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Small Faith Communities – A Preliminary Theological Inquiry

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On Pentecost Sunday 1989 Hong Kong's Cardinal John B. Wu promulgated his pastoral letter, March into the Bright Future, which set a clear-cut course for the diocese to follow during the next decade. The Bishop has directed his diocese to make every effort to work for reconciliation and set about the task of establishing 'small faith communities' as key priorities in the future development of the Church in Hong Kong. The process of reconciliation is to begin with each individual Christian, gradually extending

itself to include the local community and eventually the nation itself. The pastoral letter pointed out that each parish as well as the diocese as a whole is to promote the setting up of 'small faith communities' as

the most effective way of building up the larger local church community. Support for the idea came from the local clergy when at the annual priest's camp in January 1989 the establishment of small faith communities was discussed at some length. Many pastors reported at the meeting that they had already taken steps in this direction and were experimenting with different small community models.

This article offers a brief explanation on the origin, development and essential characteristics of 'small faith communities', and some reflections on their basic theology.

Basic Christian Communities: Origin and Character

While the 'small faith communities' spoken of by the Cardinal in his pastoral letter are not identical with the Basic Christian Communities of Latin America, there can be no doubt that the latter have inspired and influenced their development. Basic Christian Communities had their origin in Latin America and quickly became a vigorous and forceful movement there. The Brazilian theologian L. Boff estimates that there are now over 70,000 such communities in his country alone. In Latin American political terminology 'basic community' has two levels of meaning. One refers to its membership as being from the grass-roots, generally the poor and oppressed. On another level, such communities by-and-large are led by the laity, without necessarily involving the clergy in leadership roles.

According to Boff, these Basic Christian Communities have five main characteristics: 1. they are organized by Catholics generally from the poor and oppressed class; 2. they are centered in the Word of God; 3. they set new patterns for Church existence; 4. they are at once sign and instrument for liberation in Latin America; 5. they are centres for the celebration of faith and life.

Organized by the Poor

Three important social factors have caused these basic communities to flourish in Latin American societies. The first is the fundamental human need to live in community, a deep-seated desire for more personal and intimate communal relationships, which modern urban societies tend to ignore or disregard. Secondly, there is in Latin America a serious shortage of priests, leaving many Christian flocks without a shepherd. Thirdly, the laity themselves have shown a greater willingness in recent years to assume their Christian responsibility for mission, taking the initiative for preaching the gospel and developing their own faith-life.

Boff recognizes that in today's Latin American societies basic communities are composed mainly of people from the lower classes, the poor and dispossessed. Most are also charismatic in nature and spontaneous in organizational style, which makes them quite different from the traditional Church structure. But these differences do not mean that their relationship should be antagonistic or mutually exclusive. Boff sees in the basic communities alternative expressions of the one Church founded by Christ. Also each can supply what is lacking in the other. On the one hand, the basic communities are able to make the Church more present to people by entering more directly and personally into their lives; on the other hand, these communities need the support and continuity that traditional structures provide, especially the on-going encouragement of bishops, priests and religious. Only by maintaining a relationship with the local church as part of the universal Church can these small Christian communities insure their own catholicity.

Centered in the Word of God

A characteristic of the Basic Christian Communities is the important role Scripture plays in their gatherings. Not only do members come to listen to the Word of God, but also to share it with each other. Their reflection on personal problems as well as social problems is always done in the light of God's revealed Word. The Word of God becomes quite concrete for them as it is directed at the difficulties of the individual and the real needs of the community. And because of this, the Word becomes a transforming force in their daily lives. This has led in many cases to the development of new ways to read the Scriptures and the formation of principles of exegesis that differ somewhat from the more traditional methods.

New Patterns of Church Existence

The Basic Christian Communities are not just a means for bringing the Church into the lives of Christians in order for them to go out and preach the gospel; on the contrary, they are a new way of living out the gospel message--a new way of being 'Church' in modern society. The church is not merely 'organization', it is also 'event'. Whenever a group of Christians come together they hear and share the Word, break bread in table-fellowship, and the Church shows herself to be present in their midst. This new pattern of existence, of being present, is another word for 'community'. It is a community of equals, all sharing alike in the responsibility for building up the community. Those who exert authority in such communities express leadership mainly through coordination and service.

