

## AFRICAN RELIGIOUS SPIRITUALITY AND INCULTURATION

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### Abstract

*This article seeks to demonstrate the impact of community life in promoting unity from an African perspective. We use the proto-community in Acts 2:42. The aim is to encourage all Africans and other people to cultivate a sense of belonging and valuing community life in the light of Acts 2:42. Hence we shall trace this theme from a Christian history. The other section touches on the essence of community life and obstacles that hinder it. We shall offer spiritual suggestions and an integrative reflection. The nature of the article is theology in general but spiritual in particular. As a spiritual article it is guided by a foundational approach. The expected result is that freedom from all the miseries experienced is brought by living a community life. This is a life that gives greater assurance of enough food, education, health, peace, employment and increased responsibility that values human dignity. The basic presumption is that there can be no development in any society without community life.*

**Key Words:** Community; Fellowship; Honour; Neighbour; Relationship

### Introduction

The word, *community*, is very powerful. It can evoke memories and emotions; provoke judgments, theological explorations and sociological theories. It also conjures up fantasies. The fact it can produce such diverse responses suggests that behind this word there is a complex reality. Community is not a simple entity. It expresses a wide range of life experiences. However, there are also negative things that harm individuals in a community. But our concern is an ideal community according to Jesus Christ. The ideal community is found in Acts 2:42. This community is both livable and important for peace and unity in any society. According to Keener (2012:991), it has been noted that life without integration into the life of the community is difficult to sustain. If we are to value human existence and the experience of all human beings we have to speak of a community. Individuals and families form different communities. In communities people have experiences which can be positive, negative, satisfying or unsatisfying.

### Methodology

This article uses a literary critical approach. Literary criticism has many guises. In this article, the discussion traces the flow of the text and shows how it is essential to promote in a divided society. As presently practiced, literary criticism focuses on the text as a narrative. It involves a study of the context of the text and techniques by which it is told like events, characters and settings.

## **Problem of Statement and Historical Analysis**

As President Mugabe celebrated his 93<sup>rd</sup> birthday with a 93 kilogram cake on 21<sup>st</sup> February, 2017 Zimbabwe was in a state of economic quandary. The involvement of security forces in every sector had divided people. The poor had become helpless because they could not do anything to stop this phenomenon. During the 2002 elections, an army commander unapologetically said the army would support the ruling party and he warned the voters that supporting the opposition would be suicidal (Maunganidze, 2015:48). In 2008, the army, intelligence officers and police set up command centres led by colonels that forced people to support ZANU-PF. According to Makovere, “2008 was when hell broke loose in Zimbabwe because my wife was raped by six men the whole night in my presence. I also suffered head injuries and psychological distress” (Interview: 20/07/2016). Currently the security controls prices of basic commodities, and this has placed the business community and consumers at loggerheads. During the election campaign period police and military forces asked business people to reduce prices so that people would support the ruling party. At roadblocks the security forces controlled collection of money. This is confirmed by Ndlela (2008:43): “In Zimbabwe the police and military pervade the economy (in state institutions, parastatals and also the private sector) playing a dominant role in the development of national policy through their prominent role in the Joint Operations Command (JOC) and also in enforcing policies such as price controls. The looting of diamonds worth \$15 billion in Chiadzwa showed the involvement of security chiefs in economy who have become the elite of the Zimbabwe. The divisions in the country have been worsened by the haphazard land invasions and emergence of the strong opposition party (MDC). The issue of which party to support, has caused father to turn against son, mother against daughter and so forth. Amongst the churches, some Apostolic sects and ZCC incline themselves with Robert Mugabe, while others sympathise with the opposition party. The same mentality proliferates into people of same church. There is no trust among people because there is a lot [of] suspicion. For instance, in the Catholic diocese of Harare there are eight priests who are believed to be linked with the government.<sup>1</sup> At Berejena Mission (Chivi District) there are five teachers feared to be security agents working in the disguise of nurses or teachers. The community fears these people. During my research in Karoi, I discovered an Anglican priest terrorising the parish because some the members supported the opposition party. He wants all parishioners to support Robert Mugabe. Since July 2007 when former archbishop Pius Ncube resigned due to alleged adultery allegations the Christian community in Bulawayo and the entire country has never been united. While some rejoiced because he criticised Mugabe fearlessly others did not like it”.

Due to polarisation this has forced distress among people and migration. According to Makochekanwa and Kwaramba (2009:4), “More than four million Zimbabweans or a third of the population, mostly trained teachers or lecturers, nurses, doctors and mining engineers were believed to be living outside the country by end of December 2008.” An estimated 1.5 million have moved to South Africa. However, the number can be higher than this due to undocumented people on farms and industries. Most of the migrations are due to economic and political reasons. Most fear being targeted by the security forces.

