

Ten Years of Small Bible-Study Groups

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It has already been ten years since the establishment of small Bible study groups in the Diocese of Ningbo. It is necessary to look back over the last decade to consider the results achieved, the road traveled, existing problems, and to discuss the direction of current and future development.

I was ordained a priest in the Xujiahui Cathedral in Shanghai on November 21, 1985. Returning home in 1986, I went around to visit almost every parish in the Diocese of Ningbo. After the storm of the Cultural Revolution, although church work was inspirational in several parishes, yet the situation in most parishes provoked a sigh. The Protestants by contrast were flourishing everywhere. In the same environment, why were they developing while we were lagging behind? While I continually reflected on this, I asked the Holy Spirit to enable me to find the reason.

One day I read a book written by Fr. Luke Tsui, which said that the Church has three key elements: worship, the Word of God, and fellowship. Acts 2:42 states, "They devoted themselves to the teaching of the apostles and to fellowship, to the breaking of the bread and to prayer." The early Church thus developed rapidly, with youthful vigor.

I measured the pre-Vatican II Church against these four key elements. Although the Mass was a very solemn liturgy, yet it was

in Latin and seriously disconnected from the laity. This made it a marginalized liturgy. Most Catholics did not understand the prayers they recited and the hymns they sang day after day. They were no big helps to progress in the life of faith. One can almost say that Bible study was completely neglected. The majority of Catholics had never picked up and read a Bible in their lives. As to the Catholic's manner of living in unity as disciples, everyone gathered together on Sunday, but after Mass they scattered back to their homes. No one paid attention to anyone else's affairs. There was a lack of mutual concern and caring about faith and life, and a lack of an environment to help Catholics to mature in Christ. There is no need to mention Catholics coming together with the wisdom and courage of Christ to go forth to witness to God, to proclaim the Gospel, and to serve the people with a spirit of sacrifice. This did not exist. By contrast, let us look at the Protestants. Their liturgies are simple, they throw themselves into prayer, their songs of praise and hymns are easy to understand, and the Bible is an especially revered book to them, which they all must study. They are also mobilized to involve themselves in working for the spread of the Gospel. This comparison helped me to discover the reasons for the backwardness of the Catholic Church.

When I studied the documents of Vatican II, I was surprised to find that the Council Fathers had already discovered these problems, and had issued a series of texts to change the backward condition of our Church.

Lumen Gentium (L.G.), The Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, says: "The Church is the People of God and the Body of Christ. There are clergy within the Church. According to the instructions of Jesus, they have power to teach, govern and sanctify, in order to serve the faithful. But the Church is not the clergy alone; it is also all the faithful as a body. Laity, religious and clergy are all portions of the Church. Every person has a calling to holiness, and a calling to the work of evangelization."

L.G. n. 33 says: "Gathered together as the people of God and established in the one Body of Christ under one head, the laity—no

matter who they are—have, as living members, the vocation of applying to the building up of the Church and to its continued sanctification all the powers which they have received from the goodness of the Creator and from the grace of the Redeemer... Through Baptism and Confirmation all are appointed to this apostolate by the Lord himself.”

Dei Verbum, (D.V.) The Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, says this about the Word of God recorded in the Bible: “And such is the force and power of the Word of God that it can serve the Church as her support and vigor, and the children of the Church as strength of their faith, food for the soul, and a pure and lasting fount of spiritual life.” (*D.V.*, n. 21) “Access to Sacred Scripture ought to be wide open to the faithful.” (n. 22)

“[The Church] forcefully and specifically exhorts all the Christian faithful...to learn ‘the surpassing knowledge of Jesus Christ’ (Phil. 3:8) by frequent reading of the divine Scriptures. ‘Ignorance of Scripture is ignorance of Christ.’ (St. Jerome) (n. 25)

Sancrosanctum Concilium, (S.C.) The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, regards that “it is through the liturgy, especially, that the faithful are enabled to express in their lives and manifest to others the mystery of Christ and the real nature of the true Church.” (*S.C.*, n.2) Liturgy emphasizes the mission of the church, which is to become a sign of the presence of Christ and God in the world. The call of the Church is to spread the Gospel not only by using words but also by using the liturgy; to proclaim the Gospel in the sacraments and especially in the Eucharist.

Since the Church is the entire people of God, so it must encourage every believer to participate enthusiastically in the Eucharist and also in every other sacramental liturgy. Liturgy is a sign and a symbol, thus it must be easy to comprehend, and allow participants to enter into it actively. Therefore the Council Fathers resolutely wanted liturgical reform to ensure that the sacred, intrinsic qualities to which liturgy points would be clearly expressed, letting God’s children fully understand them. In addition, the Council Fathers demanded that all the faithful participate in the

liturgy fully, knowingly and actively, and adapt the true spirit of Christ to let themselves be sanctified in Christ, and put love into action in their lives, to the glory of God.

