

Small Christian Communities The Fundamental Paradigm of the Church

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The Early Church

Jesus did not work on his own but always worked together with his colleagues forming a community of disciples. He sent these people into the world as apostles. The first apostles did not have any stable place to organise their work of evangelization. They always proclaimed the Gospel just travelling from one place to another.

They gathered at home. They assembled in the family houses of their colleagues listening to the Word of God, sharing bread, praying together. This church assembly in the family was the fundamental unit of primitive Christianity.

In the Roman Hellenistic household the *paterfamilias*, the father of the house, was the unspoken authority, and the structure of the family in antiquity was markedly hierarchical. By contrast, in the Christian household or house community this hierarchical model was radically broken up. Early primitive Christianity was a brotherhood and sisterhood of equal partners.

New Testament Ecclesiology

Acts 2: 1-11

“When the time came for Pentecost was fulfilled,... the mighty acts of God.”

v. 2: “And suddenly there came from the sky a noise like a strong driving wind, and it filled the entire house in which they were.”

If we wish to have a comprehensive understanding of this description of Pentecost, we also need to refer to Gen 1, 1-2.

“In the beginning, when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless wasteland, and darkness covered the abyss, while a mighty wind swept over the waters.”

There was nothing but darkness in the beginning but when the Lord God said with His creative power ‘Let there be light’, then the light, was created and when He blew the breath of life into the nostrils of the man formed out of the clay of the ground, man was created. This means that the creative power of God has come to the apostles on the day of Pentecost.

And if we look into chapter 2 verse 3 of Acts, it says:

‘there appeared to them tongues as of fire, which parted and came to rest on each one of them.’

Luke uses the word 'tongues as of fire' to express the appearance of the Holy Spirit. Luke wishes to imply with this word that the creative power of the word of God who had ordered all things to be created, now has come to the Apostles so that they could participate in the creation of a new world. The fact that the Apostles could speak in many languages signifies that they were given the creative power of God.

Luke describes in the following chapters how the Holy Spirit started to transform the world.

The change of the Apostles:

Peter and the other eleven stood up and proclaimed the Gospel. During the passion of Jesus they were dispersed, ran away and betrayed and even after the resurrection of the Lord, they hid themselves locking the doors. But now with the power of the Spirit they declare without any fear that Jesus slain by the leaders of Jews has now risen.

The change of the community

Acts 2: 42

“These remained faithful to the teaching of the apostles, to the brotherhood, to the breaking of bread and to the prayers.”

These four elements together, the teaching of the apostles, the brotherhood, the breaking of bread and the prayers were the fundamental and constitutive paradigm of the Christian community, which was different from the style of other contemporary Jews. Since these 4 themes are very crucial to the Christian community, Luke develops again these same themes in verse 46, saying;

‘Each day, with one heart, they regularly went to the Temple but met in their houses for the breaking of bread; they shared their food gladly and generously; they praised God.’

Luke tries to emphasize that these four elements form the fundamental structure of the Church which the Holy Spirit wishes to build up.

Mark 6: 34-44

“So he stepped ashore he saw a large crowd; and he took pity on them.... Numbered five thousand men.”

For those people who were like sheep wondering around without a Shepherd, Jesus communicated His word. The word of God is the most necessary bread of life. The most important present Jesus wished to give to people whom he took pity on was the word of God.

But the only thing which the disciples worried about was physical food, the bread to fill their empty stomachs.

Jesus told them: **‘Give them something to eat yourselves.’** It is the mission of the disciples of Jesus to give something to the people to eat, not abandoning them. When Jesus said ‘something to eat’, he meant not only bread, the food which one takes in the mouth but rather the true food which enriches our whole life.

Then he ordered them to get all the people to sit down in groups, on the green grass, and they sat down on the ground in squares of hundreds and fifties.

[*kai epetaxen autois anaklithenai pantas symposia symposia epi tw klwrw kortw.*]

‘*symposia symposia*’ is a very interesting and inspiring expression. In the New Jerusalem Bible it is translated as ‘in groups’. In some other English version it is translated more literally as ‘he instructed them to recline all companies companies on the green grass.’

‘*Symposia*’ means not just a group. The original meaning of this Greek word is ‘to drink together’. The word ‘*Symposia*’ means not just a sharing food together. It specifically signifies ‘to drink together’. To drink together implies that people celebrate together in a gathering like a feast. People drink together normally in a joyful event like a feast. Therefore ‘*Symposia*’ is not just any group or multitude but a group whose members are so intimate that they celebrate a feast, drinking together. This group who could celebrate a feast together would be called a ‘Community’.

It is not just a miracle story of multiplying bread and fish, because in this episode Mark also implies symbolically the anticipation of the Eucharist by its modality of distribution of bread. **‘then he took the five loaves and the two fish, raised his eyes to heaven and said the blessing; then he broke the loaves and began handing them to his disciples to distribute among the people.’**

And Jesus finally completes the foundation of this small community Church with his twelve apostles through the institution of the Eucharist in the last supper.

Vatican II

In the first century the Church existed as a congregation gathering in the households of cities or towns. With the increase of Christian communities it was required to give the faithful constant pastoral care accompanying them permanently in their local vicinity rather than just visiting them on an irregular basis.

In the early Church beyond the Apostles there were several people who freely and voluntarily served in the Church Community according to their specific charisma such as Apostles, teachers, prophets, miracle workers, healers. The Church needed to establish a certain hierarchy of authorities to avoid conflicts emerging among the different charisma.

All these new factors brought a certain systemization and a solid hierarchical structure to the Church. I believe that this was indispensable in these circumstances in order to protect and to preserve the Christian Community from diverse heretical movements and disorder. But it is also true that this caused a certain deterioration of active participation of the faithful and charismatic ministries in the Church, which prevailed for the following 20 centuries until the Second Vatican Council.