## **Theological Background of Community**

There is no single definition for the word community. The word has a myriad of definitions. Some are inclusive of each other while others exclude one another. The Latin

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<sup>1</sup> They are given allowances, cars, fuel or houses. They spy on other priests and parishioners.

etymology for the term community is *communitas*. This can also be traced to *communis* where the word 'com' (*cum*) means with and implies severalness, while unity (*unus*) means one (Principe, 1994:183). From this is derived the meaning of community as common possession. Community can refer to a group of people living in a particular local area. It implies all people from the same neighbourhood. This is geographical oneness. These can be people in one place based on ethnicity like Kikuyu of Kenya, Shona of Zimbabwe or Toro of Uganda. There are communities based on religious affiliation like the Catholic, Lutheran or Anglican community. As such a parish is a local church community. In the same way a convent is a community of people in a religious order living together. But there can be a language community which involves people sharing a given language or dialect. There is also a community of nomadic people, politics, economics, or academics.

Elements that characterise a community could include common ownership. This is where people share a community of possessions. In this case ownership means that there is a relation of an owner to the thing possessed.

In the political arena, we have communities of nations who have common interests, such as NATO, UN, EU, AU, COMESA, SADC and EAC. These are global or international organisations which involve many different countries having certain interests in common. At times a community is marked by where people live (<http://www.thefreedictionary.com/community>, 27/01/2014, 21:20PM). This is a residential community. Hence we can have a community of high density, low density or rural people. We can further have a community based on sharing, participation and fellowship. This is why we can talk of a community of plants and animals living and interacting with one another in a specific region under relatively similar environmental conditions. This will include gay or scientific communities.

In short, the term community has varied meanings denoting collectivities which are bound by culture, environment, religion, politics or economics. The focus of our reflection is based on Acts 2:42 which states, "They devoted themselves to the teaching of the apostles and to the communal life, to the breaking of the bread and to the prayers." This ideal community is the one we intend to emulate and live daily. Although there are other theological models of the church which include the church as an institution, sacrament, herald and servant, we shall limit ourselves to the model of community because it represents the heart of the church.

The crux of the matter under discussion is community life. At face value the title seems familiar as it speaks of community life into which we were born and live. But what is important is to know what community life is in the context of Acts: 2:42. When we consider the pragmatic aspect of community living in daily experiences it may sound like tiptoeing through landmine of conflicts. Thus we are faced with the paradox that most communities affirm community life but the real community life has remained a phantasmagoria. The reality of community has remained a slogan for some people because it has not become a way of life. Just as the devil can cite Scriptures so too are vocal proponents of community who are practically destroying its foundation. If we look back into the past centuries, it is evident that this problem is not just a contemporary one. As Mauro Guiseppe Lepori (2011:369) writes, "We can find examples of this difficulty among people of the twentieth century, the nineteenth, the eighteenth, and so on." Our task is to explore the community life we already share and live in faith. There are phrases closely linked to community like unity, communion and spirituality. These phrases put us right at the heart of the bone discussed. They make us question the name of a community life.

## Community Life in the Old Testament

This section looks at community in a Jewish context. In the Davidic times there seems to have been an awareness that community was more worthy than family attainment. This is captured in the remembrance, “back in the days when the whole world was united by a single language” (Gen. 11:1). The splendour of unity extended to the rule of Solomon. The Jewish religion and customs have always been lived out in the community. However, the word was used in many different ways. In one sense, Rachael Montagu (2000:63) writes: “It is used to describe the whole people of Israel as a collective entity.” Thus community referred to the Jews of one country who acted collectively. The chosen people lived in the visible institutional unity of all its twelve tribes (Lohfink, 1973:144). In another sense it meant a synagogue. “A synagogue is a group of Jews who pray together but who also function as a social grouping, meeting to support those in need, to organise and enjoy educational activities and spend time with each other” (Montagu, 200:63).

But among the Jews are also different communities along tribal, religious and geographical communities, each paying attention to its own needs. They have different belief systems; for example, the Pharisees believe in the resurrection while the Sadducees do not. There is also a Jewish community in the Diaspora.

The most binding fact among the Jews was the covenant with Yahweh. People were to remain loyal to God, their Supreme Ruler. In this context people had to honour and not violate one another (Principe, 1995:184). This was part of a covenant relationship between God and people. Every King was to honour this relationship. Hence, “This relational treaty between a nation and a king is the metaphor for the relationship between Yahweh and the Hebrew people” (Principe, 1995:184). The Shema of Deuteronomy epitomises this saying, “Hear, O Israel! The Lord is our God, the Lord alone! Therefore, you shall love ... the Lord, your God, with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength ... you shall not follow other gods ... for the Lord, your God, who is in your midst, is a jealous God” (Dt. 6:4-5, 14-15). This text was important enough to the understanding of the covenant that a written copy was affixed to the hand, to the forehead and to the doorpost at the entrance to the home (Principe, 1995:184). In other words, the covenant with Yahweh was the basis of community in the Old Testament. It bound people in a single movement to God and to one another (Principe, 1995:184).

