

References to Small Christian Communities in the *Instrumentum Laboris* (“Working Document”) of the 2009 Second African Synod

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March 25, 2009

On 19 March, 2009 in Yaounde, Cameroon Pope Benedict XVI promulgated the *Instrumentum Laboris* (“Working Document”)¹ of the 2009 Second African Synod. While the English text of the *Lineamenta* published in 2006 uses the term “living ecclesial communities,” the English text of the *Instrumentum Laboris* published in 2009 uses the more common term “Small Christian Communities” (note the capitals). The French text uses “Communautés Ecclésiales Vivantes.”

Footnote No. 2 of the document refers to section No. 9 below and states: “Though names may vary, the reality is the same: Communauté Ecclésiastique Vivante (CEV); Small Christian Community (SCC).” The same footnote of the *Instrumentum Laboris* in the French Edition states: “Les appellations varient mais la réalité est identique: Communauté Ecclésiastique Vivante (CEV); Communauté Chrétienne de Base (CCB).” In the Portuguese Edition it states: “As designações variam mas a realidade é idêntica: Comunidade Ecclésial Viva (CEV); Comunidade Cristã de Base (CCB).” However, the word “base” (or “basic”) does not mean the same as “small.” They are not equivalent. “The 1976 AMECEA Study Conference specifically chose the word “small” rather than “basic” to indicate that the movement was growing on its own [in Eastern Africa] and to avoid certain undertones of the word “basic” which is particularly connected with Latin America where it has a different meaning than Eastern Africa.”² Archbishop Ndingi Mwana’a Nzeki stated that to call the Eastern Africa grassroots communities “small” instead of “basic” “is another indication that the movement in Africa was growing on its own, quite independent of other places (e.g. Latin America). Perhaps we used ‘small’ because that is exactly what we meant. We came to realize that our people live out their commitment in small communities where they know one another and relate to one another.”³

SCCs are mentioned in 12 times in the *Instrumentum Laboris* and twice in the footnotes. This is significantly more than in the *Lineamenta* in which “living ecclesial communities” are mentioned three times in the document and twice in the questionnaire. This increase in the importance given to SCCs is clearly due to the many responses from the Episcopal Conferences in Africa and to other answers to the 32 questions of the original questionnaire. The 12 references are as follows:

1. Under “From 1994 to 2009: A New Social Context:” “Inspired by Sacred Scripture, Small Christian Communities (SCC) are actively involved in social life.” (No. 9)
2. Under “Ways in which the Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation Has Been Implemented:” “*Small Christian Communities* are truly places for studying, meditating upon and sharing the Word of God. They are seeking ways of expressing the Christian faith in the typical settings of a traditional African community. For example, celebrating funerals during a Eucharistic liturgy in the house of the deceased, as a reminder of the Christian hope in the

¹ Of the 79 footnotes in the 2006 *Lineamenta* only seven are from specifically African sources. Of the 67 footnotes in the 2009 *Instrumentum Laboris* only nine are from specifically African sources.

² Healey and Sybertz, *op. cit.*, 138. Further distinctions are made in Joseph G. Healey, M.M., “Basic Christian Communities: Church-Centred or World-Centred?” *Missionalia* (April, 1986), 14-34.

³ Raphael Ndingi, “Basic Communities: the African Experience,” in *A New Missionary Era* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1982), 100.

resurrection and the family as the living cell of the Church as Family of God, is proving to be of great assistance to the faith.” (No. 19)

