

Small Church Communities and the Pastoral Formation of the Seminarian as a "Man of Communion"

"I want to thank you for mentoring me. I had no preparation for doing something like this in the seminary." These are the words that came quickly to mind when I was asked to offer some reflections on preparing seminarians to work with the promotion and development of small church communities. It is a young priest who is speaking. He is not complaining; he is simply expressing appreciation for the opportunity to absorb, listen in on, and participate in - a yearlong process of our working together with a group of parishioners in an effort to strengthen the life and mission of the parish as a whole.

Now, if truth be told, it is not as if this young priest came completely cold to this process. Subsequently, he also let me know that he had participated in small group theological reflection during his seminary years. His homiletics training underlined the importance of connecting faith and life. And he had himself been part of a Renew small group before entering the seminary. Even with that background, however, his words acknowledge what he regards as a lacuna in his pastoral formation. I take them as a call to integrate preparation to work with small church community formation into seminary training.

While a case can be made, no doubt, for many things to be included in seminary formation, let me be so bold as to suggest, not only that preparation to work with small communities be included in seminarians' pastoral formation, but also that such preparation ought to be front and center in the formation of future priests. Small church communities should be front and center in their pastoral formation because parish should be front and center in their formation.

Parish is the ordinary experience of church for most Catholics connected to church and parish is the ordinary context for priestly ministry. Further, developing small church communities is not merely about setting up a few nice small groups for people who want to share. What they are really about is vision for parish, about developing a more relational parish (rooted in communion) for a more relational world (oriented to mission). Developing small church communities as basic building blocks of parish is about meeting what John Paul II has called "the great challenge facing us in the millennium which is now beginning," namely, "[t]o make the Church the *home and school of communion*...1."

Says John Paul:

"[T]he domain of communion (koinonia) embodies and reveals the very essence of the mystery of the church. Communion is the fruit and demonstration of that love which springs from the heart of the Eternal Father and is poured out upon us through the Spirit which Jesus gives us (cf. Rom. 5:5), to make us all 'one heart and one soul' (Acts 4:32).2

John Paul charges us then, to make the promotion of "*a spirituality of communion*"-

the guiding principle of education wherever individuals and Christians are formed, wherever ministers of the altar, consecrated persons, and pastoral workers are trained, wherever families and communities are being built up. A spirituality of communion indicates above all the heart's contemplation of the mystery of the Trinity dwelling in us, and whose light we must also be able to see shining on the face of the brothers and sisters around us.3

It is precisely this vision of the church as mystery, communion and mission that animates the development of small church communities. "[T]rue expressions of ecclesial communion and centers of evangelization",4 as John Paul calls them, small church communities serve to develop a communal spirituality for parish, a spirituality rooted in communion. Formation orienting seminarians to develop small church communities is crucial then for realizing John Paul's vision

for the church of the new millennium.

To make the case more concretely for the importance of preparing seminarians to work with small church communities, it is essential to consider 1.) the general situation of parish today and 2.) a proposal for parish in light of our ecclesiastical and cultural contexts.

The American Catholic parish is today, at once an enormous achievement, and a source of great frustration. The fairly typical, reasonably *successful* parish today multiplies programs and activities with an eye to delivering more and more service to more and more individuals. It accomplishes a great deal in the process, but it is also a prescription for burnout; not only for priests and staff members, but also for the same one hundred families who carry each of our parishes. This general activity-dominated approach to parish is what gets scored by the wag who jokes that the seven last words of the dying priest are: "I can't possibly do one more thing."

The challenges we face in doing parish well are not just internal to the church. The challenges we face come at us, first of all, from the culture. I speak of the hectic pace of life, the competitiveness, the consumerism, and the individualism which so shape the American experience. This culture has given us many good things, but it has also given us so much emptiness, alienation, isolation, meaninglessness. Given how assimilated so many established American Catholics have become in the last fifty years, it must at least be asked: Have we so eaten of the myth of individualism that it has transformed our hearts even more than our partaking of the body of Christ?