From the above argument it is clear that God made a covenant with a people and not an individual. Thus, “individuals were covenanted because they belonged to a covenanted community” (Principe, 1995:184). Yahweh did not enter into private covenants with people for personal purposes. The concept of covenant developed with cultural changes. These include: Yahweh’s covenant with Adam and Eve, the agreement with Noah, an intensified promise to Abraham, another development with Moses, a revision with David and the new covenant announced by Jeremiah.

The spirituality extrapolated from the community’s covenant with Yahweh is that people have to become holy in the same way that Yahweh is holy. This holiness was expressed through *seged* (justice) and *hesed* (mercy). “Seged is a loving concern that all people have what is needed for a decent, fulfilling human life” (Principe, 1995:184). This justice has a distributive quality based on God’s care. The Hesedis galvanised by compassion.

In short, community in Old Testament is a oneness rooted in the total presence of people to Yahweh. The spirituality of the community is expressed through justice and mercy. For holiness and development every Christian community and the world need to be just and compassionate.

### *New Testament Teaching on Community Life*

In this section we travel back through the history of community life in the first Christian community in Jerusalem. The Greek etymology of the community is *koinonia* (Starkloff, 2000:426). In the Greek philosophy *koinonia* is understood as life-giving participation in the eternal realities. This notion reflects the Greek meaning in New Testament where Paul uses the phrase “sharers in the divine nature” (2 Peter 1:4). This confirms the understanding idea of Paul’s use of *koinonia* which arises from the idea of shared holiness (2 Cor. 6:14) to participation in Christ’s sufferings, to the unity of equity and justice demanded by participation in the Lord’s Supper (2 Cor. 10-11)” (Starkloff, 2000:426). Paul augments this idea when he talks of the social duty to share in the needs of the saints (Rom. 12-13). This culminates in the practical injunction to the Corinthians that they contribute money for the impoverished community in Jerusalem (c.f. 2 Cor. 9:13). What comes out very clearly is that community never implies absorption but rather a sharing by distinct persons.

The greatest commandment given by Jesus comes from Deuteronomy 6 which states, “Love God with all you have and are”. In the same way, how we treat one another is vital to our relationship with God. Matthew 25 gives us *sedeq* and *hesed* as qualities by which we will be judged. In Mt. 5:45 the author uses the word *perfect*, which probably tells us about the same notion of being compassionate in Luke.

In the New Testament Jesus insists on the Kingdom of God as a metaphor for a community. God is in charge of the community. Hence the use of Our Father is collective. The Christian community brings out the image of Father/parent and child. All people are children of the same parent who loves them equally. God is the universal parent of all people. Consequently, “What the parenthood of God does is make sisters and brothers of all men and women” (Principe, 1995:185). As stated in Mt. 23:8-12 we have only one Father, and that one is in Heaven. Strictly speaking, “We are always and only siblings” (Starkloff, 2000:426). This means God is our only parent in our relational structures on earth. As such, “A discipleship of equals is the character of the oneness of the many who are the community of Jesus Christ” (Starkloff, 2000:426).

The parenthood of God relates us to one another whether we like it or not. Siblings cannot choose whether to be related as siblings; their only choice is whether to live the relationship constructively or destructively. As President Obama remarked, “We can only choose friends, not relatives”. We are free individuals when we relate with others.

Jesus gives images of how a community can live its spirituality, i.e. as steward, shepherd or servant. From these qualities it is clear that a community does not belong to the leader. “The community is God’s people, and the Leader has temporary responsibility on God’s behalf” (Principe, 1995:186). The image of a shepherd emphasises that the leader does not own community. A good shepherd portrays inclusivity and care for the stray. Jesus demonstrated this by his association with sinners and good people. Sinners could eat at table with Jesus. This shepherd leaves the ninety-nine sheep and goes to look for one that has gone astray. A Christian community concerns itself with those who have drooping spirits, the down-trodden and the weak.

### **Textual Analysis of Acts 2:42 and its Community Relevance**

Acts of the Apostles is widely recognised as the continuation of Luke. It is the fifth book in the New Testament and offers a historical account of the beginning of the Christian church. Generally the aim of Acts of the Apostles is education into the being of the Holy Spirit. This is attested to by the fact that “Miracles and other wonders worked by Christ’s disciples

are so many signs of power” (Farmer, 1998:1506). The Holy Spirit takes initiative and directs the mission of the church. The disciples have to witness the Trinitarian life in their daily living. Above all the Holy Spirit draws many different people together, thus forming united communities. Throughout the entire Acts the basic element of community life testifies to the life of the risen Christ.

The climactic sentence in Peter’s description of Jesus (Acts 2:36) lays the ground work for understanding the nature of the community which had gathered in Jerusalem. Luke has Peter prepare the way for a definition of a messianic Jewish community. Those who believe in Jesus form communities that are messianic, a concept which is later translated to mean Christians. The instructions by Peter lead to the expansion of the community within Jerusalem. The community had various characteristics (Acts 2:42-47) which recur in the six subsequent descriptions of the community (Acts 4:4, 4:32-35, 5:12-16, 5:41-42, 6:7 and 8:1-3). At the conclusion of Chapter 2 there is a continuation of the programme seen in the Pentecost event and in Peter’s speech. The community gathered for four interrelated aspects of common life which are in Acts 2:42, namely the teaching of the apostles, fellowship, the breaking of bread and prayers. These four are associated and they provide an ideal community for Africa which suffers division, terrorism and xenophobia.

