

## Small communities: Networks and spaces of life

# A flourishing local Church

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*The people of God need to be envisioned as a “community of communities” where one can experience God and the Gospel as community. This will be decisive for future Church life and mission in diverse geographical and cultural contexts, including those of strongly secularized nations. The author, director of the Hildesheim (Germany) diocesan pastoral office, reflects here on the phenomenon of small Christian communities, considering his own experience with the local Church at home and abroad.*

Encountering the reality of small communities years ago in South Africa, I immediately fell in love with it. There was something that deeply impressed me, a profound experience of being Church: People who lived in remote villages shared their life experiences of Scripture, read the Good News, assumed roles in the Church and tried to integrate it into their societal life and in addressing the poverty and the needs of their people. They were rooted in the Word of God and, in this way, leaders were formed. It also impressed me that this was not a clerical Church. A priest rarely appeared, perhaps once a month. And, when he was present, in addition to the Eucharistic celebration, there would also be a “synod” to talk about all the challenges, meet with teams of leaders and agree upon upcoming initiatives and courses of formation and training.

This type of Church fascinated me, a Church that was not only *among the people*, but *of the people*. Here, charisms flourished, the Spirit was present and Jesus dwelled among the people! This is

the core of the experience: a way had been found so that everyone could hear the Word of God and experience its illuminating presence, growing as persons and as disciples of Christ. Thus, a network was formed, a network of small churches, of existential spaces of life which I had always dreamed of. In addition: here one found an answer to ‘clericalism’, to that ‘hierarchical’ structure which often treated the faithful as mere “members” or “guests” in attendance, with marked differences in the way dignity and importance were assigned to various groups of people. It was based on top-down disparities of clergy-laity, in accordance with images of a Church that is deeply rooted in the subconscious...

### A new model calling for pastoral conversion

Oswald Hirmer, German bishop of Umthata, and one of the strategic brains behind this process, understood that this path of ‘ecclesiogenesis’ was instead a new model. It was one of conversion and redirection of the Church and her mission towards her original, profound strength, that of being a light among the people, rooted in Christ. It represented a simple and subversive revolution arising in the midst of everyday life.

In the years that followed, I learned that it is not something which is easy to do. It does not easily translate into a clear, visible practice. Though inspired by the epochal changes called for by Vatican II, it calls for a process able to grasp the *Kairos* as I learned from South African bishop, Fritz Lobinger, and from other friends in the Philippines. Yes, local 'Word of Life' groups can easily be established and one can start from Gospel sharing. However, even if a few such people are present in every parish, the ecclesial fabric has still not changed. After a first phase with beautiful and encouraging results, an increasingly persistent question increasingly emerged: What is needed to ensure these nascent communities are not seen merely as a kind of "spiritual group" for the elite but rather as a sign of change within an ecclesial paradigm?

### **One more step...**

*"You Germans have a further step to take"*. I remember well this humble warning from Estela Padilla, a wonderful and creative Filipino theologian, and which also had a double meaning. On one hand, these groups cannot simply be established in a typical "top-down" manner within a planning strategy. The type of development that makes the people of God grow demands maximum participation; participation which is, first and foremost, the way in which God relates to us. On the other hand, to change the fabric of ecclesial life, the departure point must always be that of "the joys and sorrows, aspirations and visions..." of the people. It entails a journeying with people where they are, step by step, towards a Church that is the people themselves. It involves laying down roots in daily life, in the concrete realities of society, striving to give life to local communities so they are capable of standing on their own two feet. It is directed by leadership teams that are nourished by the Word of God, or better, by the presence of the Crucified-Risen Lord who urges us to be missionary.

### **Local processes of ecclesial development**

This was the discovery: the development of small communities in South Africa, in Latin American dioceses, in India and in the Philippines that presupposed the following: Diocesan processes for Christian formation; necessary enculturated engagement that fomented a new self-awareness of the people of God rooted in the existential experience of the Word of God; and a new missionary self-awareness as a result.

At first, it was confusing to see the consistent diversity of these communities but later we understood: It must be like this, because a people, the society and the context are diverse, and thus the processes are always different. From this perspective, something else also became clear: small ecclesial communities were born in a modern-day context. But European (and other western) societies are postmodern. In these cultures, little has remained of older social contexts and local stability. But there *is* a set of contexts, traditional and post-traditional, confessional and post-confessional.

