



Spring 2005

Gatherings

Eucharist, Communion and Small Church Community

Robert K. Moriarty, S.M.



On April 17, the 22nd day of Easter, we continued our celebration of the twentieth anniversary of the beginnings of small church communities in the archdiocese with a performance of the Fools' Mass in the chapel of St. Thomas Seminary. The players are members of a group named, Dzieci (Polish for children), headquartered in Brooklyn, NY. ...

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Small Is Beautiful

Joseph G. Healey, M.M.



There is something about the African personality that lends itself to setting up successful small Christian communities. Africans are naturally community minded. If someone dies they will spend days weeping with the family outside their house. They visit the old and the sick, especially those suffering from HIV. They also understand the power of prayer. We hardly ever have to reject lay leaders in our community in Tanzania.

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Worth Repeating

The Father laughs with the Son;
the Son laughs with the Father.
The Father likes the Son;
the Son likes the Father.
The Father delights in the Son;
the Son delights in the Father.
The Father loves the Son;
the Son loves the Father.
The laughter, liking, delighting,
loving is the Holy Spirit.

Meister Eckhart

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Vicariate Networking

Under the leadership of vicariate networking coordinators, Suzanne Battos (Hartford), Gena Evans (New Haven) and Lynn Tidgwell (Waterbury), three regional sessions were held recently at St. Mark, West Hartford, St. Bernadette, New Haven and St. Michael, Beacon Falls. Advisory Board member, Andree Grafstein facilitated a process of reflection on Naming and Claiming the Gifts of the Laity.

Developing Core Teams

The collaboration of Fr. Jerry Murasso and Phil Medeiros has resulted in the successful completion of the initial core team development process at St. Francis of Assisi, South Windsor. This process got underway in April at St. Ann, Avon under the leadership of Fr. Tom Sas. New parishes are in the wings.

Alliance Parishes Gather

Parishes with already developed core teams meet three times a year for mutual resourcing. Our most recent gathering was on Saturday, May 21. Fr. Art Baranowski (Archdiocese of Detroit) was on hand to facilitate this session.

communion rooted in an understanding of the church as communion that is grounded in appreciation of God as communion.

Eucharist is a mystery of communion because our God is a communion. Father, Son and Holy Spirit, the Trinity, is a mystery of intimacy, mutuality and interdependence. Relatedness is central to the very being of God. And all of reality is relational therefore, because our God is relational. The human being is not an isolated, self-contained individual, however much we crow about "my rights, my entitlements" in this culture of ours today. The essence of the person is relational because our God is relational.

As a people of faith, we understand that human beings are created in the image and likeness of God. "Let us make man [and woman] in our image, after our likeness." (Gen. 1:26) We are used to rooting the dignity of each person in the fact that we understand that we are made in the image and likeness of God. But there is also a corporate implication here. Indeed, underneath the brokenness and division that pervades the global village, there is that fundamental reality that the entire human community and all of creation are made in the image and likeness of the God of communion.

Reflecting on the mystery of the Trinity, Richard Rohr, O.F.M. (The Divine Mystery) quotes the Dominican mystic, Meister Eckhart:

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What a wonderful imaging of the total relatedness of God, God as Communion! But there is more. Our God is a mystery of communion and mission, a mystery that overflows from within into creation, redemption and sanctification. Likewise made in the image and likeness of God, the church is also a mystery of communion and mission, and so therefore the small church community. In big church and small we are called to serve as a sign of God's intention for us all. Communion leads to mission; the mission is communion. This is our evangelizing task: to be catalysts and agents of transformation in the midst of brokenness and wholeness. Evangelizing has to do certainly, with the transformation of individual hearts in our coming to know Jesus as Lord. It has also to do with the transformation of the world – with creating structures of justice and peace, with building what John Paul II called "a civilization of love." (Redemptoris Missio # 51) This is a mission about communion, so that God may be "all in all".



involved. The Link-up Team are keen to track and support similar initiatives that are unfolding in other areas of the global village. To this end, three of its members, Irene and John Wilson and Annette Hanigan spent Easter 2005 in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania observing and learning how small church communities in East African parishes accompany catechumens as part of their missionary outreach. You can access the Project Link-up web site at

home.vicnet.net.au/~rciascc/.

