

## Imaging Initiation in Small Church Communities

"I see little long term hope for the catechumenate unless there is a connection between small Christian communities and the catechumenate *before, during and after* initiation." Such was the forthrightly expressed conviction announced by Fr. Jim Dunning at the beginning of his keynote to the 1994 meeting of the North American Forum for Small Christian Communities (NAFSCC).<sup>1</sup> In the months following the NAFSCC conference, Dunning headed up the design of a Beginnings and Beyond institute with a particular focus on doing initiation in conjunction with small church communities. Scheduled for Rochester in the fall of 1995, this institute was cancelled on account of too few registrations. As it turned out, sadly, Jim was dead by the date that institute would have begun.

In 1997, the NAFSCC approached FORUM to suggest a resumption of the conversation about the possibilities of doing initiation in the context of small church communities. How exactly to proceed was not immediately clear, but the shared interest to do so was keen. Subsequently hosted by the National Pastoral Life Center, FORUM and a broad base of small Christian community constituencies explored, over a number of meetings, how this relationship might be developed. It was not long before both initiation and small community specialists jointly acknowledged that there was not a hair's breadth of difference between us on the issue of fundamental vision. Rooted in the parish, we come together under a vision of conversion in community that has for its object, *becoming the body of Christ in mission for the sake of the world*. Doing initiation in the context of small church communities offers us major opportunities both to strengthen initiation and to challenge small communities to fuller realization of their ecclesial vocation.

In 1999, FORUM committed itself to collaboration with its dialogue partners for the purpose of developing a new institute. As did FORUM, the three national small Christian community organizations (Buena Vista, National Alliance of Parishes Restructuring into Communities and the NAFSCC) each committed resources to facilitate the design of an institute.<sup>2</sup> By the spring of 2002, the team had designed a three-day institute for initiation ministers and small community members/leaders to imagine together the possibilities of doing initiation in the context of small church communities. The goals of the institute are as follows:

1. Image the Initiation Process in Small Church Communities
2. Provide a Process to Dialogue about the Possibilities and Challenges of the Initiation Process in the Small Church Community Context
3. Deepen an Understanding of Evangelization, Conversion and Discipleship in Word, Worship, Community and Mission

With a presenting team that involved specialists in both initiation and small church communities we conducted the first institute in July 2002 with the Diocese of Erie. About 75 people participated, most from the Erie diocese, but several also from other parts of the United States. Some came with experience in initiation ministry alone; some with experience just of small communities; some with some experience of each. By the close of the first day, it was already clear, whatever the point of departure of the participants, all readily embraced the possibilities, even while clearly acknowledging the challenges, of doing initiation in small church communities well.

An adapted celebration of the rites of initiation, followed by mystagogical reflection and critical input, such as might be found in a Beginnings and Beyond institute, form the basic structure of the new institute. At each stage, correlating experience and reflection on the small church community dimension is introduced. The whole institute begins with consideration of the common overarching goal of both initiation and small church communities - a vision of church oriented to the reign of God. Early on, a general overview of the rites and process of Christian initiation is presented to the whole assembly, but it is done with a particular concern to orient small

community members who might not otherwise have had the opportunity for a critical introduction to initiation. Likewise, an overview presentation on the vision of parish-rooted small church communities is done for all, but with a special concern for those in initiation ministry who might not be otherwise familiar with small church communities.

Dunning's visionary statement, quoted at the outset, suggests that he was projecting at least the possibility of a thoroughgoing relationship between small communities and initiation ministry. No one is suggesting at this point, however, that we have all the answers about how to fully realize a complete infusion of initiation ministry in the context of small communities. We do not have to begin with the whole loaf in order to set a course for the future. What animates us at this juncture, however, is a strong intuition about the fruitful potential of this relationship, along with some modest experience throughout the country that encourages that intuition.

The dream that is driving this new institute envisions the incorporation of inquirers into already existing small church communities during the period of evangelization, and the continued participation of catechumens/candidates in small communities throughout the catechumenate and beyond. Realizing this dream will take time; it will be achieved in steps and in multiple ways. There will be many more than one way of doing initiation in the context of small church communities.

Not every small church community will be ready, willing or able to double as a catechumenal community. It will take a relatively mature small church community to so serve adequately. The members of a small community will need to be well oriented to the structure and dynamics of the initiation process and their prospective role in the process. The Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults and critical thinkers about small church communities share a fundamental conviction about the four elements of word, worship, community and witness. Their substantial cultivation are the critical touchstones by which to test an adequate catechumenal experience and a fully-fledged small church community. To be an apt candidate to receive inquirers and catechumens a small church community needs for all four elements to be activated in a really cultivated balance.