Every stage of development, therefore, has a certain ecclesiological and pastoral architecture that makes ecclesiogenesis possible according to the context. While the format of this "little church" differs from place to place, the 'architecture' is similar. There is a common underlying vision of the Church, starting from Christians charisms and from the conviction

that by rooting hearts in the Word of God, a new self-awareness of being Church and the sense of mission matures. Ecclesial communities are born and characterized by spiritual sharing, by a sense of responsibility and a mode of leadership that sets in motion the life of the body of Christ. This life is expressed in the most varied charisms, gaining relevance within a concrete context by responding to the expectations of the world.

### **A Swiss Experience**

For more than ten years, Fr Martin Piller and I have accompanied one another in this adventure of ecclesiogenesis. For many, the pastoral experience of Fr Martin in the Swiss parish of Zürich-Seebach has become such a powerful model. Many come to visit and learn from this parish community instead of traveling to see similar experiences lived out in Africa and Asia. Why is it such a special parish? Already in the early 2000s, Martin and his pastoral team began developing small Christian communities. They continue to exist today but they are not the only way of experiencing this new paradigm.

Initiatives that instead first seek to enter into dialogue with people, rather than focusing on forming pre-established communities, have become increasingly important. By walking with people, listening to them, to their interests and needs, and serving them, there has been the emergence of new, original and attractive experiences of the kingdom of God, ones which sometimes crystallize themselves through small communities, despite the fact that they are fluid and changing. The intimate nature of the Church is, in fact, an existential experience within an existential territory. It cannot be simply preserved... because it is also always a gift from God. Postmodern fragility stands in sharp contrast to the illusion of secular stability.

Catechetical preparation for first communion, for example, has undergone profound changes since the parish team tried to decentralize catechesis and, together with parents, create a different experience. Instead of following a pre-established program, small groups of parents and children are accompanied, helping them become protagonists in the preparation. Catechists have a new role: through meetings with parents, they try to discern how to help them, so that they themselves can catechize their sons and daughters. It is an adventure that frequently yields positive results: a small community is born that grows together in faith. Everyone can then meet at the family Mass on Sundays. It is a beautiful, surprising and fragile experience because it offers no guarantee. It may also be that parents ask for a classic catechesis instead. It is not a question of implementing a specific innovative method but of gradually developing a culture that is constantly attentive to ensuring that people are subjects, rather than objects, on this journey so that they can grow within a community. Faith cannot develop without community.

### **A diocese in a time of Covid-19**

In my diocese there are groups built around the Word of God but often they are small, hidden “anchors of salvation” within the context of a radically changing Church. We are witnessing marked and varied changes. Some parishes are dying while others are growing. But it is not a revival of the classical forms (of parish life) and the next generation is simply not there.

Living communities can grow when there is a new ecclesial paradigm at its heart. On the

one hand, it is a question of opening up spaces for the charisms given to each person. When this happens the desire of Christians to bring their community ahead increases significantly. But it requires vision and courage to make space for the most varied and needed of initiatives on the part of parish priests and their collaborators. On the other hand, spiritual, liturgical and biblical accompaniment is still required in order for people to feel nourished and strengthened.

When this does occur, however, local community leaders are then formed. Guided by the Word, they gradually learn a new synodality and discover needed talents, becoming “funeral ministers”, for example, or proclaimers of the Word of God by starting from their own Christian experience. Together with others, they also form communities which can also be ecumenical.

But there is also no need for concern here. All this is Catholic, in both a narrow and broad sense of the term. We have seen this like never before during this COVID “lockdown”. A new sensitivity was born in homes and in families towards praying together or celebrating Easter together through simple liturgies. I attended liturgies via Zoom and was fascinated to attend one such celebration organized by a young woman from a parish.

More and more new Church experiences are emerging that resemble basic communities. I see the most varied communities developing in the city of Hildesheim (Germany), for example. In the seminary church, a community of young families has formed and, through small celebrations, has gradually grown in number. In the large garden of a parish house, another unique initiative came to life, turning it into a welcoming space for interested students and adults. Not infrequently, these new communities experience some adversity because they are not always looked upon favourably by the parish community. However, they continue to grow and develop while the others do not.

In this varied Church reality (a sort of “mixed economy” Church), I see small fluid, post-confessional communities blossoming with supportive accompaniment being crucial: How can they grow spiritually? Who assists the management team? Who guides the discernment process and helps them overcome moments of crisis in their growth and development?

Various other fundamental questions also arise: What is the parish priest’s role? How do these experiences fit into the local Church? What are the consequences of having ecumenical communities? Such important questions can also challenge pastoral theology but we should be happy that they are being asked! During this paradigmatic crisis facing the Church we are witnessing a new and unexplored springtime before us.