Small Church Communities in Europe

Fr. James O'Halloran from Dublin wrote recently to tell of his visit to Hungary to visit HALO-related small Christian communities there. HALO is Hungarian for "net". HALO creates forums where small Christian communities can network and share their experiences. O'Halloran estimates that there are in excess of 10,000 small Christian communities in Hungary. Given the history of Communist oppression, it comes as no surprise that much of this development was underground for a long period of time. HALO now seeks to connect with the worldwide experience of small Christian communities. Fr. O'Halloran has been involved particularly in Europe and Africa for about thirty years. He has written a

Small Is Beautiful

Joseph G. Healey, M.M.

(Editor's Note: During the more than thirty years that he has served in Africa, Fr. Healey has been a major animator of small Christian communities, especially in Tanzania and Kenya. He is the author of a number of books on African narrative theology. His newest book, *Small Christian Communities Today: Capturing the New Moment*, a joint editorial effort with Jean Hinton of England, is a collection of essays on current developments in small Christian communities throughout the world. It will appear this fall. You can reach Fr. Joseph Healey at JGHealey@aol.com.

This current essay appeared this past year in *The Tablet* of London. It is re-printed here with permission.)

There is something about the African personality that lends itself to setting up successful small Christian communities. Africans are naturally community minded. If someone dies they will spend days weeping with the family outside their house. They visit the old and the sick, especially those suffering from HIV. They also understand the power of prayer. We hardly ever have to reject lay leaders in our community in Tanzania. Occasionally a man will take a second wife, or become involved in financial dealings within the parish which distract him from his proper role, but on the whole the African lay leaders are committed, responsible people. Can the West learn from Africa, as its parishes look to a future with fewer and fewer priests?



The children of the St. Therese of the Child Jesus small Christian community in the Mombasa compound. They entertained their Australian visitors with a Jesus rap they had devised.

I first arrived in Tanzania in 1968, a time when the vast majority of priests and bishops were foreign missionaries, in other words not black and not local. Today the situation could not be more different. The African Church is thriving, largely because of its policy of supporting small Christian communities (SCCs). My own community of St. Charles Lwanga in Dar es Salaam was officially launched on the feast of Epiphany in 1978 and is the oldest of the 38 active SCCs in St. Peter's parish, all fully involved in local pastoral life. Currently there are 22 families with a total membership of 96, including children of all ages. The parent SCC started a youth branch, a women's club and children's activities and is twinned with another, similar community in Texas.

The bedrock of these communities is the family. Married couples host, organize and lead their groups – which never have more than about 20 members. Other people drift in and out; some only really turn up when there's a celebration and a meal. But it's the couples who provide the core stability of the group.

With more than 2,000 SCCs in the Dar es Salaam archdiocese, a key factor has been the personal commitment and leadership of Cardinal Polycarp Pengo and auxiliary



Santa Sophia small Christian community in Dugururu. African small communities typically take a saint's name and are composed of families living in the neighborhood.

thirty years. He has written a number of books on the subject, including the most recent, *Small Christian Communities: Vision and Practicalities* (Dufour Editions, Chester Springs, PA).

Buena Vista Convocation

The 2005 BV gathering will take place at the University of St. Thomas in St. Paul, MN, August 4-7. Presenters include Fr. Jose Marins, Michael Cowan, Fr. Bernard Lee, S.M., Fr. Bob Pelton, C.S.C. and others. Brochures are available from the office. For more information, go to buenavista.org.

Small, organic, small Christian communities in Buguruni. African small communities typically take a saint's name and are composed of families living in the neighborhood.

Cardinal Polycarp Pengo and auxiliary

Bishop Method Kilaini. These SCCs are part of the wider Eastern Africa experience where AMECEA (the Catholic bishops of Eritrea, Ethiopia, Kenya, Malawi, Sudan, Tanzania, Uganda, and Zambia) stated in 1976: "Systematic formation of small Christian communities should be the key pastoral priority in the years to come." One of the founders, Bishop Christopher Mwoleka of Rulenge diocese in Tanzania, described an SCC as a "community with a human face where the faith is caught rather than taught" and insisted that the entire diocesan pastoral plan be carried out by SCCs. Today most of the 40,000 SCCs in Eastern Africa are a "pastoral model" for inculturation, evangelization and the development of lay ministries within parish structures. They are at the heart of the African Church.

