Spiritual Exercises*.¹ First, we begin with a *Composition of Place* or the setting of the context. Second, we offer a *Prelude* or preliminary consideration. Third, an *Annotation* or explanatory observations. Fourth, we pick out three points. Fifth, we conclude with a *Colloquy* or final words.

1. Composition of Place

In his novel *Hard Times*, Charles Dickens opens the first scene in a classroom. Thomas Gradgrind, the school proprietor is strutting and gesticulating back and forth, rattling out what he believes to be the most important things in an education. “Now,” he said, “what I want is Facts. Teach these boys and girls nothing but Facts. Facts alone are wanted in life. Plant nothing else, and root out everything else.”² With these words, Mr. Gradgrind sums up the philosophy of education and the praxis that characterized much of the European society of his time. As an African who has spent almost 22 years of my life in school, I understand what it means to be in Gradgrind’s class. When the expatriate Western missionaries came to Africa, they did not only come with their Eurocentric theology; they also came with commerce and with their classroom.

As a student of theology, I must say that I am pleased to see how much work African scholars and theologians have done at fighting back the tide of Eurocentric Theology that we have received. Today, African theologians and many in the official magisterium have come to the conclusion that if theology must make sense for us, we need to take inculturation seriously. While inculturation as taught in theologates today touches on the content of theology, I do not feel that this is enough. We need to also inculturate the method of teaching theology because at the end of the day what really matters is not *content* but *process*. The kind of persons we become are a result of that process. Unfortunately, as Laurenti Magesa notes, theological formation in most of our theologates and seminaries today are still stuck in the Tridentine formula.³ Thus, in this essay I wish to make a little proposition on how Small Christian Communities can provide a model for reimagining theological education in Africa today.

2. Prelude: Small Christian Communities (SCCs) -- A New Way of Teaching and Learning

Since Vatican II’s ecclesial turn to an ecclesiology of communion, the African Church has adopted Small Christian Communities (SCCs) not only as a pastoral strategy and priority but also as the

¹ In the *Spiritual Exercises* of St. Ignatius, the prayers are usually structured using this format. We have chosen this format, not only because it provides a guide in articulating the reflection at hand, but also in imitation of Agbonkhanmeghe Orobator who himself adopted this format in a public lecture entitled “On Fire and Desire: Some Aspects of Ignatian Spirituality for Our Times” delivered at Hekima University College in Nairobi in 2002.

² Charles Dickens, *Hard Times*, Webster’s German Thesaurus Edition, (San Diego: Icon Group International, 2005), 1.

³ Laurenti Magesa, *The Post-Conciliar Church in Africa: No Turning Back the Clock* (Nairobi: CUEA Press, 2016), 199.

new way of being church in Africa.⁴ One of the practical reasons is that the SCCs capture central African values and ideals like participation, communitarianism, family, *ubuntu*. This idea has led to various strategies aimed at revitalizing the Catholic Church, and in reshaping how she imagines herself and her mission in Africa today.

However, I believe that, beyond a way of being church, SCCs can also provide us with an African way of doing theology in a way that is contextual, and that takes into account the needs of the African Church and her people, and prepares the theologian for life in the African context. I have been a member of SCCs myself, both as a Pentecostal⁵, a Catholic layman and a Jesuit religious in pastoral ministry. However, my particular inspiration for this paper comes from my experience of our SCCs Class at Hekima University College between January and March, 2017. Based on these experiences, I wish to point out three values from the praxis of SCCs that I think can be helpful for reimagining theological education in Africa today. But before I proceed, it would be nice to get a sneak peek into our SCC class at Hekima University College.

3. Annotation: Our SCC Class at Hekima College – A Sneak Peek

Our Small Christian Communities Class itself – entitled “Small Christian Communities as a New Model of Church in Africa Today (THE1410)” -- was an Elective Course in the Pastoral Theology Department as part of the BTh Degree. Our SCC was named after two patron/patroness saints – St. Paul and St. Mother Teresa. On the very first day of class, not only did we chose the names of these two guides for our class, but we also shared our expectations. It is from these expectations that a course outline was designed. This is one of the strengths of a SCC class -- bottom-up rather than top-down organization and praxis. Besides the course outline and praxis, the class itself was outlined and structured as a proper SCC. Each class began with one minute of silence and an Opening Solidarity Prayer just like an ordinary weekly SCC in the neighborhood. Thereafter, the theme or topic for the day was brought forward. Each student was expected to have done some initial reading and reflection. The responsibility of the lecturer was to “facilitate” or “animate” the conversations. The role of animation was not left to the lecturer alone, but was often shared among the members of the SCC class.

Much of the class was presented online using the Small Christian Communities (SCCs) Global Collaborative Website (including the Small Christian Communities Facebook Page) www.smallchristiancommunities.org. This included voting in the SCCs Poll and exchanging messages and photos on the SCCs Facebook Page.

