

Anselm Prior OFM and the shift to the Lumko Model for the Church after Vatican II

John Fuellenbach

Gregorian University, Rome (former professor)

fuellenbach@steyler.eu

Abstract

In the creative turmoil after the Second Vatican Council, the Divine Word Missionaries (SVD) set up a five-month renewal course at Nemi for their members. Noting that one key issue was the changing concept and practice of the Catholic Church from a universal, clerical pyramid to a communion of local communities, and that this conciliar theological vision demanded particular pastoral skills and training, the then director of the Nemi Renewal Course invited Anselm Prior to conduct a workshop presenting the Lumko training method of building Small Christian Communities. In this paper the author contrasts the Basic Ecclesial Communities that were birthed in Latin America over against the hierarchical church, with the Small Christian Communities that originated in Africa that were planned by the bishops themselves to bring the church closer to the people and their culture. This African model was promoted globally by the Lumko Pastoral Institute, and so became a vital part of the pastoral skill training conducted by Anselm Prior during some 15 annual courses at Nemi.

Keywords: Basic Ecclesial Communities; Small Christian Communities; Lumko Pastoral Institute; Nemi Renewal Course

Introduction

In the nineteen sixties in Nemi, near Rome, the Divine Word Missionaries (SVD) opened a renewal centre for its members who had spent 15 and more years in cross-cultural mission work. The course lasted 20 weeks with the aim of bringing the members up to date in the theology that had emerged during the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965). Speakers from different fields of theology were contacted and asked to bring the participants up to date with the main thrust of Vatican II.



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The aim of this short paper is to show the contribution Anselm Prior made over the years to our renewal programme in Nemi.¹ My intention is to acknowledge and honour Anselm Prior and to say thank you for his commitment, through this modest contribution to the Festschrift for his golden jubilee in the priesthood.

For 15 years (October 1987 to November 1999), as head of pastoral ministry at Lumko (1987–1990) and then as director of the Lumko Pastoral Institute (1990–1999), Anselm Prior came to present the main objective of this institute at our Nemi Renewal Programme under the title *The Renewal of the Parish Church through Small Christian Communities in Africa*—the African counterpart to the Latin American Basic Christian (or Ecclesial) Communities (BCCs or BECs).²

The African bishops had opted for Small Christian Communities (SCCs) as their pastoral priority. They regarded the Lumko programme as the most appropriate way to build up local churches that are truly self-ministering, self-propagating and self-supporting. The bishops regarded the SCCs as the best means for developing African Christianity, stating that “small communities also seem to be the most effective means of making the Gospel message truly relevant to African traditions.”³

On the basis of the bishops’ option for SCCs and African pastoral experience, the Lumko Pastoral Institute in South Africa developed a method of how to build SCCs in local parishes that could lead to a creative renewal of the African church.

The Nemi Renewal Centre and the BCC/BEC Model of the Future Church

The author became the director of the SVD On-Going Formation Centre in Nemi in 1978 and directed the annual renewal courses until 1990. By that time one of the most debated topics in our courses was a comparative study of the church, particularly the emerging ecclesial structures in the ongoing awakening of the local churches, with their diverse situations in the different countries and continents from where the participants hailed. Lumko seemed to offer the best guidelines for this pastoral approach when compared to the Latin American BCCs, which stressed the need to place every single pastoral aspect within the context of liberation.

The best known term for this phenomenon at that time was Basic Christian (or Ecclesial) Communities, a movement that emerged after the Council, originally in Latin America. BCCs

1 The Nemi Renewal Centre is now known as *Centro “Ad Gentes”* as the final session of the drafting committee of the conciliar decree *Ad Gentes Divinitus* (on the missionary activity of the church) was held there in 1965, chaired by SVD Congregational Leader, Johann Schütte.

2 See, Anselm Prior, *Small Christian Communities: How They Are Formed and How They Live*. Germiston: Lumko Publications, 1997; *Towards a Community Church: The Way Ahead for Today’s Church*. Germiston: Lumko Publications, 1997 (2nd edition); *Fully Human, Fully Alive! Facilitator’s Manual*. Germiston: Lumko Publications, 1999.

3 The African bishops envisaged that SCCs would become more important than traditional mission structures such as church buildings, schools, and hospitals. Immediately prior to the Vatican Council, the bishops of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) approved a pastoral plan to promote “Living Ecclesial Communities” as the only way to make the church more “African” and close to the people; they launched the SCC movement in 1971–1972. The bishops of eastern and southern Africa followed closely afterwards.

understood themselves as the true fruits of Vatican II. They regarded the emergence of their movement as part of a concrete realisation of the communitarian model of the church (church as communion, and as people of God) promoted by the Second Vatican Council.⁴ Basic Ecclesial Communities are considered a new way of “being church”—the church at the grassroots, in both urban neighbourhoods and in the village.

