



Small is beautiful

Locky Flanagan CSSp

Our 22 Spiritan students come from villages and towns in Malawi, Zambia, Zimbabwe and Mozambique. Through prayer and witness these native communities play a very significant role in their vocation. Back home too, the Small Christian Communities (SCC) continue to be decisive for their future and the future of the church in Malawi and surrounding countries. They number from 15-30 families, varying in age from 15-70.

Emmanuel recalls going to the SCC with his parents and relatives as a boy. He remembers them praying and singing together, and how they cared for one another. In particular he was impressed when the priest came to pray and share the Word of God with them. The SCC ignited his call to the priesthood. Later in secondary school the Young Christian Students (YCS) nourished his prayer life and his desire to enter the seminary.

Now, three decades later, the Small Christian Communities continue to be wonderful signs of unity among the local Catholic Christians and of concerned outreach to the very needy, of whatever creed, in their area. They meet each week under a tree or in the mud-walled church or local school-house. Beginning with singing and prayer, the core of each meeting is reflection on the Word of God.

I was enthused by these small groups, recalling my own earlier experience of deepening faith through the charismatic movement. I saw how people's lives were changed and villages were transformed. These groups offered a renewed vision for the Church.

A people belonging to God

An incident that stands out for me involves a village community where 1 Peter 2:9-10 was being reflected upon. "You are

a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his own wonderful light. Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God. Once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.” Six weeks later, an elderly man recalled that passage and prayed with conviction: “Lord God, through baptism I, Amos, have been chosen by You as a member of Your people. Thus I am different to the non-Christians. Lord Jesus show me, indeed show us all, how to witness that difference.”

Subsequent SCC meetings included more reflection and prayer plus practical applications. Within three months their communal decisions resulted in a commitment to family

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prayer, while a significant number of Catholics assisted the sick and elderly of all creeds in the area. In time, some non-Catholics were struck by their sincere love and joined the catechumenate programme.

Rodney remembers his family gathering in the evening after supper. His father, a Muslim, joined in as his mother led the rosary and asked God to bless the household. This practice sparked the notion of priesthood in him. Later, in the YCS the priest often dropped by to speak with the young men and encourage them. Rodney was led to think about the seminary. He is now an aspirant.

Catholicism — an earthy religion

In that back-of-the-woods village Catholicism demonstrated itself to be an “earthy religion” that responded to need wherever it was found. These Catholics relied on a collective wisdom of saying “yes”, giving their hearts, lighting a candle and making a difference: “Small is beautiful”. For me as a priest it is sheer joy to witness the transformation in people’s lives, to see the grace of God very much at work. In such an atmosphere vocations are fostered and nourished, marriage and family life are enriched.

Daniel recalls doing childhood pranks at the SCC. Later he joined the choir and then the parish youth group. He had a talent for acting. A teacher encouraged him to go on a vocation retreat and it became a moment of decision. His father sometimes jokingly addressed him as “bambo” (priest).

Key components of Catholicism

What are the roots of the Church in this part of Africa? I glean some common characteristics from the stories of many of our seminarians:

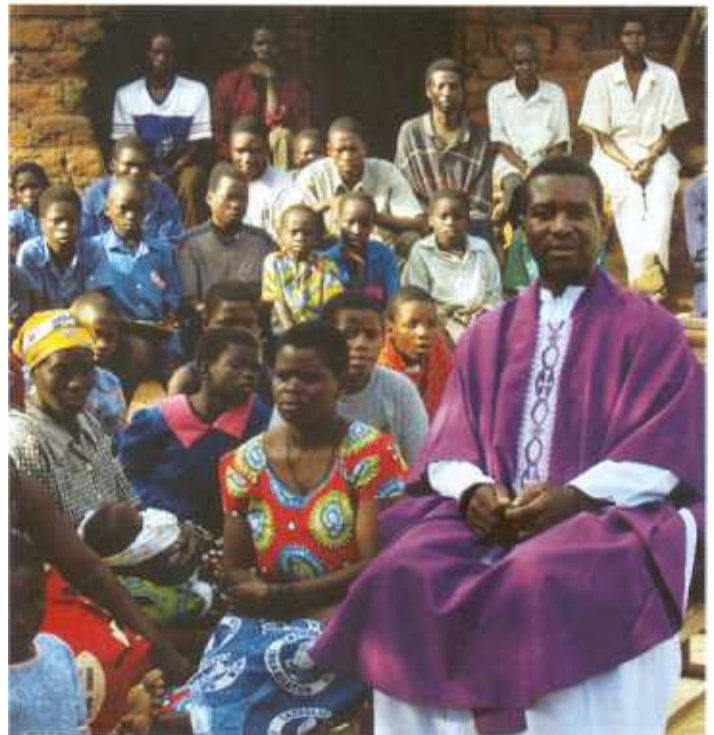
- Families and small communities linked together.
- The sense of belonging, care and support, amounting to being reared by the village community.
- The influence of family and significant members of the local community.
- The Church’s liturgy and sacramental life, which draw all five senses into play.
- Youthful memories of the richness of the celebrations — vestments, bishop’s visit, processions, incense, an atmosphere of singing and dancing — were the spark that began the journey to the seminary for many of these former altar servers.

Genuine family life and authentic community come really close to reflecting the reality of the Blessed Trinity. God made us to belong. God, in whose image and likeness we are made, is a family of three Persons who, however distinct they are, totally belong to each other.

Small groups — Family, SCC, YCS, Youth Group, Choir — fostered the faith and vocation of many of our seminarians. Membership in these groups gives them a sense of belonging and the freedom to be who they are, to grow in understanding, to regard each other as human, to forgive — not condemn, to build-up — not tear down, to be self-sacrificial — not self-centered, to be giving — not grasping, to live a God-like life.

Building up such a community in my little corner of God’s creation is where I find myself. ■

Please forward donations to: Fr Paul McAuley CSSp, “Spiritan Sem-fund, 121 Victoria Park Ave., Toronto, ON, M4E 3S2, Canada.



Nigerian Spiritan Dominic Dzegeten with a Small Christian Community in Tunga, Malawi.