Sign and Instrument of Liberation

The authentic Christian community is not one that is closed in upon itself, but rather it is always open to society and to the world. Because these small basic communities very quickly become channels for the free expression of opinion on the grass-roots level, they are often instrumental in fueling popular movements throughout Latin American nations. Many church leaders see in these communities centres for raising the social consciousness of believers. They impart a new social concept as they teach people how to confront and deal with an unjust and inequitable social system, without resorting to violence. Many are very actively involved in social issues and in voicing their social concerns. In doing this, many have come to assume a prophetic role in their society.

Theological Reflections on Small Faith Communities

In Cardinal Wu's pastoral letter, there is no direct mention of Basic Christian Communities as such, except to explain that 'small faith communities' have also been called 'basic ecclesial or Christian communities'. Throughout his letter, the Cardinal prefers to use the term 'small faith communities'. When he does use the word 'basic', it is clear that he is not using it in the same way as it is used in the Latin American context. Small faith communities are described as "basic organizations of the local church." Their role is similar to that which families have as the basic organizations of the state or country. These communities are to be self-supporting in that they are to rely on themselves for preaching and teaching the gospel and in providing for their own pastoral ministers within the community. Nevertheless, that they are independent and spontaneous in style does not mean they are separate from or live in opposition to the parish, diocese or universal church.

Members of these small faith communities are not to be limited to one class of people or one strata of society. They are to include all levels of society. The Cardinal goes on to describe four basic characteristics of the small faith communities: 1. they are Christocentric; 1. they are nourished by the Word of God, the Sacraments and prayer; 3. they are in service to the gospel; 4. they live an authentic community life.

The above characteristics of the small faith communities show many similarities with the Basic Christian Communities of Latin America, but they also have their differences. In Latin America, the theological underpinning of the basic communities is the theology of liberation. The ecclesial model is that of the People of God. This underlines the necessity for the Church in Hong Kong to develop a theological basis on a specific ecclesiology to serve as the foundation for its own small faith communities, one based on its own situation and responding to its own

specific needs.

I would like to offer here a brief outline of an ecclesial model which I feel would be more fitting for Hong Kong and serve better as a theological basis for promoting small faith communities here. It is the ecclesiology of the 'Little Flock'. Karl Rahner has pointed out that 'little flock' does not refer to a 'small handful', much less to a faction or party. It refers rather to 'a mentality or attitude of mind'. The Church must recognize that today she is but a minority group in the large family of humankind, a very small 'flock' indeed. When quality and quantity can no longer co-exist, then the Church must eschew quantity for quality.

If the Church recognizes that she is indeed a 'little flock' and forgoes quantity for the sake of quality, then her strategies will be quite different and she will develop new ways of preaching the gospel. No longer will the Church be preoccupied with the number of people seeking membership, but will emphasize instead the quality of their faith...is he or she committed in faith to the Christian life? An ecclesiology based on the concept of the 'little flock' sees one authentic Christian to be of greater value to society than ten who are lukewarm or uncommitted. The emphasis on quality over quantity will certainly result in a change in the influence the gospel message and the Church will have on the world in which we live.

The movement to establish small faith communities is not intended to be just a way of decentralizing the local church as 1997 approaches. It is not an effort to break up the whole into small parts. What is hoped is that the small faith communities will improve the tenor of Church life as a community bonded by closer and more intimate personal relationships. In this way, the Church can become an authentic and forceful sign of faith for all people.

Due to obvious limitations of space, the task of developing the relationship between small faith communities and an ecclesiology of the 'little flock' will have to be put off to another time; perhaps this matter can be best addressed in a future article. For the present, let me end by saying that I feel we have much to learn from the Basic Christian Community movement of Latin America, and that its liberation theology and ecclesiology of the People of God will provide valuable reference points for us. However, it is also my conviction that the Church model of the 'little flock' seems to fit in better with the situation in which we presently find ourselves here in Hong Kong, as we go about the task of renewing the local church through small faith communities.