

which has known persecution and oppression for many centuries, will enjoy greater freedom. And when the Word of God is proclaimed openly in Chinese by Chinese to Chinese, the body of the church will grow in ways yet unimagined.

Before I left Sheshan, two members of the community quietly told me that my dream was their dream. I suspect it is the dream of many more.



## Small Faith Communities

by Osvaldo Pisani

*(Editor's note: Osvaldo Pisani is the former chancellor of Hong Kong Diocese.)*

Rev. Fr. Luke Tsui is to be congratulated on his very fine article on this subject, published in Tripod #55. The definition he gave of small faith communities is very precise indeed: "Small

faith communities are communities which have the Bible as their guide, the Eucharist as their motivating force and the attainment of a richer life as their object." In the text of his article, describing their method, he emphasizes that "Their method is... to obtain nourishment and strength from the sacraments."

Although in his 8-page article he mentioned only twice the necessity of the Eucharist and the other sacraments, no one can deny their essential importance in the life of such communities. My purpose here is to encourage more dialogue on this subject, which, in a near future, may well become a modus vivendi in our diocese. Cardinal Ratzinger says that "the eucharist links men and women not only with each other but with Christ and in this way it turns people into the Church...the Church lives in eucharistic communities. Its worship is its constitution, since of its nature it is itself the service of God and thus of men and women, the service of transforming the world...". However, quoting Lumen Gentium of Vatican II, Ratzinger also makes a point of clarification "It does not say simply: 'The Church exists completely in every community celebrating the eucharist' but uses the formulation: 'The Church is really present in all legitimately organized local groups of the faithful, which, insofar as they are united to their pastors, are called Churches....'" Two elements are important here. Ratzinger continues: 'The

community must be "legitimately organized" for it to be the Church, and it is legitimately organized "in union with its pastors". What does this mean? First of all it means that nobody can turn himself or herself into the Church. A group cannot simply come together, read the New Testament, and say: "'We are now the Church, because the Lord is present wherever two or three are gathered in his name.'" An essential element of the Church is that of receiving, just as faith comes from hearing, and is not the product of one's own decisions or reflections...The Church is not something one can make but only something one can receive, and indeed receive from where it already is and where it really is - from the sacramental community of his body which progresses through history."<sup>1</sup>

The new Canon Law has codified these principles in canon 517:1 which says "Where circumstances so require, the pastoral care of a parish, or of a number of parishes together, can be entrusted to several priests jointly, but with the stipulation that one of the priests is to be the moderator of the pastoral care to be exercised. This moderator is to direct the joint-action and to be responsible for it to the bishop.

Canon 517:2 also states: "If, because of a shortage of priests, the diocesan Bishop has judged that a deacon or some other person who is not a priest, or a community of persons, should be entrusted with a share in the exercise of the pastoral care of a parish, he is to appoint some priest who, with the powers and faculties of a parish priest, will direct the pastoral care."

This canon has no precedent in the 1917 Code; it manifests a concept that is new to the Church since Vatican II. Assemblies and celebrations of this kind were already known in the past, especially in mission territories. (It is enough to note here our former ecclesiastical districts of Taipo and Saikung.) In the years which immediately followed Vatican II, France and Germany experienced a dramatic shortage of priests. This caused an increase in the number of priestless parishes. Yet the faithful continued to gather on Sundays so as to be able to bear witness to Christ and practice charity in their daily life, and thus make the Church's presence and action felt by their neighbours. The present ecclesiastical concern of ministry is to build a credible church community that will constantly renew itself by the way it evokes the charism of all its members. These communities must be shaped by Gospel values and concerns; they provide the necessary and challenging symbol of Gospel commitment constantly renewed. They must be tested by their ability to evoke such commitment from their own members and thus be credible symbols to the large Christian communities.<sup>2</sup>

Hans Urs Von Balthasar has strongly emphasized the necessity for supervising these communities, and he quotes the example of St. Paul who thought it his duty not to abandon the small communities founded by him to their democratic destiny or to their charismatic chaos. On the contrary, he continued to take care of them with energy and zeal, and did not hesitate to confront at times unpleasant situations within those communities in his capacity as the one who established their structures and functions.<sup>3</sup>

The priest referred to by canon 517 would be available periodically to celebrate Mass and administer other sacraments. When the priest cannot be at hand every week, the Bishop may allow the Blessed Sacrament to be kept in a permanent and immovable receptacle, without the eucharistic lamp, in the house where Sunday services are normally held. This will provide the local community with the opportunity to receive Holy Communion from the person designated ad hoc by the priest in charge.

It is highly desirable that the Liturgy Commission publish some guidelines for Sunday worship services in the absence of a priest.

Vatican Council II states: "This Church of Christ is really present in all legitimately organized local groups of the faithful, which... are also quite appropriately called Churches in the New Testament. For these are in fact, in their own localities, the new people called by God, in the power of the Holy Spirit and as the result of full conviction (cf. 1 Thess 1:5)... In these communities, though they may often be small and poor, or existing in the diaspora, Christ is present through whose power and influence the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church is constituted". (Lumen Gentium par. 26)

One Final Note: The term "Small Faith Communities", in our local context, could possibly have a rather negative and restrictive sense. For this reason it would seem better to keep the more commonly known term "Basic Christian Communities" whose Chinese translation sounds very appropriate.

- Notes: 1. Ratzinger, Joseph, Church, Ecumenism and Politics St. Paul Publications, England, 1988. pp. 8-10.
2. The Code of Canon Law - A Text and Commentary, Paulist Press, New York, 1985. pp. 417, 418.
3. Balthasar, Hans Urs Von, Punti Fermi Rusconi Editore, Milano, 1972. p.226.