Lay leaders come from within them and drive policy outwards and upwards through out the entire African Church. While some priests and bishops resist this phenomenon, the majority welcome it and understand that, with parishes covering such huge geographical areas, these communities are by far the most efficient way to ensure the survival of Catholic faith and teaching.

Most Africans – clergy and laity – are conservative by nature. They have no wish to question Rome, and so tend by and large to accept and comply with Catholic doctrine. Could such a radical restructuring ever work in the West? The spiritual energy induced by programmes such as "At Your Word, Lord" and "Cafe" run the risk of petering out once the sessions have finished, and in cities especially the rate of turnover in any given group is high. The urban understanding of community is also quite different from that of



L to R: Fr. Joseph Healey, M.M., Yanitta and Joseph Samaka and visiting Australians, Irene Wilson and Annette Hanigan. The Samakas host and facilitate the St. Francis of Assisi small Christian community in Mombazi.

the rural villages. Many people deliberately leave small communities in order to live with some degree of anonymity in the city, yet the need for community never quite goes away.

A key is to make parish-based SCCs a normal way of pastoral and spiritual life. In September, 2003 I visited England during the opening days of the "At Your Word, Lord" renewal process taking place in the Westminster diocese. I'm sure I surprised some pastors (and parishioners alike) when I said that in Tanzania we find it "easy" to preach on Sunday if we use the SCC process. That is, during the week the priest participates in various SCC meetings in his parish that reflect on the gospel of the following Sunday. Then the Sunday parish liturgy becomes a "communion of the SCCs" with his homily reflecting back the experiences, insights and applications that he learned from the Bible reflections that took place in the individual SCC meetings.

The two main reasons that Catholics join SCCs are that they are looking for more religious nurture than the parish is providing and a hunger for community with relational depth. In the United States, parishes are encouraged to be renewed as a "community of many small communities" and to see SCCs as a "way of being parish" rather than a short-term programme. Research conducted by Fr. Bernard Lee of St. Mary's University in San Antonio, Texas, in 2003 indicates that there are 45,000 to 50,000 SCCs in the United States with an estimated 1 million members. In most communities the time is spent with scripture, especially making those magical connections with members' own lived experience.

Model parishes of SCCs have grown in different ways. Presentation Parish in Upper Saddle River, New Jersey, has 75 active SCCs as well as ministerial communities such as the Catechumenate Team and the Peace and Justice Ministry. New seasonal groups are formed each Lent and at other times of the year. St. Monica Parish in Indianapolis, Indiana, started with small church communities in 1988 and now has 37 SCCs in varying stages of development and maturity.



St. Francis of Assisi Church small Christian community in Mumbai.

In Eastern Africa we have learned that it is essential to provide a steady supply of faith-sharing resources and "How to Do It" booklets for SCCs. These rich materials, which come in print form, on the internet and on video, are produced by a wide variety of groups including Renew International, Buena Vistas, Twenty-Third Publications, Good Ground Press and New Way of Being Church (based in England). Particularly valuable for us is Quest, a Sunday scripture-based resource for small communities. We also find that parish and diocesan newsletters can promote SCCs and encourage networking.

There are still problems along the way. Africans living in remote areas have little or no education. Reaching out beyond their own community to the problems and issues of the wider world and the global Church is something they find hard; this challenge to social action is always a weak area that we try to work on. Nevertheless, the fact is that the members in St. Charles Lwanga SCC in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, gather enthusiastically for the weekly meeting where members – mainly adults – report on their families' health and problems in the neighborhood. They reflect on one of the Sunday scripture readings and they plan specific acts of charity in their area. The meeting incorporates prayer offerings and lively singing so that for these 15 people the maxim "We are the Church" is not just a slogan, but a way of life that truly applies to them. The challenge is to make that same transition in the West.

Questions for reflection and conversation

- What might we learn from the African experience of small Christian communities?
- How might we make small Christian communities more family-focused?
- To what extent would you describe your experience of small Christian community as a way of life?

Padri, Why Are You Trying to Break Us Up?

(Editor's Note: Among his recent publications, Fr. Joseph Healy, M.M., has edited a collection of stories and anecdotes that capture something of the African faith experience. The story featured here focuses on the catechumenate and community.)

When I served as a priest in Tanzania, I spent a year preparing a group of Maasai for baptism. I had to decide who seemed ready and who needed more study.