

Families & Small Christian Communities

By Wendy Louis

August 2011, Nagpur, India

Introduction

SCCs are a microcosm of the Church. We call them also Basic Ecclesial Communities which means they are a sacred Church) entity sharing in the mission of Christ. SCCs are made up of a number of families from a particular neighbourhood or district. The family called “Domestic Church” as a sacred entity will be explored. The health and well being of the family the basic unit of society, is of vital importance if society is to flourish in virtue, with good mental and spiritual health. The breakdown in the moral fibre of a culture or society finds its roots in family life that is negligently lived, taken for granted or non-existent. The alarming growth of the refugee situation today, migration where families are separated and child sexual abuse have shocked us deeply and pushed us to see the urgent need for a restoration of respect and care for the family as a whole unit.

We would like to look deeply into the very warp and woof of human and family life to find the real strengths that have been created by God within the family and what it has to offer to humanity, to the church and to the world.

The paper on Family and SCCs has painted a global picture of the family in its context. I would like, in my response, to take a micro look, to discern the way God chooses to reveal himself in the human and relational life he gave us. Then I would like to examine the relationship between the family and Small Christian Communities.

The Family – sacrament of God’s love

All through the Old Testament we see God revealing himself to the People of Israel. The God of creation also reveals himself through all created things from the tiniest dynamic atom & neutron to the cosmic realities. In Jesus Christ, the Word revelation was completed. As

human persons we are made in the image and likeness of God and therefore reflect God's life and nature through our own lives and relationships. We are called to grow more fully into this image until we are in total union with God.

The mission of the family and of married couples is to reveal for each other and for the world God who is love; God who is three persons in perfect unity and God, whose all-embracing and universal love, demands a response. The family is a revelation of the Creator who made human beings and all of creation out of an outpouring of love.

The security, love, selflessness and friendship possible in a family makes it a crucible for humanizing society and individual persons. The family enables human persons to become loving, mature and secure in their own future relationships.

In the sharing of meals and through an exchange of intimacy we find what Christ called for from his disciples and the 'way' in which he nurtured his disciples into a new family that transcended blood ties.

We often find in the Scriptures various features of family life – Story telling – parents to children, Prophets to people; lives exchanged through word and action, forgiveness; failing and starting again and loving unconditionally that is the ultimate revelation of the love of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Taking our reflection a little deeper, consider a child conceived within an act of self-giving love. The act of sexual intercourse is uniting and fruitful. In the womb of the mother a child is nurtured and fed for nine months. Thereafter the mother breastfeeds the child directly nourishing him or her with her own body. In many poor countries the women literally give their lives during or after child birth, so that their children can live. There is no greater revelation of the love of God made visible than this. We find it repeatedly in the scriptures. God's love goes beyond even this love we are told. The fact that it is held up as the greatest love beyond which no one goes but God is an indication of how closely the love of mother and child reflects the love of God for us. It is the special mission of women and mothers in particular to bring to our notice and to help us experience this protective, self-sacrificing & unconditional love of God.

Women have a special closeness to the love of God through their 'glad burden' of the child in the womb. The role of father as provider and protector at the time when his wife and child are most vulnerable reveals the other aspect of the love of God. Together we see the kind of creator – God we can relate to.

Nowadays we find the image of God within a marriage can be distorted because of the selfishness, infidelity, poverty, greed & jealousy. Unfortunately the frequent cases of domestic violence, rape and abuse further mar the sacrament of love and the image of God.

Children in family life today have a hard time in many cases. The long-term experience of a dysfunctional family or poor, single parent family with little extended family support and financial security, can weaken the resilience of a child and make him / her less healthy both mentally and physically. His experience of love is distorted and inadequate for healthy relationships and can make them more likely to repeat these mistakes in their own marriages and families later on.

Families within SCCs are called to be signs and symbols of God's love and the SCC in turn is called to be the Sacrament of God's love for the families and for the neighbourhood and church. In this way the SCC can have an important part to socialize, nurture, support and welcome such children who are going through a very rough patch as well as supporting single parents or orphans or those in financial distress. Families that consist of single persons, siblings, widows with adult child etc are all families and need the welcome and support to become fuller human beings and children of God.

Inter-faith reality of families today

The family in today's context is rarely all of one faith. There are often members of varied confessions in the same family which requires another form of sensitivity and self sacrifice which leads to humble and authentic dialogue. The witness of these families is that the love of God can transcend differences and create a unity of will and unity of love.

Evangelization is wrought through the daily dialogue that spills over into work, leisure and extended family and widens the circles of unity and understanding among peoples of different

faiths. In this context we can speak of Evangelization as “Sharing the Hope” that we carry and “giving an account” of the hope that we have in Christ as St Peter said.

The SCCs are called in this context to be a place of welcome where the encounter with Christ is offered but never imposed and working together, being helpful and kind to the poor; to bring about the Kingdom brings people of different faiths together. In situations where the partner who belongs to another faith is not sympathetic to the Catholic faith, the SCC is a place of relief where the Catholic partner can live and share their faith openly and without fear of misunderstanding.