There is good news however. And it comes to us from the culture itself. There are signs that individualism is not fully satisfying. There is something of a compensatory response to a one-sided individualism that is bubbling up from the grassroots. Witness the emergence of the support group phenomenon throughout the culture. Robert Wuthnow, one of the country's premier sociologists of religion has done a major study of the support group phenomenon in American society.⁵ He reports that 4 out of 10 Americans are members of some type of small group that meets regularly and in which people experience caring and support. Another 2 out of 10 said they would like to participate in such a group. Half of them indicated that it was fairly to very likely that they would join such a group within the following year. While the support group movement can be critiqued and challenged to grow at a number of levels, it is, says Wuthnow, a significant cultural phenomenon, motivated by the basic desires for community and spirituality.

In his recent Lilly-funded study on Catholic small Christian communities in the United States, Bernard Lee, S.M. identified a minimum of 37,000 small Christian communities, the vast majority of which are parish-connected communities.⁶ Since the original census, which formed the basis of the subsequent analysis, communities have continued to surface. Lee presently estimates that there are between 45 and 50,000 Catholic small Christian communities in the United States.

There is afoot, then, in the church and the culture a move to recover connectedness, the ties that bind; a concern to re-weave the communal fabric of the body politic and of the body ecclesial. The recovery of community is, I believe, one of the principal challenges that faces us in this culture and in our church in this culture. Ironically, the typical way we so often do parish aids and abets some of the worst of the culture. We complain about the pick and choose, delicatessen, smorgasbord approaches that many take to parish, but at the same time we cater, in spite of our best intentions, to the expectations of a consumer oriented culture. Sadly, so many of us are elegant consumers of parish services, but all too often with precious little sense of belonging and shared responsibility for it all.

Parishes have been "seduced by needs," suggests Fr. William Bausch. "We have been trained to find out their needs and respond, find out where they itch and scratch."⁷ Meeting needs, he notes, is not bad, but too many parishes are defined by programs. The parish of the new millennium will not be enamored by merely fulfilling needs, says Bausch, it will be enamored of relationships - with God, one another, the wider community. In other words, the future of the

parish depends on becoming more and more "the home and school of communion".

We are specialists in Catholic pastoral care in the *cura animarum*, the care of individual souls. That will always be one essential pole of pastoral care. In the church, in this culture, however, we need a compensatory shift of emphasis that redresses the one-sided individualistic imbalance and cultivates deliberately the corporate, the communal. The Vatican II document on priestly life and ministry underlines the importance of maintaining this polarity. "The office of pastor is not confined to the care of the faithful as individuals, but is also properly extended to the formation of a genuine Christian community."⁸

We can not simply pour water and stir people into a vivid experience of participation in the body of Christ. Like quality family life, we have to cultivate the conditions favorable to an experience of being the body of Christ. We need to be cultivating a vision and experience of parish centered on *ordinary people helping each other to connect life and faith regularly*.

This vision statement founds what has come to be known as the **Called to Be Church** approach to parish. Developed initially by Fr. Arthur Baranowski, Katie O'Reilly and Carrie Piro at St. Elizabeth Ann Seton Parish (Troy, MI), this vision for parish is promoted now by the National Alliance of Parishes Restructuring into Communities (NAPRC) founded by Baranowski.⁹ **The Called to be Church** vision is a comprehensive approach to developing a more reflective and relational parish for a more relational world. It is not focused simply on small church communities. It proposes two equally important lines of structural development for parish. The first of these two lines of development has to do with *doing everything differently* in the parish, i.e., doing every program and activity in the parish in a specifically more reflective and relational way.¹⁰ The second line of development has to do with the formation and nurture of small church communities, not as one more program, but, in line with the perspective of the U.S. bishops, as "basic units of parish" in a long-range plan for parish development.¹¹ This involves a phased introduction to the small church community experience that begins by inviting limited commitments and supported by structured resources appropriate to the particular phase.¹²

Taken together these two structural lines of development form a comprehensive approach to realizing a vision for parish centered on *ordinary people helping each other to connect life and faith regularly*. This vision is not so much a model for parish as it is a set of orienting principles that are variously implemented in accord with particular parish situations.

