

## A parish on the outskirts of Bujumbura

# The Church as family in small Christian communities

**Innocent Thibaut Ndoreraho**

*In many parts of the world, parish life in the Church is increasingly centered around small Christian communities where interpersonal dimension of faith is concretized and strengthened at a human level. This has also been the experience of Sainte Famille Parish, in Kinama, in the Archdiocese of Bujumbura (Burundi). The author, in addition to serving as parish priest, is episcopal vicar for the entire city.*

Located on the northern outskirts of Bujumbura, capital of Burundi, *Sainte Famille* is a parish of more than 150,000 inhabitants, including 80,000 Catholic Christians. Here, many people live in poverty and we still suffer the consequences of the 1993 war which raged here, too, among the local population. In addition, we welcome others coming from more remote areas, in search of a better life.

Yet, it is not all negative; there are so many Christians attending Church that we now need to celebrate 25 Masses every Sunday. And, since it is impossible for priests to preside at all celebrations everywhere, there are also Sunday Eucharistic Services celebrated by catechists.

The risk is one of becoming - using sociological terms - a “Church of the masses”, in the sense that having huge numbers of Christians attending Mass and receiving the sacraments does not necessarily lead the faithful to automatically experience a sense of family. One can often take advantage of what the Church offers in matters of formation and liturgical life, but then live in anonymity, without ever feeling part of a true *Christian community*.

## **An experience of community**

When I arrived here in 2009, I asked myself what could be done to build a Church-communion. We further reflected on this with the Parish pastoral council, starting from the indications given by the post-Synodal exhortation *Ecclesia in Africa*, which states: “[T]he Church as Family cannot reach her full potential as Church unless she is divided into communities small enough to foster close human relationships. The Assembly described the characteristics of such communities as follows: primarily they should be places engaged in evangelizing themselves, so that subsequently they can bring the Good News to others; they should moreover be communities which pray and listen to God's Word, encourage the members themselves to take on

responsibility, learn to live an ecclesial life, and reflect on different human problems in the light of the Gospel" (No. 89).

In light of these indications for the Church in Africa, we agreed that the only possibility of living and experiencing communion among Christians was to focus on small communities made up of persons sharing their faith and living in the same neighbourhood: each was 20 to 40 families, with support from the parish priest and supported by an 8 person parish committee, including two young people. And so we began. Each community met, and continues to meet, once a week for a moment of prayer, followed by sharing the Word of God, and a discussion immediately afterwards on how to face life challenges together.

## **Places of dialogue and encounter as brothers and sisters**

Today, the Kinama parish has 105 small communities. In a nation wounded by recurring wars, these communities are a place of dialogue and reconciliation, where people come together as brothers and sisters.

Everything is discussed within small communities: Church life, evangelization, the family, etc. They are places of openness and dialogue, even among those from different groups or spiritualities. In fact, in small communities you find members of various ecclesial movements and charisms. By living and praying together, mutual appreciation and esteem develops. It is a dialogue of life. And the Church can no longer exist without these small communities.

Christians also give and receive tangible support from one another. The region is very poor, much like the rest of the country, which has endured a years-long political crisis. It's not uncommon for community members to reach out to help one another. Additionally, because it is often the small communities that recognize and bring to the attention of the wider ecclesial community those persons experiencing difficulties, it becomes easier and more natural to give help and support.

One of our initiatives in these communities is to offer training in the SILC program (*Savings and Internal Lending Communities*). Community members pool their financial savings in order to provide loans to those in need within their same community, with it then paid back in ways laid out by the program itself. Through such credit and training projects, solidarity grows and poverty is overcome.

In the parish, a committee of lay people and a priest follow the formation of small community leaders and assist in implementation of formation programs throughout the year.

## **Adult Church members, committed and involved**

There are abundant fruits. On one hand, a sense of ongoing spiritual growth. Christians see themselves as full-fledged members of the Church, fully committed and involved. And, on the other, this evangelization project becomes a place of formation and communion. Now, it is the small Christian communities themselves assuming responsibility for the Church's cleaning, care, and security. They also provide food provisions for the priests because they have understood that they are there, in service to everyone.

Many couples in these communities, who previously had been living together, decide to get married in the Church. And some separated couples, too, find support to help save their marriage.

There is also collaboration with the locally based Diocesan Commission for Justice and Peace. This Commission often helps find solutions between conflicting parties, assisting in conflict resolution before ever reaching the tribunal, and thus avoiding long, painful court proceedings with the consequent loss of money.

Of course, things don't always go smoothly. Pastoral work with small Christian communities is quite demanding because we need to be close to the people, making periodic visits, accompanying them patiently, and sharing in joys and sorrows. But the fruits more than make up for this effort, because in this way each one feels a sense of belonging in the community and in the Church.

In the African context, where family and community are a way (if not *the* way) of being a society, to discover the Church itself as family is a great accomplishment, one that will likely have an impact on the Church's future on this continent.

Pope John Paul II's desire was for a commitment by members of small Christian communities to live "Christ's love for everybody, a love which transcends the limits of the natural solidarity of clans, tribes or other interest groups."<sup>1</sup> Today we are experiencing this reality, first-hand.

---

<sup>1</sup> *Ecclesia in Africa*, September 14, 1995.