The section selected falls under the church’s liturgy, and is usually used during Easter, Ascension and Pentecost celebrations. The text is also used for dedication of churches, spread of the gospel, persecuted Christians and for those suffering from hunger and natural calamities. Ideally the text is intended for a liturgical community. The growth of the community is a constant theme in the early church. It portrays a community in the Jerusalem church that is ideal. *In de facto* in its growth the Christian community resembles the community of Israel (Farmer, 1998:1513).

### *The Four Elements that Promote Community Life*

In this section we shall critically analyse the four elements that summarise spiritual features in a Christian community. These include teaching of the apostles, fellowship, breaking of bread and prayers (Keddie, 1993:42). Gaventa (2003:81) calls them daily life in the community. These elements are linked to one another. There is a sense of belonging in a community. As Nicholas Segeja (2011:115) argues, the early Christian communities were characterized by the way in which members related to one another. Any commitment should mirror Jesus Christ. Like in the early Church, living in a community means relating to God and to each other in Communion i.e. *Koinonia*. Acts 2:42 sets as primordial image of *koinonia* in a community.

### *Teaching of the Apostles*

The teaching of apostles was the principle of authority. The teaching however, was not merely that of catechumens, to prepare them for admission to the church, but that which was essential to the Christian life (Bruce, 1990:131). Membership meant fellowship with the apostles. This means the church becomes apostolic because it abides by the apostles. The apostles had been the disciples of Jesus Christ, had witnessed His resurrection and hence they qualified to be the new teachers.

The prominence of teaching among the Jews was due to their possession of written Scriptures which contained their law and rule of social and religious life. It is in the same context that the early Christian community emerged. When Christ ascended into heaven the apostles took his place as teachers. They taught publicly and had a place of teaching in the

synagogues. Similarly, a Christian community teaches and preaches because the two go side by side.

The teaching of the Apostles was not limited to their public proclamation of good news but also their private instruction to other disciples, as they explained the Scriptures in the light of Christ and recalled the teaching of Jesus. The teaching had an impact on the lives of people; it rang out authoritatively far beyond boundaries of colour, creed and tribe. In contrast with gospel of prosperity where preachers speak more about themselves, the early Christians based their teaching on the risen Christ. We can argue that the explication of Scripture is part of community's apostolate. This element continues when Christians confess Jesus Christ by word and life. As such small Christian communities have a special role in preparing new members.

The believers underwent a regular course of instruction which became known as catechesis. This became a necessary qualification for baptism. The apostles taught about things concerning the Lord Jesus Christ of which they were witnesses. This is a challenge of teaching with authority and relevant information. The call to this apostolate is for every baptised person. It concerns the kingdom God which demands moral uprightness. It should be a custom which is conveyed by word of mouth and continual repetition. When this is handed down as a good deposit from one generation to another it becomes a tradition.

### *Fellowship (Communion)*

The second aspect of community life is fellowship. The precise term, *koinonia*, occurs only here in Acts. The word fellowship comes from the Greek term, *koinonia*. It also means communion. Keener (2012:1002) opines, "The term *koinonia* or partnership, can refer to the sort of harmony created by shared purpose and working together." It was also used by Paul to mean the sharing of resources (Rom. 12:12-13). In addition it referred specifically the collection of money for the poor of Jerusalem (Rom. 15:26). Thus the financial contribution to the poor is a proof of fellowship. The notion of sharing or togetherness which was inherent in the early Christian community was evident in other ways. Members of the community gathered with one mind in way that characterised a community. Paul emulated the pattern of daily meetings in Berea (Acts 17:11), Athens (Acts 17:17), and Ephesus (Acts 19:9). In Acts of the Apostles, we see a community or fellowship. The Jerusalem community is philosophically described as having all things in common (Acts 2:44). The emphasis is on participative common life. Inferring from 2:42 Robert Bellarmine wrote, "The one and true Church, is the community of men brought together by the profession of the same Christian faith and conjoined in the communion of the same sacraments, under the government of the legitimate pastors and specially the one Vicar of Christ on earth, the Roman Pontiff" (Dulles, 19974:14). In this definition three elements of community life are clear, namely profession of faith, communion and submission to the legitimate pastors. However, this view is exclusive because there is no room for people who do not belong to the church. True community life is manifested through life. How people live what they profess is more important than mere lip service. As Dulles (1974:15) argues community life is the union of people with one another. To this Dietrich Bonhoeffer adds interpersonal relationship which constitutes the complete self-forgetfulness of love.