Admittedly, realizing this vision means work, perhaps even exhaustion from time to time, but it does not mean burnout. It is work worth doing because it is not about just adding one more program for people to pick and choose to meet individual needs. It is about meeting individual and communal needs. It is not just a replication of the service industry approach to the culture. It is not ministry focused in terms of doing more things for more people. It is ministry focused in terms of consistently bringing people together in a way that enables them to make a difference in each other's lives and faith. It is pastoral ministry understood in terms of minister serving as a catalyst for on-going mutual evangelization.

This vision for parish is not about saving a threatened institution. It is about animating a church for mission. As church we are a people gathered and sent. The gathering is for the sake of the sending. We are called to promote a world in right relationship, a world of justice and peace, a world which a people of faith know and experience as rooted in the mystery of Trinitarian communion and mission. But how do we expect to make a difference in the world if we are not first making a difference in each other's lives and faith?

The nature of this vision is such that it can not be achieved by a pastor alone. Nor can it be realized by parishioners alone. It can be realized only as a marriage of effort between priest and people committing to the effort together. The ordinary vehicle for this mutual cooperation is located in the development of a core team that involves parishioners, the pastor, perhaps one or the other staff member. Their task is to cultivate a deliberate, focused, sustained effort to

implement both lines of development (i.e., *doing everything differently*, small church communities) rooted in a vision for parish centered on *ordinary people helping each other to connect life and faith regularly*.

This is a vision that is proportionate to the challenges we face in doing parish in this culture. It is this proportionality that serves as the warrant for suggesting that the theme of parish and small church communities be front and center in the pastoral formation of seminarians.

Priests generally deal with a number of issues in exploring the vision for parish limned here: 1.) the busyness of parish ministry; 2.) the need for basic information and an overall vision context within which to hold it all together; 3.) their familiarity with small group process; 4.) their own comfort level around speaking about the connections between personal life and faith; 5.) questions about control; and 6.) in some cases their general morale. There are implications in each for seminarian formation.

1.) A feeling of being overwhelmed by the sheer busyness of parish often leads the fatigued pastor to spontaneously recoil from small church communities understood as one more program. It is seeing them in the context of the larger vision explored here that gives priests glimmers of relief and a hope for more deeply engaging the lives of individuals and the parish corporately. Seminarians need the opportunity to grapple with the implications of the vision treated here precisely in light of the prevailing activity-dominated pattern of parish life today.

2.) What do people do in these small communities? Aren't they just little cliques, places for the disaffected to complain about church or the pastor, knock-offs of Latin American Marxist liberation theology cells? Priests sometimes raise such questions. The process of their honest clarification offers the opportunity for sharing basic information and the kind of vision introduced here. Seminarians need such background, a sense of the contemporary worldwide emergence of small church communities,¹³ their grounding in an eccesiology and spirituality of communion, and beginning experience with, and skill development in implementing, the several dimensions of the vision.

3.) Priests are generally experienced in dealing with large groups, with the parish as a whole, with the liturgical assembly, with couples and with individuals in one on one settings. Experience in and facilitating small group process is something many need to develop skills and comfort with. Introduction to this dimension of pastoral ministry during their years of formation will stand seminarians in good stead in the years ahead, not only in realizing the vision addressed here, but in their parish ministry in general.

4.) Being comfortable with speaking personally about his life and faith, and in the language of ordinary life, is an important factor influencing a priest's being able to facilitate the kind of parish development envisioned here. The gradual, phased approach that underlies the overall approach described here is as important for priests as for parishioners. Step by step pastors and people grow together into this experience of being church. Seminary formation offers the time and space to develop this capacity and in a way that is also boundary-appropriate.

