

Pastoral Responses to the Worldwide Eucharistic Famine

By Joseph G. Healey, MM

I. Introduction

Good evening and greetings from Nairobi, Kenya. I am delighted to participate in this important teleconference on an important pastoral challenge in the World Church today. As I travel around the world I always begin by saying: "I am an ordinary and regular member of St. Kizito Small Christian Community (in short, SCC) in the Waruku Section of St. Austin's Parish, Archdiocese of Nairobi, Country of Kenya, Continent of Africa, world. I am a student, a learner."

I like to begin this way. To be faithful to this new way of being church, to this new SCC Model of Church, my main credibility is that as a priest I have no special responsibilities in our SCC. The lay people are the leaders of our SCC. I learn from them. Even though I have lived in East Africa for 50 years I remain a student of African culture and values. The African people are my teachers.

I teach a course on "Small Christian Communities (SCCs) as a New Model of Church in Africa Today" at several universities in Nairobi. I am 79 years old. In our first class the students who are in their 20s started calling me *Mzee*, the Swahili word for "elder," as a title of respect. But I said, "No. Not yet. Not yet. Please give me another name." So, the next day they started calling me "a youth from a long time ago." I like that a lot better.

For our dialog and reflections today, I suggest the process or method of synodality, that is, the entire Catholic Church walking, discerning and evangelizing together. This is an on-going process of listening, discussion, dialog, debate, discernment and proposed pastoral responses that builds on collegiality and subsidiarity under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Pope Francis likes to call this process a journey or a path -- in the spirit of the meaning of the word "synod." The pope says that we should be listeners first and teachers second. I also want to link to Father Robert Duch's presentation on "The Lobinger Model for Parish Leadership and Ministry" on November 8, 2017 and Chris Lowney's presentation on "Everyone Leads: How to Revitalize the Catholic Church" on February 21, 2018.

Much of the African material in this presentation is found in my chapter "Beyond Vatican II: Imagining the Catholic Church of Nairobi I" in the book *The Church We Want: African Catholics Look to Vatican III* edited by Emmanuel Orobator (published by Orbis Books in North America and Europe and by Acton Publishers in English-speaking Africa). It is the first link in the articles and resources on the FutureChurch Website.

The Small Christian Communities (SCCs) Global Collaborative Website (www.smallchristiancommunities.org) has many resources on SCCs in all six continents. It includes the free online Ebook *Building the Church as Family of God: Evaluation of Small Christian Communities in Eastern Africa*. The Small Christian Communities Facebook Page (<https://www.facebook.com/www.smallchristiancommunities.org>) can be a forum for conversation, discussion, exchange, sharing, and updates on pastoral topics.

I have studied carefully the questions and comments that you posted on the FutureChurch Website and I will try to integrate them in my presentation.

II. Three Meanings (Examples) of the Worldwide Eucharistic Famine

If “the Eucharist is the source and summit of the Christian life” (Second Vatican Council, *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*, No. 10 and *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, No. 1324), then fostering eucharistic communities at all levels – from the SCC Mass in the home to the Sunday Eucharist in the parish church – is vitally important. African relationship and community values enrich the meaning of the Eucharistic community. A Ganda, Uganda proverb says *Relationship is in the eating together* that can be the starting point for a rich eucharistic theology.¹ A specific pastoral challenge in Africa today is what we call the “Eucharistic Famine”² (also called the “Eucharistic Hunger” or the “Eucharistic Drought”).

1. The first meaning (example) is that due to the lack of priests, on any given Sunday most Catholics in Africa (up to 80%³ in some surveys) participate in a “Sunday Service Without a Priest” especially in rural areas where there is usually no Holy Communion rather than participate in a regular mass. This is popularly called “the Eucharistic Famine.” In some of these services communion is distributed by the catechist or by a trained and installed lay leader. In

¹ This is a pastoral problem not limited to Africa. Observers in the West explain that the *de facto* impact of the priest shortage is to deny laity everywhere ready access to the sacraments, especially the Eucharist. It imposes a fast from our most basic spiritual nourishment, forcing laity to travel further – sometimes much further — to find celebrations occurring at times available in their jammed and complicated schedules.