Acts 4:32 stipulates that the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common. For Stella Nneji (2004:48) community is meaningful when its members are treated with dignity and rights. This idea of *koinonia* spreads through Judea and Samaria to Antioch, through Asia Minor and Greece, through Cyprus and Crete to

Rome (Nneji, 2004:55). The Pauline letters to Corinthians show a concern for unity and maintaining *koinonia*. The Corinthians would experience *Koinonia* because of their participation in Jesus Christ and in the Holy Spirit. In 1 Cor. 1:9 Paul writes, "You can rely on God, who has called you to be partners with his son Jesus Christ our Lord." This refers to the following engendered by the Gospel of Jesus Christ and reception by people. It is also a place where communion is first experienced and lived. This is why the Church as a community is a place where people have fellowship and union. This is supported by Segeja (2011:11) who argues that communities should promote justice and peace. This clearly sets the vision of communion among small Christian communities. In other words, the one community is a community of other communities; unity in each community is a mark of apostolicity. He goes further to say that communities should be true expressions of profound communion. Hence the celebration of the Eucharist expresses communion (Segeja, 2011:10).

Members of the community were found both in the temple and in their homes (Acts 2:46). Even though Luke wrote after the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem he knew the prominent role of the temple. He accurately locates the messianic community as continuing to be faithful to the temple cult. Thus their public presence in the temple continued unabated. The practice was continued by Paul in Jerusalem and other public places.

The idea of communion in a community fills the understanding of unity as a vital element. An authentic communion brings worship, ways of organising church life and recognises them as authentic gifts of the Holy Spirit which are necessary for the integrity of the community. This leads to an understanding that community is a place where the Gospel of Jesus Christ is proclaimed and received by people.

From the above exposition we have come to know that fellowship is comprehensive in its application. It corresponds to words like community, communion, and communication. "Its rarest sense, at least in the New Testament, is the vague one of society or social intercourse" (Addison, 90). It might be applied to the community of goods. In the ensuing verses it refers to mutual participation of the same food, whether social or sacramental. Above all fellowship signifies charity or any other species of beneficence. All these are appropriate and essential to the community character. It is desirable that people give alms to the needy. From the cited verse the early Christian community constantly engaged in mutual communion, both by joint repasts and sacramental feasts and charitable distribution.

### *The Breaking of Bread*

The expression seems to refer to the Eucharist (1 Cor. 10:16), i.e. the celebration that Jesus introduced on the night he was betrayed (1 Cor. 11:23). In other words, breaking of bread was a custom of Jesus (Luke 9:16, 22:19, 24:35). While Acts 2:46 makes it clear that this was a daily practice of the Jerusalem community, there is no further reference to the breaking of bread. However, the sharing of meals is inferred at various points in the ensuing narrative (Acts 10:23, 11:12, 16:14-15, 34, 18:7). Later references demonstrate that the breaking of bread remained a practice of Paul in Troas (20:7) and on board ship (27:35). Breaking of bread closely connected with fellowship (Keener, 2012:1003). It seems that during breaking of bread disciples shared common possessions and common meals. According to Keener (2012:1003), "It was a daily practice that involved shared use of property in, presumably, especially the more ample homes."

The Old Testament does not refer explicitly to this idea of finding communion with God in a common meal. Eating however is closely connected with sacrifice (c.f. Gen. 31:54, Exod. 18:21, 1 Sam. 9:12-13). Peace offerings ended with a feast upon the victim, and the

priests ate the remains of the guilt and trespass offerings. The sacrifices are called the bread of God and besides this animal victims, meal-offerings, showbread and first fruits were to God and eaten by the priests. On the other side the ordinary meals of the Jews bore a religious character, as was shown by the practice of blessing God or giving thanks over the food i.e. saying grace. Apparently the head of the family would break and distribute it. And so the term breaking of bread came to denote this commencement of a meal with a blessing.

In the life of Jesus Christ and his disciples the meal was no less part of their religious life. Eating together formed the bond of union between them and the Lord. This reinforced the notion of equality (Phillips, 2005:99). They began their daily meals by breaking bread and giving thanks in the manner described in the feeding of 5 000 people (c.f. Mt. 14:19). At the sea of Tiberius Jesus first took bread and gave thanks (Luke 24:30, 35). The Twelve naturally continued their common meal after the Lord was taken away from them. After Pentecost the whole society engaged in daily breaking of bread together and the meal must have held a central place in their life.<sup>2</sup> It was the bond of fellowship which gave an opportunity for common worship and mutual instruction and sustenance of poor members in the society.

From the beginning Christians observed the Lord's Day by gathering for the "breaking of the bread" (Acts 20:7). It was fraternal meal or love feast. This fellowship amounted to communion. In the *Didache* (A.D. 100) it is argued, "Thou shalt not turn away from him that hath need, but share all things with thy brother, and shalt not say that ought is thine own; for, if ye are partners in the eternal, how much more are ye partners in perishable?" (IV,8). The celebration was perceived as the expression of love by Christ (1 Cor. 11:26). Luke describes three times the life of the early Christian Community in Jerusalem (Acts 2:42-47, 4:32-37, 5:12-16).