Children are often neglected or left out of Small Christian Communities. The spirituality of children and their ability to build community through the Holy Spirit should never be underestimated. SCCs are strongest when Families with children attend the weekly meetings and undertake various tasks as a family. Children can be taught to share the Gospel and to have their own meetings with a teen or young adult to facilitate as I have seen taking place in Cheju Diocese in South Korea. Families with children growing up together in these small Communities is the best way to keep our growing children and teenagers close to God through the Word of God and the friendship of community members. The lack of an extended family is compensated in these communities where elders take on the roles of grandparents, aunts and uncles.

The family is a complex system of vulnerable persons and the Church and SCCs need to support all the members and strengthen the adults and not only the children. Over emphasis on children’s catechesis without equal attention to adult formation leads to a lopsided development and can cause tensions in the family. The Church is called to respect the whole family and their particular mission to reveal the love and mercy of God among themselves first of all and then to those around them in Church and society. Care should be paid to the way ministries are organized so that they respect the integrity of the family. Separating parents from children for church services; creating absent parents due to the pressures of church ministries or work is doing an injustice to the primary role of the family to nurture disciples for Christ in the family, in church and in society.

The way the Church can show greater support is by recognizing the tasks of each stage of human life as well as key moments in family life. Thus, provide appropriate pastoral care in each case. For example, youth ministry can intentionally isolate adolescents from their families or can help them keep unity with their families. When families face bereavement or new challenges in the form of a child born with special needs etc, the Church community needs to ask itself how it can support such families and what the Small Christian Communities can do to help in a systematic and realistic manner. In this way, new and creative ministries will grow out of the SCCs which are not centred solely on the parish and its traditional activities.

The self-sacrificing work that mothers and fathers engage in produces nourishment for all and brings about a growth in love. This is precisely and concretely the 'making of disciples' that parents work at for their children.

The intimacy shared by a couple is a direct reference to the way God relates to us and goes even further and is closer to us than we are to ourselves. The family is in myriad ways the mirror of the love of God 'through a glass darkly' no doubt but still the most powerful witness available to us as human persons.

The Christian family is consecrated by their baptism and consciously lives the Trinitarian love in their family meals, charitable works, nurturing of disciples among their children and their self-sacrificing love and mercy. The unity so longed for by Christ is the life long work of families. The SCCs may sometimes have a role to support the efforts required to keep unity in the family or neighbourhood. The fact that in many SCCs women are facilitating and learning to be articulate about their faith and life has meant that the ideal of marriage as a partnership rather than of people expected to fulfill particular roles can be realized more fully. When we speak of complementarity in marriage we can sometimes lock the fathering and mothering roles into old stereotypes which are not helpful for the marriage or for the children. The feminine characteristics of tender love, listening and sharing belong to men as well within these SCCs. Perhaps the new way of being church – of participation and co-responsibility is built on equal partnerships in marriage and family life.

The family is constantly living within the mystery of the love of God and interpreting on a daily basis the way that love should be expressed –verbally, physically; sexually; through kind gestures and acts of generosity etc.

The pain and sacrifice constantly present in living as a couple with children, in-laws and other relatives is joined to the cross of Christ willingly carried because of the underpinning love.

The Early Church and Families

St Paul in his letter to the Colossians Chapter Four sent greetings to Nympha and the ‘church that meets in her house’. The realities of being a family bound by blood and a family united in Christ by faith exist side by side in the early church. St Paul referred to the house churches also as ‘households’ which in Greek is translated as ‘*Familia*’ rather than ‘*Ekklesia*’. These households had a head – sometimes a man and sometimes a woman. There was the household of Stephanas in Achaia found in 1 Corinthians 16 vs 15; the household of Onesiphorus who was assisted by Prisca and Aquila who had travelled from their home to assist Paul and the founding churches.

In Ephesians 2:19 Paul speaks of being the “Household of God” where we can grow into a holy temple. The family and the church are inseparable, in the Households the family seems to be foundational with a ‘*Pater Familia*’ and with others who belong to the ‘church that meets in their home’. Out of these ‘households’ emerged the ‘*Ekklesia*’ and what is known as the local church, diocese or particular church.

One must acknowledge a difference between the House churches of the early church and the Small Christian Communities or BECs because the leaders of Eucharist were found within these house churches. The breaking of bread took place within these households and house churches. Today, the ‘household’ has become a parish. One parish would have a number of BECs / SCCs where there is a leader who is not equipped to preside over Eucharist. The fullness of Church – Eucharistic & Missionary is lacking in our BECs but they are gatherings of believers around the Word of God – ekklesial in a more limited sense.

Conclusion

What is clear is that the family is the primary place for education in the faith and for mission – the mission to love and witness to the love of God for others. The love of '*Philia*' and '*Agape*' is experienced and learnt in the home and these families are called together to witness to the love of God in the household churches in the neighbourhoods. The gifts and ministries are activated within these Basic Ecclesial Communities (SCCs) where we gather as a church to witness to the kingdom of God for society and the world.

Wendy M Louis

Executive Secretary, FABC Office of Laity & Family & Women's Desk

Singapore 549102

24 June 2011

2393 words and 7 pages.