² While not a common expression in the West, it is well known in Africa. Archbishop Raphael Ndingi Mwana’a Nzeki Ndingi, the retired archbishop of Nairobi Archdiocese, Kenya used the term in his intervention at the First African Synod in Rome in April, 1994.

³ This figure is quoted in **Joseph Healey**, *Building the Church as Family of God: Evaluation of Small Christian Communities in Eastern Africa*, Small Christian Communities (SCCs) Global Collaborative Website, **retrieved on 21 March, 2018**, http://www.smallchristiancommunities.org/images/stories/pdf/Build_new.pdf, p. 260. American Catholics really have no sense of the magnitude of this crisis especially as Catholic dioceses in the USA continue to import African and Indian priests.

general, the Catholic Bishops do not have the Eucharist reserved in outstation chapels mainly because of security issues and do not allow the catechists to give out communion because of the abuses that have taken place.

2. The second meaning (example) is that many Catholics in Africa cannot receive communion because they are not officially married in the Catholic Church. In some surveys 60% of adult Catholics in Africa have not had their marriages blessed in church (sacramentalized). Other practicing Catholics are divorced and remarried civilly outside the Catholic Church so cannot receive the Eucharist. Thus, a serious, ongoing challenge for SCCs is to help many of their members to regularize their marriages in a Catholic ceremony. M. Cleary states: "In many places of Africa and Madagascar large numbers of baptized are not able to receive communion because of their marital situation."⁴ Botswana Bishop Boniface Tshosa emphasizes that this situation causes much pain in an African context:

Many [people], because of what we call irregular marriage situations cannot receive the Eucharist -- the Food of Life. In Botswana, food is a symbol of welcome, of togetherness, of sharing, of celebration, of solidarity. To exclude someone from the Eucharist in Botswana, is interpreted as being excluded from God's company and God's love. Words expressing otherwise do not convince.⁵

3. The third meaning (example) may surprise some people. Due to the shortage of priests, the aging of priests, overworked priests and the clustering/mergers of parishes, the Eucharistic Famine is already a reality in North America and Europe and is happening in different ways. Three examples:

- a. In Summer, 2017 the Catholic news reported on a rural parish in Minnesota that always had Mass 52 Sundays a year. When the pastor went on vacation for three weeks, he couldn't find another priest to take his place. So, a deacon came to lead the "Sunday Service Without a Priest." So Holy Communion, yes, but no Sunday Mass for first time in the history of the parish.
- b. Before his death my brother lived in a fine Catholic Nursing Home in New York City. He appreciated the lay Eucharistic Ministers that regularly came to his room with communion. A new pastor came to the parish and said no lay people can give out communion any more, just priests and religious. So, my brother received communion much less frequently. This may be any exception, but it does happen.

⁴ M. Cleary, *Church as Family: Dialogue between African Culture and the Church*, 948.

⁵ Boniface Tshosa, intervention at the 1994 First African Synod, "Fifth General Congregation," *L'Osservatore Romano*, 17, 1338 (27 April, 1994), p. 11.

- c. In a February 23, 2018 article in *America Magazine* called “The Uncertain Future of Catholic Ireland” James Keane refers to the “sacramental famine brought on by clergy shortages that may prove even more painful for Ireland than the United States.”

III. Pastoral Solutions to the Worldwide Eucharistic Famine

Listen to Pope Francis’ invitation in No. 33 of *The Joy of the Gospel (Evangelii Gaudium)*:

Pastoral ministry in a missionary key seeks to abandon the complacent attitude that says: “We have always done it this way.” I invite everyone to be bold and creative in this task of rethinking the goals, structures, styles and methods of evangelization in their respective communities. A proposal of goals without an adequate communal search for the means of achieving them will inevitably prove illusory. I encourage everyone to apply the guidelines found in this document generously and courageously, without inhibitions or fear. The important thing is to not walk alone, but to rely on each other as brothers and sisters, and especially under the leadership of the bishops, in a wise and realistic pastoral discernment.