Thus the author writes, "They devoted themselves to the apostle's instructions and the communal life, the breaking of the bread and the prayers" (Acts 2:42). As Phan (1998:199) writes, "It is the body and blood of Christ, the gift of God the Father, brought forth by the power of the Holy Spirit." On this idea Pope Leo XIII (1902:513) wrote:

"...this sacrifice of the Lord in itself affirms the universal union of Christians among themselves by firm and indissoluble charity. For when the Lord calls his body the bread made up of many grains, He indicates the union of Our people; and when He calls his blood the wine made out of thousands of grapes and forming one single liquid, He also designates Our flock formed out of a multitude of different men gathered together."

In a similar way St. Augustine called the Eucharist a Sacrament of unity (Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1993:351).

*Sacrosanctum Concilium*, No. 47 teaches that the Eucharist is "a sacrament of love, sign of unity, a bond of charity, a paschal banquet ... a pledge of future glory" (Abbot, 1966:137). This is why it is atrocious for Christians to be deprived of the Eucharist. The deprivation of Eucharist means losing unity and communion. Communion with Christ brings peace and joy and fosters courage to forgive our enemies. The Holy Eucharist creates our unity with God and among ourselves. As it is written, "At the heart of the mystery of the church lies the deeper mystery of communion: communion with God and among human beings in God" (Spearhead, 1979:9). The unity brought about by Eucharist is not deadening and alienating uniformity. This is called liberating unity wrought by God. Pope John XXIII (1959:513) in his encyclical *Ad Petri Cathedram* said "Let there be unity in what is necessary, freedom in what is doubtful and charity in everything". Thus, as a

<sup>2</sup> Luke pays attention to the thought of bodily nourishment (Acts 2:46, Luke 2:42, 46, 6:2, 9:19, 10:9-16).

Eucharistic community people should want unity only in things that are necessary or essential to our faith and spirituality.

In the Eucharistic action, the bread and wine are the instruments of communion. A community shows *koinonia* by actually sharing bread and wine. St. Paul refers to a sacrificial community when he writes, "Look at Israel according to the flesh; are not those who eat the sacrifices participants in the altar? So what am I saying? That meat sacrificed to idols is anything? Or, that an idol is anything? No, I mean that what they sacrifice, (they sacrifice) to demons, not to God, and I do not want you to become participants with demons. You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and also the cup of demons. You cannot partake of the table of the Lord and of the table of demons" (1 Cor. 10:18-21).

To belong to a community requires no double standards. One belongs either to the table of the Lord or the table of demons. One sign that shows that an individual belongs to Christ is participation in the Eucharist celebration. And participation in the sacrifice shows that one belongs to the body of Christ and has accepted the invitation (cf. 1 Cor 11:23-26).

According to Paul participation in the Eucharist holds the community together because people see others as members of Christ's body. Hence the spiritual gifts given to them edify the body (cf. 1 Cor. 12:a4-6). Where *koinonia* is strained what helps the community to continue understanding one another and working together is Christian love (cf. 1 Cor. 13:4-7). In essence liturgical celebration should bring the community together. According to Jungmann, (1956:101) "Celebration is the expression of thought or joy or enthusiasm communally shared ... A man needs his fellow human beings if all that is human in him is to blossom forth." In other words community life is the fruit of the Eucharist. Breaking of bread has remained a central means and test of fellowship in the church. Eating together is a sign of fellowship. Hence the Bantu people agree that a person who eats alone is witch. Hence eating together creates a bond and friendship.

### *Prayer and Devotion*

The devotion to the apostles' instruction was of value for the early Christian community. The apostles preached publicly in the Temples and homes Christians (cf. Acts 5:42); for example Peter preached to the centurion and his relations in his own house. Similarly, Paul preached publicly in synagogue or in lecture-halls (cf. 19:10) and also evangelised in the houses of Christians. Christians were loyal to the common creed of the apostles.

Prayers meant the singing of psalms, the great prayers of the Bible that Christianity inherited from Judaism. Prayer is a necessary tool for community life. People have to pray for each other. Thomas argues that prayer was a mark of the early Christian community. The prayers were not a part of formal worship services only. The whole life of the early church was a dialogue with God. Prayer preceded every decision, undergirded all action and followed every triumph. In addition, "The Christians assisted at prayer in the Temple (Acts 3:1), but they also prayed in their homes". Apart from communal prayers Christians continued to develop individual prayers. The Daily Mass and prayers require that people have to participate. People reaching out to each other are brought together. The life of Christ is realised in prayer. Jerome argues that prayer is at the centre if one wishes to live a godliness and dignified life. Prayer makes people discover their foundation and stability. The Christians shared all things (Acts 2:44, 4:34), and people were generous, as in the instance of Barnabas (Acts 4:36, 37). Secondly, Mary the mother of John Mark, chose to open her house to the Christian community (Acts 12:12-19). But deceivers of the community like Ananias and Sapphira would not be entertained. Luke gives us an ideal community for human living. To have everything in common reminds us of Aristotle who

argued that friends have their goods in common. In other words, people may own their own goods, but they are ready to surrender their claim for a friend in need. This is how the early Christian community lived.