Happily, completely apart from this conversation about developing a close collaboration between initiation ministry and small church communities, there is a clear consensus among people involved with small communities, that the elements of word, community, worship and witness form the essential measure by which to gauge the ecclesial authenticity of the small community experience. If sometimes one or the other of these elements is honored more in the breach than in the observance, small church communities are being regularly challenged to achieve a balanced realization of all four elements. Gathering around the *word* of God, usually the lectionary readings of the liturgical year, is the privileged lens through which small community members focus on their lives with a view to making concrete connections between life and faith. Making a difference in each others' lives and faith, acknowledging the ties that bind, belonging to one another: these are key themes being cultivated in *community*. A fundamentally Eucharistic and ecclesial spirituality informs the *worship* life of small communities. The prayer of the small community both orients members to, and flows from, the weekly celebration of parish Eucharist. If small community members are typically among the most involved parishioners in the life and mission of the parish, there is a strong effort throughout the United States to underline for small communities the importance of realizing that the call to witness goes beyond an often very laudable involvement with the corporal and spiritual works of mercy. More and more, small church communities are being called to a basic engagement with the issues of systemic change that promote the realization of justice and peace.

To realize this vision for collaboration will call for a spirit of adaptability on the part of both small church communities and catechumenal teams. A small community must be genuinely open to receive inquirers/catechumens/candidates. This openness will be witnessed to by the willingness of the community to adjust its operating style to meet the needs of those they will be receiving. For instance, small church communities typically gather around the lectionary readings in a spirit of *preparing* for the next Sunday's Eucharist. The initiation process, however, envisions the liturgy

as the privileged place of catechesis. There, the nourishing word is announced, preached, celebrated. Catechumens/candidates are dismissed from the community to savor the word in the week ahead. Consequently, one simple change that small communities might be called to make would be to gather around the lectionary readings of the *previous* Sunday, rather than the *upcoming* Sunday.

The challenge of dealing well with the catechetical component of the catechumenate will be an issue of major importance. How one understands the *catechetical* task, of course, shapes one's perspectives on what it will take, for a small church community to be judged adequate to this task. In this regard, it might be anticipated, that, over time, what is presently understood as the catechumenal team, may come to be as much, if not more, of a resource to the small communities doubling as catechumenal communities as to the inquirers/catechumens/candidates themselves.

Presently, it is often the case that once baptized/received, new Catholics want immediately to become members of the catechumenal team. Having experienced an intense communal experience during the course of their initiation/reception process, they quite naturally want that experience to continue. But, as Jim Dunning was always quick to observe, "We are not initiating people into the catechumenal team; we are initiating them into the church." Tossing people like goldfish into the often relatively anonymous waters of general parish life, however, has met with its own problems. The retention problems we have experienced can often be traced to the disconnect people experience between the catechumenate experience and that of general parish life. Drawing prospective Catholics into involvement with mature small church communities *before, during* and *after* initiation can capitalize on the bonding experience that develops as a matter of course in small church communities. Not only does the kind of bonding that happens during the catechumenate not need to be broken following the completion of the initiation rites, preserving it, through continuing participation as a member of the small church community, will facilitate the transition into the initial mystagogy that has often been found wanting with the newly baptized/received. A continuing communal relationship with the newly baptized/received will also encourage and challenge small church communities to deepen the on going, indeed, life-long, mystagogy to which we are all called.

Whether one's entry point in this venture is that of initiation ministry or small church communities, what we are about together transcends the immediate concerns of either point of departure. We come together around a vision of church oriented to becoming the body of Christ in mission for the sake of the world. Nevertheless, the legitimate self-interest of both initiation ministry and small church communities stands to be enormously well served as we cultivate this relationship in the years ahead. Doing initiation in the context of small church communities offers new hope for more secure initiation on the one hand; and on the other, it will serve to enhance the ecclesial character of small church communities.

The Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults makes it crystal clear that the responsibility for initiation belongs to all the baptized. This emerging approach to doing initiation in the context of small church communities opens a path to a deeper embrace of that shared responsibility, a path to a more animating and animated, a more evangelizing and evangelized church at the service of the reign of God.

Robert K. Moriarty

(Robert K. Moriarty, S.M. directs the Pastoral Department for Small Christian Communities for the Archdiocese of Hartford. He is a FORUM team member and serves as a board member of the National Alliance of Parishes Restructuring into Communities. He holds a doctorate in religious studies from Marquette University.)

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1. The NAFSCC is an association of diocesan personnel charged with the responsibility for promotion and support of small Christian communities in the parishes of their respective dioceses. For a fuller sense of Dunning's thought about developing the relationship between initiation and small Christian communities, see the synopsis of the conference that Dunning and I offered in the March, 1995 issue of **Catechumenate**.

2. At that point, Sheila O'Dea, RSM and myself set about assembling a team to do the design. At one time or other, the team included initiation specialists, Linda Licata, Joanna Case, Fr. Rick Conway, Fr. Andy Varga and Sheila O'Dea, RSM. The small church community specialists included: Fr. Clem Davis, Carolyn Mackenzie, Fr. Thomas Caroluzza and myself. Caroluzza doubles as a specialist in both respects, of course, having been doing initiation and small communities in very close association for more than twenty-five years. Caroluzza, it may also be noted, keynoted the 1995 conference of the NAFSCC. Building on the foundational vision Dunning explored in the previous year, Caroluzza presented his working model in this regard implemented over the course of twenty-some years.