Pope Francis recognizes that the many reasons that people do not, and cannot, receive communion is an **urgent, concrete, pastoral problem** that requires **urgent, concrete pastoral solutions**. The pope was asked by a German newspaper if the Latin rite Church could allow the ordination of married men. He answered: “We have to study whether *virii probati* are a possibility. We have to determine which tasks they can take on such as in remote communities.” He asks national bishop conferences to try to come up with a consensus and make proposals for new pastoral solutions. So, Pope Francis seems to favor ordaining married men of proven virtue (known by the Latin term, *virii probati*), but the pope wants to leave the decision up to individual bishops’ conferences (subsidiarity). The vocation situation differs so widely in different parts of the world that a uniform worldwide solution is not possible

In reaching out to people with special needs Pope Francis in No. 47 of *The Joy of the Gospel* says: “The Eucharist, although it is the fullness of sacramental life, is not a prize for the perfect but a powerful medicine and nourishment for the weak.”

Creative pastoral solutions for the Eucharistic Famine (and specifically the world-wide shortage of priests) are:

1. Ordain mature married men of proven leadership skills (*virii probati* in Latin).

Providing the Eucharist to all Catholics in Africa is a great need. Malawian theologian Bishop Patrick Kalilombe, MAfr emphasizes that the Eucharist community is the heart of our Christian life. He says that if Christian communities in Africa cannot receive the Eucharist because of the lack of ordained ministers that presently in the Latin Rite are male, celibate priests, then we must rethink our church laws and pastoral practices, for example, ordain mature

married men of proven leadership skills (*viri probati* in Latin). Then many more people would be able to receive communion and our SCCs would truly be Eucharistic Communities.

The retired German Fidei Donum Bishop Fritz Lobinger (of Aliwal Diocese, South Africa) has written extensively on topics such as *Like His Brothers and Sisters* (Crossways, Publishing Company, 1999), *Teams of Elders: Moving Beyond "Viri Probati"* (Claretian Publications, 2007), *Every Community Its Own Ordained Leaders* (Claretian Publications, 2008) and Lobinger, Fritz, *The Empty Altar: An Illustrated Book to Help Talk about the Lack of Parish Priests* (Crossroad Publishing Company, 2016). He states:

"The Lord's Day and the Lord's Supper belong together" must remain our key principle. In about half of all Catholic communities in the world, these two things -- the Lord's Day and the Lord's Supper, which intrinsically belong together, have in fact become separated. Thousands of communities meet on Sunday not for the Eucharist but for a "Service of the Word." [In fact] more than half of the Catholic Church's communities have no resident priest. This is especially the case in Asia, Africa, and Latin America but also to some extent in Europe and North America. We cannot allow this situation to continue.⁶

As one challenging response to the "Eucharistic Famine" in Africa the Lobinger Model is an innovative model rooted in the particular needs and talents of local communities. It addresses the theological conundrum presented by the priest shortage by expanding the role of lay leaders and ordaining them into service. The Lobinger model was developed by Lobinger who, early on, was instrumental in developing the pastoral model of the Small Christian Communities -- including a particular model of *Bible* study with central roles for lay leadership in liturgical services, catechesis and the social gospel. He ministered in regions of South Africa where there were few priests. He recognized the enormous faith and talents of lay people in the communities under his care and sought to empower them to carry out the fullness of sacramental life in their local community. One can learn more about his model by reading his interview at: <http://www.uscatholic.org/ordainelders>

Many do not understand the Lobinger Model. The bishop proposes that the local community chooses a mature man to celebrate the Eucharist for that specific community. He would have a professional job (like St. Paul's tent ministry). He would not travel widely and not do ministry in other communities. He would exercise servant leadership in his very own local community.