The main SCCs Course book and resource was Joseph G. Healey, *Building the Church as Family of God: Evaluation of Small Christian Communities in Eastern Africa*. This free online Digital Book (Ebook or Electronic Book) was regularly updated with material from the class. As of 10 April, 2017 it was 909 pages and is available on the left hand side under “Ebooks” of the “Home Page”/“Front Page” of the Small Christian Communities Global Collaborative Website at: http://www.smallchristiancommunities.org/images/stories/pdf/Build_new.pdf

⁴ Joseph Healey and Jeanne Hinton, ed. *Small Christian Communities Today: Capturing the New Moment* (New York: Orbis Books and Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 2005), 97.

⁵ The Pentecostal Churches refer to their SCC meetings as “House Fellowships.” While there are differences between theirs and the normal procedure of SCCs in the Catholic Church, the general idea remains the same.

Beside the SCC class members, the class itself was “team taught.” This means that we did not have just one teacher. On a number of occasions, depending on the theme or topic for discussion, we had different people with relevant experience come to share their experience of SCCs. For instance, we had Mr. Alphonse Omolo, Mrs. Rose Musimba and Sister Rita Ishengoma, all trainers of SCC facilitators with many years of experience. We had three representatives from the Youth SCCs at Kenyatta University, etc. These people helped broaden the voices and the scope of the conversations that we had. More so, oftentimes, when the issue for discussion involved the praxis of SCC, rather than theory, the class itself becomes the praxis. For instance, as a way of understanding with *Bible Sharing/Bible Reflection* in SCCs and how to adapt it, the class had its own *Bible Sharing/Bible Reflection* – twice in groups of eight and twice in buzz groups of two each. One such occasion involved our sharing on the 2017 Kenya Lenten Campaign on “Peaceful and Credible Elections.” On another occasion the SCCs class animated its own SCCs Mass/*Jumuiya* Mass at the Hekima College Chapel. These experiences not only provided us with the felt knowledge of the content itself, but more importantly, provided a basis for evaluation, a ground for reflection and more importantly, the “wine” or material for conversations in class. It is based on these experiences that I wish to point out three areas in which the SCC model can help in reimagining the theology classroom in Africa today.

4. Three Points

a. **Point One: From Teaching to Conversation – African Conversation Theology or African Palaver Theology**

One of the first values that I believe that SCCs can contribute in the pedagogy of theological education in Africa is in the area of doing theology as conversation. In saying this, it is important to mention that African Conversation Theology is not a distinctive invention of SCCs. African theologians like Agbonkhianmeghe Orobator and Benezet Buzo have long underlined the idea that in Africa, conversations or what they both refer to as *palaver* is the model for doing theology that we can call African Palaver Theology. This is because for Africa “doing theology is not an isolated affair.”⁶ It is a community event, one that involves interaction, debate and inclusive participation. This idea of *palaver* as a way of doing theology is not an invention of African theologians themselves. Citing examples from Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*, for instance, Orobator shows how this model of theology as conversation has been there from the very beginnings of African culture.⁷

The strengths of the *palaver* model of teaching theology cannot be exhausted. However, I will point out just two levels of advantage. The first is at the epistemological level. As opposed to the lecture method or “hierarchical model”⁸ that centralizes the source of knowledge on one person -- the teacher -- the *palaver* method decentralizes the source of knowledge process. This, therefore, not only broadens the scope of the theological conversation and insight, but also enriches it, deepens it and grounds it in the context of the real fears, hopes and desires and contexts of the community having the discussion.⁹ The second, which for me is the most important, is at the level of agency. For the *palaver* method, participation is key. By giving each student a voice in the theological conversation in the classroom, this

⁶ Agbonkhianmeghe Orobator, *Theology Brewed in an African Pot* (Nairobi: Paulines Publication, 2008), 11.

⁷ *Ibid*, 11.

⁸ Magesa, *The Post-Conciliar Church in Africa*, 200.

⁹ For Magesa this decentralization is necessary for African theology to begin to take the practitioners of Africa Religion as equal dialogue partners. *Ibid*, 200.

model makes of the student not just a passive and docile receiver of ideas, but an active agent in the process of creating value and knowledge. This process is transformational and empowering for the student.¹⁰

While many African theologians have researched and written quite appreciatively on the importance of *palaver* as a method for doing African theology, as a student of theology, myself, I still struggle to see that at play in the classrooms. I believe this is because of the fact that while the idea is present, many schools of theology are still at a loss for a method for giving it flesh in the classroom. This is where I believe SCCs comes in. SCCs have found a way to make this idea of *palaver* functional as method. For instance, in an SCC Mass, rather than a “preached homily”, SCCs have learned to adopt the method of a “shared homily”. This model was also at play in the SCC class at Hekima. Rather than a taught lecture, each class was structured as a conversation. Of course, every class should have a target -- content! However, rather than make the class to be circumscribed by content, each class was designed in such a way that the content provided the background/springboard for conversations; rather than the focus of teaching, content was the material for dialogue. Thus, my experience as a student was that the conversations in class always had more content than the assigned reading material, and with the added implication that this method made theology more personally engaging, and more intimately meaningful for the student.