In the light of Vatican II *Constitution on the Church* community life can be seen as charity and truth. Thus what befits a community is visible unity. This is what Dulles (1974:49) calls, "...the immediate relationship of all believers...". Thus community life completes and makes explicit a human relationship with God. This makes Christians a unique people of God. When the world looks at our communities people should say, "Look at them; they are one heart and one soul". This is a community motto. It should prevail in homes, small Christian communities, parishes, dioceses and the universal church.

Community life should become a spiritual notion that is hereditary or contagious. People have to be conscious of the community. This is what brings heroism in any community. Community is a means for perfection. Both priests and the laity are abound with people and things to show their virtues. Hence one sacrifices for the sake of the community.

The goodness of a community depends solely on the goodness of individuals and families who constitute it. Where the people are role models so also is the community. This is why we argue that a community that violates the rights and dignity of an individual is not worth living in. A community is a bigger home for people. It is absurd when the community eats its own children. A good community guarantees security and comfort. It has influence on the families and people pride in it. Families need community to realise their potential. The need for community is a natural need where people exchange love and services, seek common good and support each other. An organised community exercises mutual charity daily. The concern for the common good of all becomes a higher and more sacred concern than for any private good. This is why any intelligent person must learn to regard the common good as a sacred thing close to Christ. There is no way charity can harm its beneficiaries. The problem starts when people feel neglected by the community.

In his discourse at the last supper (John 17:20-23) Jesus called upon the community life to be the truest sign to future generations that He had been sent by His Father into the world. A community of his followers is the proof of Jesus' presence in the world. God is community (cf. Gen. 1:26). There are three persons but One God. The more communal people become the more visible signs of God are realised in the world. As such community should reflect God's fidelity, peace and love. It draws life from the love and grace of God.

The four elements which include devotion to the apostles' teaching, the breaking of bread, communal life and prayers (c.f. Acts 2:42) we have discussed indicate that community life has both horizontal and vertical dimensions. The horizontal dimension refers to the social aspect of relationship with other people, while the vertical is about the relationship with God (Dulles, 1974:45). Community life is the glory of Christ. In other words, "The outward and visible bonds of a brotherly society are an element in the reality of the Church, but they rest upon a deeper spiritual communion of grace or charity" (Dulles, 1974:45). The cooperation of Christians with the Holy Spirit is shown in a network of mutual interpersonal relationships. The true Christian spirituality is depicted by a relationship of people as Body of Christ. This exemplifies the community as an organism vivified by the Holy Spirit. Thus a community is seen as a human body with various organs. The main function of a community is to follow Christian teaching, mutual union, observe the Eucharist and prayers. These are metaphorically oxygen to any sincere community. The four bring people closer to each other and to union with God, and the Holy Spirit who is the principle of unity dwells in such a community.

## Obstacles to Community Life

- *Lack of affirmation:* Nowadays there is a culture of respect and recognition. Affirmation works for both an individual and community. It is a kind of feedback and appreciation that someone has done something that is valuable and recognisable. Paul in his Epistles repeatedly expressed thanksgiving and appreciation to God and the community or individual to whom he wrote. The feeling of being appreciated makes one desire to improve and do better, just as lack of affirmation breeds despondence. A genuine affirmation prevents abuse by leaders because it stems from a heart filled with the love of Christ.
- *When Christ ceases to be the centre of our life.* When one is far from others one is further from Christ. This means that life without Jesus Christ is absurd. The absence of Christ means that life is lived without ultimate significance, value, or purpose. The moral values are just human expressions without taste. From a qualitative point of view life without Jesus Christ is not different from that of brute animals.
- *Dysfunctional passivity.* This is unwillingness to engage (cf. Gal. 6:1-5), i.e. a situation where there is no empathy. The person is emotionally unavailable, and therefore a passive abuser. One is hurt by the lack of interest and lack of communication. In this case the attitude manifested defines one as unlovable and unworthy.
- *Lack of dialogue* (cf. Sirach 19:5-12). According to Pope Francis (2013:15), “Peace cannot be built without dialogue founded on meekness.” Thus all the wars, strife and unresolved problems are due to lack of dialogue. Whenever we are confronted with problems dialogue must bring solution and peace. The nature of dialogue is that it does not allow conflict and quarrel.
- *Barbed-wire disease.* Barbed wire is a type of steel fencing wire constructed with sharp edges or points arranged at intervals along the strand(s). It is used to construct inexpensive fences and is used atop walls surrounding secured property. In community life some have the attitude of fencing relationship. Such people would not allow anyone close to them to relate or talk to anyone. They jealously guard against any person that may interfere with their friendship. Some even end up killing the person whom they suspect or perceive as a threat to them.
- *Prayerlessness.* But is prayerlessness sin? Though it is not listed specifically as such in Scripture, James, the brother of Jesus, said, “*Anyone, then, who knows the good he ought to do and doesn't do it, sins*” (James 4:17). An argument may be made then that prayerlessness, as a lack of action, could indeed be considered a sin of omission. Without a doubt we are commanded to pray. Jesus told His disciples to pray and not give up (Luke 18:1-8). Paul commanded us to “*pray continually*” (1 Thessalonians 5:17). Peter wrote that we are to be self-controlled so that we can pray (1 Peter 4:7). James commanded us to pray for each other (James 5:16). If failing to do something we are commanded to do is sin, then prayerlessness is surely a major sin for believers. Perhaps the most foundational issue here is that prayerlessness is a declaration that we do not need God. Prayerlessness occurs when you depend on yourself. Failing to pray is also an indicator of a lack of love for the Lord. Prayer, at its heart, is communicating with God. What does it say to Him when we fail to find time to talk with Him? Do we say by our lack of prayer that we are not at all interested in spending time with the Lord or hearing anything from Him? When we do not pray, we move away from any possibility of intimacy with Christ. When prayerlessness is prevalent in our lives, we are also guilty of failure to love one another. There is scarcely any greater way to demonstrate love than to pray for someone.