5.) Dealing with the issue of control is a matter some priests need to sort out. Engaging with the importance of the effective implementation of the structures related to pastoral facilitators is a significant factor enabling pastors to deal with this issue. Experiencing and understanding lay empowerment as rooted in the parish and well connected to pastoral leadership during their formation will enable seminarians to facilitate and lead gracefully.

6.) Fatigue, frustration and discouragement with an overwhelming pastoral situation and with general turmoil in church - low morale - as it is sometimes named, can easily get in the way of a priest being able to see the possibilities of the approach to parish discussed here. But this brings us back to the large question of vision. Ezekiel's words, "except for a vision the people will die", are as relevant for priests as for people. Seminarians need to be armed with a realizable vision

for parish. They need to be formed and mentored in preparation for pursuing it.

These six issues interpenetrate one another. Dealing with one requires one to deal with the others. Dealing with one helps to deal with the others. If these are issues actively dealt with by practicing parish priests, it stands to reason that they are issues around which the pastoral formation of future priests should be focused.

Formation for this vision needs to involve a combination of both experience and critical reflection - done in dialogue with the rest of the candidate's theological and spiritual formation. It is all about developing the seminarian as a "man of communion".¹⁴

As he grounds fundamental Christian identity, so also does John Paul ground the identity of the priest. "It is within the Church's mystery, as a mystery of Trinitarian communion in missionary tension, that every Christian identity is revealed and likewise the specific identity of the priest and his ministry."¹⁵ No wonder, then, that John Paul underlines "the fundamentally relational dimension of priestly ministry..."¹⁶ "[T]he nature and mission of the ministerial priesthood cannot be defined except through this multiple and rich interconnection of relationships which arise from the Blessed Trinity and are prolonged in the communion of the Church, as a sign and instrument of Christ, of communion with God and of the unity of all humanity."¹⁷

It is this fundamental sense of Christian life and priestly ministry that leads John Paul to regard the priest as "a man of communion" and why "in his relations with all people he must be a man of mission and dialogue." Thus the "special importance" he attaches to "the capacity to relate to others." "This," he says, "is truly fundamental for a person who is called to be responsible for a community and to be a man of communion."¹⁸

This vision of the church as communion explicitly shapes John Paul's perspective on the formation of candidates for the priesthood. "Since pastoral action is destined by its very nature to enliven the Church, which is essentially 'mystery', 'communion' and 'mission', *pastoral formation* should be *aware of* and should *live* these ecclesial aspects in the exercise of the ministry."¹⁹ He calls, in effect, for a formation rooted in *experience* and *knowledge*.

The most basic orientation of seminarians to the possibilities of small church communities will come from the actual experience of participating in one. An experience of small church community within the seminary itself is a rich way to develop the seminary along the lines of John Paul II's expectation that it be "a formation community".²⁰ The development of small church communities among seminarians offers something of a crucible for a gradual peer formation to a living experience of church as communion and mission. Such an experience can also serve to lay a foundation for future participation in an on-going priest support group after ordination.

As important and valuable as is the development of small church communities among seminarians themselves, their richest experiential formation in this regard will come from extended participation in a parish-based small church community. This will afford them an opportunity to hear the stories of ordinary people dealing with the call to be faithful in the ups and downs of daily life, even as they share something of their own story of faith. It will offer them a setting to hone their ability to put the experience of faith into the language of ordinary life. Their participation in a parish-based small church community can serve as a language school, as it were, a setting in which to learn to translate the work of critical theological study into the words that people use. A significant parish-based small church community experience will contribute to the deepening of the seminarian's own personal and spiritual formation.²¹

Happily, there is some experience to report in this regard. The field education program of one Midwest seminary has provided the opportunity for seminarians assigned to a particular parish to participate as a member of a small church community. Assignment to this parish for field education means participating in a small community for the duration of a year. A colleague who has served as field education supervisor in this parish reports that this has been a very significant

experience for seminarians who have participated. Reflecting on the experience at the end of the year seminarian interns have reported their realization that people are not just filling up pews. They experienced, and came to be inspired by, the depth of people's faith and their ability to put it into words. They have been struck as well with how the sharing of faith has moved parishioners out from the small community to service. Some of the seminarians continued to come back to the small community even after the year. They experienced substantial support and affirmation of their vocational journey. In more than one case the small community continued to journey with the seminarian right to ordination.