3. Under “On the Road to Peace:” “Some roads to peace have been opened by Pastors, by those in the consecrated life, by Small Christian Communities and by the lay faithful, as individuals or members of associations. However, some obstacles still remain. (No. 63)
4. Under “Active Presence of Christ in Life:” “Christ’s disciples carry out their work in a conscientious manner, which is the basis for their taking charge of parishes to every extent possible and their forming future priests and consecrated persons in the midst of Small Christian Communities.” (No. 76)
5. Under “Power of the Word of God:” “If read and explained in groups or in Small Christian Communities, Sacred Scripture will become the dynamic force to renew and recreate African culture and fashion new men and women “to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ” (*Ephesians* 4:13). (No. 85)
6. Under “Rites of Reconciliation:” What has the Church learned [about reconciliation] from the experiences of diocesan synods, days of recollection for the clergy and forums for the lay faithful and Small Christian Communities? (No. 88)
7. Under “Church: Sacrament of Reconciliation:” “In virtue of the power of the Holy Spirit, some ecclesial communities bear witness to their faith in Christ by having the courage to take initiatives for reconciliation among Small Christian Communities, separated couples, families in conflict and divided village communities.” (No. 90)
8. Under “Working for a Reconciled Africa:” “In what ways can Church institutions and communities (episcopal conferences, dioceses, parishes, Small Christian Communities) share in this witness [of service]? (No. 92)
9. Under “Church: Family for All Nations:” “Small Christian Communities incarnate in the Church the support which arises from the joy of belonging to a family. Since the Christian life is human life, by necessity it takes place in the context of a family. Acts of solidarity, an expression of Christian charity, are occurring in exemplary fashion in these communities. In some places, the Word of God is read, shared and lived at this level. The role of lay animators in these communities is particularly important in ensuring a leadership-service which assists members to grow in their faith and become involved in efforts for reconciliation and a more just and peaceful society. Undoubtedly, theological work needs to be done in this ‘area’.” (No. 93)
10. Under “Service to Society: Health, Education and Socio-Economic Development:” “Because of the notable assistance of both *Caritas* and some Small Christian Communities, the poorest are cared for and those with AIDS receive attention.” (No. 96)
11. Under “Agents: The Lay Faithful in the Church:” “Maintain family unity by fostering peace and just relations and by a harmonious rapport with other families in Small Christian Communities.” (No. 118)
12. Under “Formation Programmes:” “Some difficulties can be seen in the diffusion of such programmes [referring to formation programmes that incorporate the Catholic Church’s social teaching] and their follow-up at the grassroots level. Can a way be found in dioceses, parishes and Small Christian Communities to make the implementation of such programmes possible? (No. 130)

References 4-10 are found in the document in Chapter III called “The Church-Family of God: “Salt of the Earth” and “Light of the World” and References 11-12 are found in Chapter IV called “The Church-Family of God at Work: Witness and New Perspectives.”

There are also two important footnotes on Small Christian Communities in the document. Footnote No. 2 of the *Instrumentum Laboris* is quoted above in Footnote No. 28 of this paper. Footnote No. 48 of the *Instrumentum Laboris* states: “The method of *Lectio Divina* devised at the Institute of Lumko (South Africa), called *Seven Steps*, has been adopted in a number of countries.” Our research shows that this method of Bible Sharing/Bible Reflection is very popular in Eastern Africa.

In light of these 12 references to SCCs and the major themes of the *Instrumentum Laboris* we ask the question: How is the recent praxis of SCCs in Africa contributing to the development of the theology of the Church-Family of God? Along with parish-based SCCs and lectionary-based SCCs we can talk of family-based SCCs. This includes SCCs that incorporate youth and children into the activities of the small community and” Mother SCCs” that have branches of Youth SCCs and Children SCCs. While there is a lot of discussion about the breakdown of the family structure in our contemporary society, some SCCs in Africa are countering this trend by helping couples who cannot receive the Eucharist to regularize their marriages in a Catholic ceremony. Other SCCs have night prayers for families in the neighborhood and a carefully planned program of catechesis for younger members such as teaching the sacraments as a regular part of SCC meetings.

SCCs are a concrete expression of, and realization of, the Church-Family of God Model of Church in Africa. Pius Rutechura emphasizes that “hopes for the Church in Africa depend on the courage to foster and build SCCs as the ideal foundational units of building the Church-Family of God.”⁴ This article documents many examples and case studies of SCCs that are involved in social and mission outreach and in promoting reconciliation, justice and peace in Africa. Kieran Flynn states: “It is in being transforming communities that SCCs realize their identity in the Church as Family Model. These individual [communities of] Church as Family the task of working to transform society.”⁵

As we move into the future let us use the famous Spanish proverb that is often applied to SCCs: *We create the path by walking.*

⁴ Pius Rutechura. “From the First to the Second African Synod of Bishops: Hopes and Prospects for the Church in Africa, *Hekima Review*, No. 38, 2008, 14.

⁵Kieran Flynn. *Communities for the Kingdom: A Handbook for Small Christian Community Leaders* (Eldoret: AMECEA Gaba Publications, Double *Spearhead* Nos. 181-182, 2007), 99.