In the 1960s Pope John XXIII realised that the Church had been too much confined and closed towards the world whereas the world had been through an extreme change - experiencing two world wars, a second wave of industrialization, ideological conflicts between capitalism and socialism, promotion of democracy and human rights etc. The Church needed to have a dialogue with the completely changed world and to effectuate an *aggiornamento* in the modern culture. The fathers of the Second Vatican Council with the help of many theologians wished to incarnate the Word of God into the modern world. Looking back over the whole history of the Church, they

formulated a complete remodelling of our faith life and structure releasing the 4 major constitutions.

The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy: *Sacrosanctum Concilium*

The Dogmatic constitution on the Church: *Lumen Gentium*

The Constitution on Divine Revelation: *Dei Verbum*

The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World: *Gaudium et Spes*
Dei Verbum

The Church neglected the Word of God in the past. We may have stressed too much the importance of the Sacraments and the Canon Law and we did not pay sufficient attention to the Word of God which is the real basis of our faith life. Therefore the document concludes that it is urgent first of all to read, pray, study and proclaim the Word of God. (DV No. 10, 22, 25)

Lumen Gentium

For many centuries the Church stressed too much the celestial and sacred character of the Church using a mystical language, like the body of Christ as the mystical body which included the communion of saints with Christ as the head.

God did not invite some righteous individuals but the whole people of God to be the witnesses of salvation for all humankind. Therefore the Church needs to give testimony and to live the communion (*koinonia*) of the saved community.

Sacrosanctum Concilium

Liturgy has been mainly understood as sacrificial rites and prayers entrusted solely to clergy without active participation of the laity. For many centuries the laity were spectators in the Liturgy. Therefore the document urges us to revive the liturgy through more spontaneous involvement of many members of the community which express the grace and salvation of God through our local languages, music and our own cultural heritage. The liturgy becomes more communitarian than individual.

Gaudium et Spes

Jesus Christ is the word of God incarnated in the world who transforms the world reigned by all kinds of injustice and evil into the kingdom of God. Jesus lives in this world and offered his whole life totally to liberate people from sins and evils of this world. But the Church recognizing the world only as wicked and secular and did not make any effort to change the world. The document encourages us to fight against evil and to transform the world into the Kingdom of God realising justice and peace in our daily life.

Although the Second Vatican Council had designed such an ideal blue print of the renewal of the Church, in fact it was each particular local church which had to effectuate the realization of this blue print. During the last 40 years after the Council we have learned and studied the basic spirit of these documents but in reality we have not successfully developed an integral pastoral plan which could comprise all the elements of the above four constitutions.

However, the new trend of small Christian communities which have appeared separately in different continents, Latin America, Africa, Asia, North America, has made a considerable contribution in realizing integrally the above blue print of the 4 constitutions.

The small Christian Communities are a little different from each other according to their place and culture. In Latin America they call them Basic Christian Communities. In Africa or in Asia they are called Small Christian Communities, or Basic Ecclesial Communities.

Although each place has developed some variations of their own, the small Christian Communities have the same essential four factors in common:

1. They meet together with the power of the Word of God:
In Small Christian Communities the word of God is always in the centre. Christ is the Word of God incarnated into the world. Therefore wherever Christians meet together, the Word of God should take first and central place. Listening to the Word of God, sharing their experiences, the people of God mature as children of God and they develop an evangelical perspective to see, discern and judge the complex realities of our world. This realizes the teaching of *Dei Verbum*.
2. They meet in small groups: Community building
In our parish setting it is actually not possible to develop personal relationships with the other faithful. But in the small Christian Communities the Christians have close contacts with a limited number of members and feel the bond of community life having a new sense of belonging and solidarity based on a common faith. This is what *Lumen Gentium* teaches and wishes us to realise.
3. They pray together in communion with the Universal Church:
While the majority of Christians find it quite difficult to pray individually in their ordinary lives, the small Christian community helps people grow together in their spiritual life praying together regularly, following the liturgical calendar of the Universal Church. In small Christian communities the members are deeply influenced in their spiritual life by others in the community through the sharing of experiences lived in daily life. The small communities present the milieu for a communitarian spirituality.
This is what *Sacrosanctum Concilium* also tells us to achieve
4. They realise the Gospel in their lives.
The Small Christian Communities try to put into practice the Word of God in their concrete daily lives. There are several methods of sharing the Gospels but they all aim not only to meditate on the Word of God but also to live out in their daily life the knowledge they received from the Gospel so that they could contribute towards realizing the Kingdom of God in this world.
The small Christian Communities put us within a powerful context in order to challenge unjust realities in modern society so that we could transform the world into the Kingdom of God which Jesus wished to accomplish. This realizes the teaching of *Gaudium et Spes*.

Conclusion

Looking back from the beginning of the early Christian Church we saw an undeniable inspiring intervention of the Holy Spirit which created the community of the new People of God. And we all know that the Lord God wished to call not just a few chosen people but the whole of humankind to salvation and eternal life. It is God's

will that we to be saved through the structure of community. This communitarian structure of the Church existed from the beginning and survived through many centuries but flourished in modern times after the Second Vatican Council especially in the small Christian Communities. It is astounding to see that these small Christian Communities appeared simultaneously but separately in all continents without any artificial leadership of the church Hierarchy. There is no motherhouse or any headquarters of Small Christian Communities in the world while the movements like Legion of Mary, Focolare, or Cursillo have their own head office in some place.

The Holy Spirit, who founded the community of Apostles at the moment of Pentecost, has always accompanied the Church through the history and led the modern Church through the Second Vatican Council and is now working equally in the Small Christian Communities supporting their communitarian activities.