An experience of small church community in the parish and in the seminary needs to be enriched, of course, by critical reflection on it all and this needs to be done in dialogue with the rest of the seminarians' theological and spiritual formation. The very experience of small church community, it may be hoped, will generate grist for the mill of theological and ecclesiological study.

The theme of parish and small church communities could find itself appropriately integrated into already established courses of study both theological and pastoral. Special programs, workshops or seminars featuring priests and parishioners working together to implement the broad vision being explored here would bring experience, critical assessment and theological reflection together for the mutual enrichment of both seminarians and pastoral practitioners.²²

It is not only a young priest today who brings together reflections on seminary formation and small church communities. The Initiative Report on the recent Catholic Common Ground conference, *The Priest in the Church*, features relevant reflections by a senior priest.

Fr. Neil Connolly, pastor of St. Mary Parish in Manhattan, who was ordained in 1958, contrasted his seminary experience of separateness from others, lecture style teaching, "almost zero" pastoral training, and authoritarian discipline, with his life as a pastor today. Today's challenges, he finds, require willingness to look for new solutions, experience in small Christian communities, skills in community organizing, and collaborative working with laity, especially with women.²³

And in between the young priest and the senior pastor there is the experience of the priest in his prime to consider. Speaking awhile back at a diocesan meeting of parish core teams working to implement the vision for parish being explored here, a Hartford pastor summed up his reflections simply, "In short, small church communities bring an excitement, a vitality and a way of being parish that I had never experienced in the earlier years of my priesthood."

Deliberate, focused, sustained pastoral formation of the seminarian designed to prepare him to develop parish along the lines described here will serve to form him as "a man of communion." Such an approach to the seminarian's pastoral formation promises to lay a solid foundation for effective and satisfying priestly ministry and for developing the church as "*the home and school of communion*".

(Robert K. Moriarty, S.M. directs the Pastoral Department for Small Christian Communities (Archdiocese of Hartford) 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.)

1. *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, n. 43.

2. *Ibid.*

3. *Ibid.*

4. *Christifideles Laici*, n. 26.

5. Wuthnow, Robert. *Sharing the Journey: Support Groups and America's New Quest for*

Community. New York: The Free Press, 1994.

6. Lee, Bernard. *The Catholic Experience of Small Christian Communities*. New York: Paulist Press, 2000. For a summary and review of this book, cf. Moriarty, Robert. "Parish and Small Church Communities", *America*, Vol. 184, No. 15, May 7, 2001.

7. Baush, William. *The Parish of the New Millennium*. Mystic, CT: Twenty-Third Publications, 1997.

8. *The Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests*, n. 6.

9. Baranowski, Arthur. *Creating Small Church Communities: A Plan for Restructuring the Parish and Renewing Catholic Life*. Cincinnati: St. Anthony Messenger Press, 1996.

10. The methodology for implementing the principle of doing everything differently is profoundly simple. It involves three dimensions. It begins with the deliberate introduction of some time for silence (two minutes) at some point or other whenever parishioners gather for one activity or another. It involves offering parishioners an experience-based question for reflection on life and faith that they might consider in the silence. Thirdly, it involves inviting people to speak with one another in a threesome for just a few minutes in response to the question considered. Finally, the person who is facilitating this experience ties these several minutes of silence, reflection and conversation together with the Lord's Prayer or some words of summary prayer.