A key for Lobinger is that the ordination of elders would work in vibrant, self-reliant Catholic communities in Africa such as the networks of parish-based SCCs. He admits that some priests view a new path to ordination without formal academic training or the celibacy requirement as a threat that could undermine the traditional priesthood. But Lobinger argues that

⁶ Fritz Lobinger, "Homegrown Clergy: The Case for a New Kind of Priesthood," *US Catholic Website*, retrieved on 30 December, 2016, <http://www.uscatholic.org/ordainelders>

traditionally trained priests would fit into the new system. “The new local leaders (Married Community Elders) become a leadership team and the priests become formators.”⁷

Bishop Erwin Kräutler, an Austrian-born missionary who headed the sprawling Diocese of Xingu in the Brazilian rain forest from 1981-2015 said finding ways to address the priest shortage would be one of the main topics of the special Synod gathering for the Pan-Amazon region to take place in October, 2019. He said criteria for admission to the priesthood must be modified to allow for the ordination of married men. He added that, since women now head many of the Small Catholic Communities, it’s also urgent to ordain female deacons.

2. A related pastoral solution to the Eucharistic Famine is twofold:

a. Dramatically increase the number of Eucharistic Ministers – sisters, brothers and especially lay people. More religious sisters and brothers could easily make this part of their pastoral ministry.

b. Build strong, secure churches in the sub-parishes or Mass Centers. Have the Blessed Sacrament reserved in these churches. Then the Eucharist could be given out at all services.

3. African Stages of Marriage:

One intriguing proposal in Africa for many years is to develop an inculturated Rite for the Catechumenate of Christian Marriage (Marriage Catechumenate) similar to the Rite for the Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA or the adult catechumenate). This could be two years or more depending on the customs and traditions (cultural dimension) of the local ethnic groups in Africa. It would integrate the basic elements of consent in the traditional African marriage rituals into the Christian sacrament of marriage.

This would follow the stages of marriage in an African context (also called “marriage in stages”) where marriage is a process rather than a single event and marriage is between two families rather than just between two individuals. The Catholic sacramental and spiritual “moments” (not “moment”) would take place during different stages of the marriage process: from the first official meeting and agreement of the two families of the couple to the betrothal (engagement) to the living together to the paying of the dowry or bridewealth (that often takes place slowly over many years) to the wife’s pregnancy to the birth of the first child to the civil marriage to the Catholic Marriage Rite (that could be in a Catholic Church or in a SCC) to the wedding celebration.

The couple usually live together during most of this process -- what is commonly called premarital cohabitation. During this period, sometimes called the “trial marriage” or “the test of compatibility” period, the couple test their ability to live together and to get along with their in-

⁷ *Ibid.*

laws such as the wife getting along with her mother-in-law if it is a patrilineal society. In African ethnic groups it is essential for the couple to have successful genital intercourse and for the wife to be fertile. If she is barren (or not able to have children for various reasons) the marriage can break up. More recently if the wife does not get pregnant the man should also be tested because there are various reasons for male infertility (male's inability to cause pregnancy in a fertile female).

IV. We Create the Path by Walking

A striking Spanish proverb sets the tone and the spirit of our journey: *We create the path by walking.*⁸ As we look at various pastoral solutions to the Eucharistic Famine in the context of the teaching of the Catholic Church, let us journey ahead together and let us be bold and creative. Let us put the pastoral options on the table for a truly open and inclusive discussion and dialog. Our process or method should be flexible, inculturated, contextual, collegial, decentralized, a “big tent” approach to the changes and developments in the Catholic Church as a World Church. It is obvious that one size does not fit all. We need “devolved” authority structures and decision-making processes. Different pastoral practices will develop in local communities “from below” in different countries and cultures.

I like to follow the wisdom of the African Riddle: *How do you eat an elephant?*
ANSWER: *One bite at a time.* This includes chewing and digesting well. Do or tackle one thing at a time. And do it thoroughly and well. Then move on to something else. So as a first step Bishops Conferences in particular areas where the Eucharistic Famine is widespread (for example, the Amazon Region in Latin America; isolated, rural dioceses in Africa; and remote Pacific Islands in Asia) should ask Pope Francis permission to ordain mature married men to celebrate the Eucharist in their local areas of acute need. As a second step implement the recommendations that will be coming from the Commission on the Women Diaconate. Then other steps would follow.