Lumen Gentium is definite regarding the position of Catholics as the People of God, so we should actively participate in evangelization with the attitude of our Master. *L.G.* demands that Catholics read the Bible to raise the quality of their faith. *L.G.* demands that Catholics participate in the liturgy to sanctify themselves in the spirit of Christ. Yet how should we bring these spiritual energies down upon ourselves, and change the ossified, backward appearance of our diocese? How could we restore the springtime vitality of the early Church to our Church, and send our Church on the road to a flourishing and beautiful future? Thanks be to God! Guided by the Holy Spirit, the Diocese of Ningbo, in 1992, finally found the method of Small Bible-Study Groups. They were first established in the Xinpu Parish, and then spread across the entire diocese.

Following the establishment of Small Bible-Study Groups, as Catholics went through a period of Bible study, the quality of the faith went up continually, and liturgical reform was smoothly implemented. Everyone could actively participate in liturgical worship, and solidarity among Catholics was strengthened. Their developing mutual unity led them to get involved with works of evangelization, such as visiting and serving the sick, caring for the dying, assisting families in hardship, mediating family quarrels, supporting the weak and disabled, serving in church, attracting those outside the church to enter and accompanying them to become zealous Catholics, directing devotions inside the church building but apart from Mass, and proclaiming the Gospel to new Catholics, etc. Overall, after participating in the Small Bible-Study Group, the scattered energies of the Catholics were drawn together, a greatly aroused spirit of loving sacrifice emerged, and there was a constant surge of good people doing good deeds. Making contributions to the construction of a socialist spiritual civilization, and putting forth effort in the work of evangelization, the image of

the church has come to life with overflowing vitality.

The year 2002 marked the tenth anniversary of the establishment of Small Bible-Study Groups. The group in Jinshan in Xushan Parish issued a special compilation, a collection of 80-some essays, written by themselves, which expressed what they had learned from their experiences in Small Bible-Study Groups. Later, every such group in the whole diocese also summarized the graces, which God had bestowed on them during the previous decade, writing several valuable essays. Now we publish a one-volume collection [*the magazine from which this lead article is taken?*] to praise and thank the Heavenly Father for his abundant graces, and also to stimulate us to be even more resolute in continuing the Small Bible-Study Groups, and to run them even better!

On the occasion of this tenth anniversary, we not only summarize our achievements, but we also find out existing problems, make greater efforts to overcome them, to improve, and to ensure that, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, the groups will be renewed and made firmer, more substantial and more elevated. In order to make the Small Bible-Study Groups develop in an even healthier direction, I offer some of my hopes:

1. Emphasize spiritual cultivation. *The Imitation of Christ* says: "If you have no modesty, then even if the fire of the Holy Trinity comes upon you, and you can cleverly expound the doctrine of the Trinity, what will you gain? You should know that loud and convincing arguments cannot summon people to become saints. Only by establishing yourself in virtuous works can you summon other people to God's gracious love. I hope to experience contrition even more than I hope to understand its definition. If, for example you memorize a passage of Scripture and can transmit the teachings of the philosophers, but you are without the love of God, then what is the use of all these studies? Therefore, aside from loving and serving the one and only God, everything else is vanity of vanities and illusion of illusions." Thus, after we have studied the Bible, the important thing is to live according to its teachings.

2. Earnestly study *Dei Verbum*. *The Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation* tells us that the truth of God's revelation is contained in the Bible, and also in Sacred Tradition. These sacred traditions are teachings, which Jesus and the Holy Spirit entrusted to the Apostles, and they have come down to us from the Apostles. *D.V.* tells us that the power to interpret Scripture and Tradition belongs to the living Magisterium of the Church, i.e., to the Pope and to the bishops joined to him. At the present time a few individual Catholics, who have studied a smattering of Scripture, think they are quite extraordinary. They even have the impudence to despise the Magisterium. This is an extremely dangerous signal. All the faithful in the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church should increase their vigilance against this kind of thing happening, and uphold the pure, true faith!

3. Earnestly study *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*. A systematic study of Catholic doctrine and rules will set the faithful solidly on rock. They can select various methods of study. And it is important to promote self-study.

4. At the proper time, study the Bible from beginning to end within a small Bible group.

I hope that every parish and every small group will agree on a concrete plan, according to the individual situation, and study seriously with honesty and dedication. May God bless this holy work of ours!