At least at the beginning, this whole experience does not take any more than 5-7 minutes. We have elements of this already going on here and there in parish life. To introduce this experience into any one of these activities on any given occasion is a nice pastoral thing to do. The call here is to imagine the cumulative impact in a parish of doing this consistently, perseveringly and thoroughly over an extended period of time.

11. *Called and Gifted for the Third Millennium*

12. This second line of development has to do, not with adding small groups as one more program, but with a deliberate, sustained effort to invite parishioners to try a beginning small group experience with the hope that in time it may mature into a longer term small church community. At the outset, people are invited to make a limited commitment of time (e.g., six to eight weeks). They are provided with a simple, structured resource that allows people, in a self-directed fashion, to slow down, notice their lives, listen to each other and begin to connect with each other. In the final analysis, it is not the idea of small church communities that grabs people; what holds them is the actual experience of people making a difference in each others' lives and faith.

A second phase builds on the first, but becomes more deliberate at inviting people to notice the presence of God in the stuff of life, in the stories of the lives they have been reflecting on and talking about with one another. A limited commitment of time is again involved and a structured resource that any member of the group may lead from is offered. During this second phase, a link person or a couple is identified, one or two persons who may serve to connect the group to other groups and the larger parish in relationship to the pastor. Some particular formation is offered to them to fulfill this role. The link people come to be known as pastoral facilitators (PFs).

Having moved through the beginning phases, the groups are invited to claim an identity as a small church community. At this point the Sunday scriptures become the gathering focus of the community's life. The four elements of word, community, worship and witness become the touchstones of the community's identity. Small church communities are more than Wuthnow's support groups. The quality of the community's belonging, formation in faith, prayer and service are the criteria by which to test the authenticity of the group as a small church community. In this third phase, communities decide on a longer-term commitment, open to periodic review.

By this third phase, the PFs are in a regular pattern of meeting (i.e., every four to six weeks) with other PFs and the pastor. These gatherings are an opportunity for reflection on the small church community experience, for on-going formation in the overall vision and in the grounding elements of word, community, worship and witness. The fruit of these sessions is then fed back to the small communities.

With the dynamic of silence, hearing the week's gospel, reflection on a couple of experience-based focus questions and conversation in threes and in the whole group likewise being an integral part of the PF meetings, the regular gatherings of the PFs also take on something of the character of a small church community experience for the pastor himself.

The small communities themselves will also be brought together from time to time to experience

more directly their connection to each other and the larger parish. Potluck suppers, for instance, become occasions not only for socializing, but also for sharing with one another and other parishioners what the small church community experience means for the participants and for the parish as a whole. An annual retreat for the small communities, open also to parishioners at large, structured substantially in accord with the doing everything differently principle, extends and deepens the experience for the sake of strengthening the life and mission of the parish as a whole.

13. For a sense of the worldwide development of small church communities, cf. Moriarty, S.M., Robert. *An Experience of World Church in Miniature: A Report on the International Consultation on Small Christian Communities*. This 52 page report is available from the Pastoral Department for Small Christian Communities, 467 Bloomfield Avenue, Bloomfield, CT 06002; (860) 243-9642. For additional resources and information about the work of the department, cf. www.sccquest.org.

14. *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, n. 18.

15. *Ibid.*, n. 12.

16. *Ibid.*

17. *Ibid.*

18. *Ibid.*, n. 43.

19. *Ibid.*, n. 59.

20. *Ibid.*, n. 60.

21. Connecting with the pastor of the parish during their participation in a parish-based small community will offer additional mentoring. It will offer a grounded opportunity to process the whole range of issues addressed above that are key to priests' own coming to embrace this vision of developing the parish as a community of communities.

22. The National Alliance of Parishes Restructuring into Communities would be one resource on which to draw for the design and conduct of a workshop or seminar for seminarians. The NAPRC national office is located at 310 Allen Street, Dayton, OH 45410; (937) 256-3600.

23. *Initiative Report: Catholic Common Ground Initiative*. New York: National Pastoral Life Center. Volume 7: Number 2, June, 2003.