V. Evolving the Small Christian Community Model of Church in North America and Europe

Most of the questions related to how the Small Christian Community Model of Church can evolve in North America and Europe in the context of emerging models of parishes – the theme of this ongoing series.

In his book *Everyone Leads: How to Revitalize the Catholic Church* by Chris Lowney has an interesting section called “Hey, America, Let's Catch up with Kenya.” It focuses on the Catholic Church's new culture of leadership and describes Small Christian

⁸ The Spanish is *caminante no hay camino* based on the words “make the road by walking it” of the Spanish poet Antonio Machado (1875 – 1939).

Communities (SCCs) or *Jumuiya Ndogo Ndogo za Kikristo* (JNNK) in Swahili in St. Joseph the Worker Parish in Nairobi, Kenya. The leadership ministry of the local lay leaders (men and women) such as Lucy Kungu, Peter Karanja and Samuel Waweru is highlighted. Co-responsibility in the church is exemplified in deeds, not just talked about in words. The section ends with: "Just as Africa conceived the *jumuiya* to build the church within its culture, we in USA too must find imaginative ways to unleash each [lay] Catholic's gifts."

For me the key is what is the **local context**.

SCCs developed in Eastern Africa following our **local context**: small neighborhood, parish-based communities. SCCs are a pastoral model of church that transforms the parish into a communion of communities and an instrument of evangelization. SCCs combine *Bible Sharing/Bible Reflections* and practical action/outreach. SCC members are called to be missionary disciples.

This is very different from the local context in North America and Europe. When I am asked to explain the difference between Africa and the West in one sentence I say that in Eastern Africa "SCCs are not a program or project in the parish, but a way of life."

So, you have to be bold, creative and imaginative in your **local context**. Concerning the changing structures in Europe, Cardinal Christoph Schönborn of Vienna, Austria said the following in an interview with John Allen:⁹

The key idea, which has been extremely present in this synod, is the Small Christian Community. Many, many bishops from around the world have spoken about the Small Christian Communities. We see the need, and we have the desire, not to lose communities but to increase their number. We're forced to reduce the number of parish structures, with all their administration and expenses, but we want to favor a growing number of Small Christian Communities led by laity – laity who aren't full-time, who aren't bureaucrats, but volunteers. These are people living in the field, who do what laity in many parishes and other communities already do, which is to take responsibility for a large part of the life of the church, the vibrant aspects of community life. We want to implement more explicitly the great theme of Vatican II: the common priesthood of all the baptized, with the ministerial priesthood at its service, promoting the holiness of the People of God. Laity today – or, I would rather say, the baptized today – are fully capable of being true witnesses to faith in Christ in their daily lives, and therefore in the lives of Small Christian Communities...[In the future] five small

⁹ John L. Allen Jr., "Interview with Cardinal Christoph Schönborn," *National Catholic Reporter* [(NCR)] (25 October 2012) on the *National Catholic Reporter* Website retrieved on 28 October 2012 <http://ncronline.org/node/37906>

parishes in the countryside will form one greater parish. Their facilities, however, could be used to animate some of these Small Christian Communities.”

My main ministry now is with young people. In Eastern Africa we have:

- a. Parish-based Youth Small Christian Communities (YSCCs). Includes online YSCCs using What’sApp, Facebook, etc.
- b. School-based/campus-based/institution-based/center-based Youth Small Christian Communities (YSCCs). Includes online YSCCs using What’sApp, Facebook, etc.

A final suggestion for North America and Europe: I am reminded of the 16-29 years age range being used for the Synod of Bishops and specifically for the Pre-Synod Meeting going on in Rome right now on the theme “Young People, Faith and Vocational Discernment.” I feel that there are many young people who are searching for meaning in their lives. They may not be interested in the Institutional Church, but they hunger for a “safe place”/“real space” for discussion/sharing/reflection. They want to meet in small communities by themselves without their parents, teachers and church leaders present to share their own faith and reflect on their concerns.

So, let us help start SCCs for young people that go by many names:

Small Faith-sharing Community of Young People.
 Young People Peer Group Small Faith Sharing Community.
 Young Professionals Small Christian Community.

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