## **Spiritual Suggestions**

- *Strengthen the Christian Teaching:* People are drawn to the beliefs they share. Very often most of us do not know what we believe. People are carried away by cheap and popular notions that make them deny reality. It is essential to find Scripture references in Holy to what we are living today, to what concerns us and preoccupies us in the present, so that we can discern and understand our way of life. This is no biblical fundamentalism but making the word of God take the place of reality. The word of God clarifies reality in all its dimensions and truth. It arouses freedom and motivates people towards the good. Thus communities need to receive and proclaim the Word of God (i.e. *kerygmatic*).
- *Uphold Fellowship:* A community is the centre of spiritual life in which the lonely find friends, the sinful find understanding and forgiveness, believers find support from fellow-believers and the down-trodden find solace. This is affirmed by Stella Nneji (2004:53) who says, “The Church is a communion.” Fellowship makes people share the existence of Christ. Similarly put, Constance Bansikiza (2012:9) argues that a community is a place of protection and security. This is what John Lukwata (2003:185) calls unity of those who worship together. Such a community is free of discord or quarrelling. The members have courage to reconcile.
- *Develop Spiritual Interest in the Holy Communion:* Celebration of Mass is not a matter of soulless routine. *In de facto* it is a spiritual act by which people are drawn together as a community.
- *Love of Prayer:* People who remember one another in prayers can survive divisions and privations which can destroy their oneness. Praying together brings unity among people even though they work for different concerns, in diverse parts of the world.
- *Economic Responsibility:* The impact of economic doldrums can be visible in the lifestyle of a community. While some live in luxury others are languishing in economic disaster. There are many people who have no access to houses, clothes, food, clean water and health facilities. As a community we have to support our fellow brethren in need. The money raised to support them must reach the intended destinations and be used responsibly. These people belong to the community of human beings and they should feel part of us. Leaders must be transparent and accountable. According to Stella Nneji (2001:53) communion must be manifested in co-responsibility and collaboration.
  - *To Know and Live Trinitarian Communion:* This is the ultimate meaning of each person and community. The individual finds the real meaning of community when he/she enters into Christ who is the origin and end of everything and goal of every human heart. And this is possible through grace of the Holy Spirit. It is not enough to remember historical events but Christians need to join a group of people who are living the Christian teaching (Hargreaves, 1990:29).

## **Integrative Reflection**

The four practices are inseparable. The organisation and condition of the early Christian community was that of a family. Thus all acts were more or less of religious character. It was at meals and prayers that teaching and fellowship were dispensed. Moreover, the Breaking of Bread was also administered at the social meals. Thus the social and the Eucharist were combined to make up the full sense of apostolic communion. The early Christians adhered to the teaching of apostles and breaking of bread. As the beginning of mature life the initiatory acts should teach the young adults the idea of communion. The

devotional character of prayer has to be focused. Although cultural practices can be social but they can enhance religious attitudes.

The gist of our article has been to reflect on our community life today. The mission of all the baptised is to continue what Christ came to accomplish in this world. thus to make Him present and living among us. The real challenge of any community is to give humanity access to Salvation, to the Saviour. We discover the presence of Christ in our midst as he promised, "When two or three are gathered in my name, there I am in the midst of them" (Mt. 18:20). The mission of every community is to place all individuals in communion of love with the Trinity.

To conclude, it should be borne in mind that community life is the concern of every individual, nation and continent. The obligation comes from the fact that people have been created to live a community. No person is an island. From Acts 2:42 we have learnt that community life is at once human and supernatural. No individual person or nation should live, develop and make progress at the expense of others. Community life is the basis of civilisation of the world. It is a war against war (the threat of nuclear war). It is a manifestation of genuine religion, independence and human life. In other words, people engage in a spiritual pilgrimage for perfection.

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