b. Point Two: Theology as Inclusive Collaboration

The second value of SCCs as a model for doing theology is that it offers a more inclusive model for having theological conversation. Anyone taking a class on Christology or “Introduction to Theology” today would often be bombarded with a litany of heresies like Pelagianism and Donatism and fancy words like *perichoresis* and *communicatio idiomatum*. While one may argue that these ideas are foundational to theological education, it is also a reflection of the kind of conversationalists involved in the theological process. According to Orobator, this penchant for rigorous scholastic summersaults in theology is often as a result of, or rather indicative of, the absence of women’s voices in theological education, research and scholarship.¹¹

I would like to further add that it is not only women’s voices that are silent within our theology classrooms, but the voices of the ordinary people. These simple people are really those who are struggling with the real realities of life of the African continent – they are the victims of HIV/AIDS, they are the women and men who are victims of human trafficking, they are the married couples struggling with childlessness, they are the youth struggling with a sense of direction. By ignoring their voices, we often find that theology fails to talk about real and existential issues, and instead throws around fanciful jargons like *perichoresis* – issues that have no relevance to *ugali* and *sukumawiki*¹² -- the daily experiences of people’s lives in Africa today.

SCCs as a model for a theology class offers a model for including these voices within our theological conversation, so that rather than theologize *about* them, we theologize *with* them. For

¹⁰ While empowering the student it also teaches him/her how to listen to others, as part of the discipline for theological education.

¹¹ Agbonkhanmeghe Orobator, “Ethics Brewed in an African Pot,” *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 31, No. 1 (2011), 7.

¹² I prefer this to saying “the bread and butter” of people’s lives. *Ugali* and *sukumawiki* are common staples of the poor in Nairobi.

instance, during the SCC class on the theme of “Youth in the Catholic Church”, rather than read theological treatises on youth, we had African youth themselves who are not professional theologians come into the classroom to have conversations with us – students of theology -- about their faith journeys and the challenges that they face today, and how we can together reflect together on these challenges. As a student of theology, I believe that this process not only enriches the quality and depth of the theological conversations that I can engage in inside the classroom, but it also prepares me for a life of collaborative ministry that often would involve working with non-academic theologians in the journey of faith. This is quite connected to my next point.

c. Point Three: Connecting Classroom and Mission Ground

One of the burdens that theology has received from the expatriate Western missionary’s entry into the African continent is what Orobator calls, in the words of Bernard Williams, “the wall of separation” between Religion and Society.¹³ Traditional African society did not have this dichotomy. Unfortunately, this dichotomy has, in a lot of ways, also infected academic theology. Often, theological education in classrooms seem quite disconnected with the nitty-gritty of life on the streets. Orobator for instance points out what he calls “the big five” (five critical areas that should form a serious talking points for African theology, but which are often untalked about and untouched): governance, integrity of creation, genetically modified organisms, resource extraction and domestic injustice.¹⁴ I believe the list is more than these.

One of the things that the SCC model does is that it forces theology to take seriously, in the words of *Gaudium et Spes*, “the joys and hopes and anxieties”¹⁵ of those we serve. This is because SCCs brings the world into the classroom, and the classroom into the world. For instance, in our conversation with young people from Kenyatta University, it became clear that for many of them, there are three major issues of worry today: sex and personal relationships, unemployment and social justice and internet and social media.¹⁶ None of these issues often make it into theology classroom. Thus, by bringing these issues within our purview, SCC as a model of theology forces the theology classroom not only to open her windows, but to also allow the dust and sand of the mission ground to dirty her windows and plaster her desks and tables. This forms the “new ground” on which the theologians can stand rather than the fancy “cement” that is clean of all the nitty-gritty reality.

5. Colloquy: The Task Before Us

Presently Africa and the world at large are experiencing seismic changes at multiple levels and at various fronts. If the Catholic Church in Africa is to be ready and equipped to respond to the challenges of the continent today, a reimagination of theological education is a non-negotiable component. To

¹³ Agbonkhanmeghe Orobator, “Not a ‘Wall of Separation’: Religion and Politics -- The Challenge for the African Church.” Summer Lecture Series, The Lane Centre for Catholic Studies and Social Thought, University of San Francisco, July 7, 2010. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5vcXExMbFhc> Accessed 24 March, 2017.

¹⁴ Orobator, “Ethics Brewed in an African Pot”, 9-12.

¹⁵ *Gaudium et Spes*, #1. http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html Accessed 24 March, 2017.

¹⁶ See Alloys Nyakundi, “Report on the Youth Small Christian Communities (YSCCs) at Kenyatta University Christ the Teacher Catholic Parish in Nairobi, Kenya” on the Small Christian Communities (SCCs) Global Collaborative Website. http://www.smallchristiancommunities.org/images/stories/pdf/kucc_report_2016.pdf Accessed 10 April, 2017.

paraphrase the title of Laurenti Magesa's latest book, the world is moving and African theology needs to move along, for indeed, "there is no turning back the clock!"

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10 April, 2017