In the seventies this new model of being church spread to Asia and Africa, but with a different emphasis.⁵ Since this new way of being church invited the participation of all members, in which the laity would actively participate in the leadership of the local church, the official hierarchical leadership was concerned that it might lose its privileged position, as well as its social standing, which they had enjoyed for many centuries. And so, on occasion, tensions arose between hierarchies and the basic communities. While the promoters of the BCCs were inspired by the Old and New Testaments to undertake social analysis (just as social analysis was being employed by liberation theologians), bishops were accusing them of taking their model not from the Bible but from Marxist social praxis. This controversy invited fierce reactions from the well-established class of the wealthy. It also prompted Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, to publish two letters on the risk involved, and requested those participating to return to the well-known teachings of the church.⁶

Renewal of the Parish Church through SCCs in Africa

At almost the same time, the African church was looking for their model of church renewal in the context of Vatican II. The SCCs became the African counterpart to the BECs and BCCs of Latin America.⁷ However, they evolved in the context of pastoral planning, which was initiated by the bishops in contrast to the BECs, which had evolved from the grassroots of the faithful as a response to the lack of priests, the rise of Pentecostal churches, and the abominable poverty and injustice suffered by the masses of people in corrupt political systems with the unbelievable riches and uncontrolled power of the ruling parties.⁸

The Africans, however, were more concerned with the inculturation of the Gospel message into the fibre of the African community, while the BECs in Latin America were more

4 *Lumen Gentium*, “Dogmatic Constitution on the Church,” especially chapters I (The Mystery of the Church) and II (The People of God).

5 Both personnel and material from Lumko inspired the growth and direction of SCCs in Asia. Oswald Hirmer, a former director at Lumko, was invited to present at the Fifth General Assembly of the Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conferences (FABC) at Bandung, Indonesia in 1990, on the theme: “A New Way of Being Church.” The FABC then established The Asian Integral Pastoral Approach (AsIPA) at the FABC Office of Laity to train pastoral leaders for SCCs. For Anselm Prior’s contribution in the Philippines, see the contribution by Mark and Estella Padilla in this volume.

6 See, Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Communio Notio* [Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on Some Aspects of the Church Understood as Communion], May 28, 1992. Also, Joseph Ratzinger, “The Ecclesiology of the Constitution of the Church, Vatican II, *Lumen Gentium*,” November 2000.

7 BECs were made a pastoral priority at the Second General Conference of the Bishops of Latin America (CELAM) held in Medellin, Columbia, in 1968. See, Document on General Pastoral Work No.10, in *A Igreja atual transformação da América Latina à luz do Concílio*, Vozes Petrópolis, 1969, pp.152ff.

8 See, Marcello deC. Azevedo, *Basic Ecclesial Communities in Brazil: The Challenge of a New Way of Being Church*. Washington DC: Georgetown University Press, 1987, pp. 23–56.

concerned with the liberation of the oppressed from injustice. Although the BCCs and BECs supported many ministries, all of them were tied directly to the work of liberation. On the basis of the bishops' option for SCCs and African pastoral experience, the Lumko Pastoral Institute in South Africa had developed a method to build SCCs in local parishes that could lead to a renewal of the African church without putting the emphasis—as in the BCCs and BECs in Latin America—heavily on socio-economic and political liberation.

The shift to the Lumko Model for the Church in the Future

As the director of the Nemi Renewal Centre, at each course I gave a topic entitled: *The Church in and after Vatican II* (The very topic I was teaching for years at the Gregorian University in Rome). In relation to it, I spoke on the main concerns of liberation theology which had emerged in Latin America. Then I came across the programme of the Lumko Pastoral Institute and realised their programme was much richer and more balanced and could answer many questions from the participants which the BECs and BCCs left unanswered.

I contacted Lumko and got in touch with Anselm Prior, then head of the Department for Pastoral Ministry at the Institute. I asked him if he would be willing to give the Lumko course of building Small Christian Communities to our group in Nemi.

Most participants in the group had to work with small communities in their cross-cultural mission work but often felt not sufficiently equipped in accompanying them and giving them appropriate guidance. They felt inadequate for the task and expected assistance from the Nemi course. Anselm Prior instantly agreed and was willing to come for one week and to help us with the request for guidelines. His presentation was an immediate hit. From that day on his programme belonged to each course in Nemi.

The most important activity of SCCs was Gospel sharing—something we as Divine Word Missionaries cherished greatly on the basis of our name. Through common reflection and sharing, the group members would meet the person of Jesus Himself. They became ever more aware of the presence of the Risen Lord in their midst and in each other. This regular sharing on the Word led them into a personal relationship with Christ who truly is the foundation of their community.⁹ This also led to a deeper sense of community among themselves. Thus, Gospel sharing also gave and gives rise to a spirit of openness and trust in the group. SCC members come to know each other as brothers and sisters. All other activities are inspired from here. Important, also, is the training of community leaders for these specific communities. Since they do not want to regard themselves as sectarians but wish to remain linked with the universal church through the parish priest and the bishops, this relationship needs special care from both sides.

9 Anselm Prior, *Gospel Sharing: An introduction to Three Gospel Sharing Methods*. Germiston: Lumko Publications, 1997. Also, Oswald Hirmer and Anselm Prior, "Gospel Sharing Builds Community," in *Becoming a Creative Local Church*, edited by P. Hartin, P. Decock and B. Connor. Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 1991, pp.119–143.

Anselm Prior was the right person to offer a programme to deal effectively with the needs of these communities. In lectures and workshops, and with ample teaching aids, he offered participants what they felt they needed most: pastoral competence and skills. His personality and gentleness made the relationship between him and the group all the more relaxed. The best proof of this is that he was invited no less than 15 times to Nemi in order to facilitate the workshops. It was a blessing for all: for us, the faculty, as well as the participants. For me all the more since one of the main topics of the academic part of the course in Nemi was how to guide and to develop the local church in its mission in the multi-cultural world of ours today.

I wish Anselm Prior every blessing from the good Lord for his golden jubilee, and thank God for bringing him into my life as an inspiration of what it means to be a true disciple of our Lord in our age.

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