

## Places of Education and Christian Formation in Africa.

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### Introduction

Education and Christian formation are at the core of the church's mission both as part of her traditional and especially in response to her core essential vocation to bring the good news to the ends of the earth (Matthew 28:20). This paper begins with definitions of these terms and then proceeds to discuss four milieu or places of Education and Christian Formation in Africa, namely, the family, the parish, Small Christian Communities, and Catholic Educational Institutions such as schools and universities. Each of these milieus is treated on two levels, namely the essential character and mission of the place in line with the Church's teaching and tradition, followed by a reflection on some of the experiences on the ground. In so doing, the author shares her limited experience and invites other participants to reflect on their own. The consideration of each of the places is then concluded with some recommendations which must be viewed as invitations to further reflection on how these milieus might be promoted as more effective places of Education and Christian formation.

For the purposes of this paper, written specifically for the Pan-African Congress of Catholic Laity (Yaounde 4 – 9, 2012) the terms Education and Christian formation are used interchangeably. This is considering that any education worthy of the label in the Christian setting is about equipping the person to respond fully to the grace of God in his/her life, and so to receive the fullness of life that Christ came to bring (John 10:10). In other words, such education is formative of the person in the context of the community in which they live and work and make their life's meaning. Both Christian and authentic African tradition concur in the explanation of a fully-alive person. Such a person is integral in their stance of commitment to the search for truth and to carrying out all the obligations that emanate from such truth. In the Christian community, the Truth is Jesus Christ, the centre of the universe and of history (John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Redemptor Hominis*, 1). He is the one who has come that all people may have life in abundance. Christian formation or education is about assisting persons at every stage or state of their lives, to identify what is meaningful, what is true and to respond generously to the call emanating from such awareness, service and self-gift to the project of bringing about a more life-enhancing world and community realities. Only God gives life, but humans can choose to receive it generously, and to share it in such a way as to make it fruitful. The task of Christian formation and education is to help this happen for each person who comes in to their encounter.

### 1. The Family as the foremost place of Christian Formation

The family is the place where the very fabric of life is woven; it ought to be, ideally, the centre of meaning and energy for most lay Christians. It is the milieu in which they are called to grow in sanctity (*Christifidelis Laici*, 15). The family is the place where fundamental relationships for life are created and modeled. Here we learn to be loved and to love, to serve others and to share life. In the family, the Christian man, woman or child lives their daily experiences of choosing in line

with the highest ideals set by the community – be it the family itself or its larger context. Accordingly, it is in the family that children learn the processes of making choices and living out the responsibilities inherent in such choices.

The family is one of the best places in which the African traditional wisdom - *education is not to be separated from life, but to be conducted in the midst of living* – can best be lived out. Within the family, ethical choices are made on a daily basis – the choice to be fair and just with our resources, the choice to influence young minds in ways of peace and justice. It is the cradle of the experience of living with human dignity. Family is the place where the dignity of the human person is first experienced and promoted thus forming the parameters within which these will be understood in other milieu.

Through all the circumstances of their lives, family members learn together, how to live each experience in faith and in relationship to the Lord Jesus Christ whose total paschal mystery – life, death and resurrection - sanctifies all life experiences of humans and of creation. By their reception and celebration of life in the context of faith, they encounter Jesus in his incarnate presence among them, by their self-emptying sacrifices and their sufferings in the family they find him living his passion often in its darkness and seeming meaninglessness. Their faithfulness leads them to encounter the risen one, in the new seeds of hope and life that God’s faithfulness unfailingly brings into human situations.

Very importantly, the family is the first school of the love of God and of relationship with the divine. Thus the constancy of faithfulness to prayer and to the teachings of God’s word is first witnessed to in the family. And witness is the first and most essential components of formation (Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 15).

The Church underscores the obligation and right of parents to the education of their children (Vatican II, *Gravissimum Educationis* 3):

Since parents have given children their life, they are bound by the most serious obligation to educate their offspring and therefore must be recognized as the primary and principal educators.

The family is also the symbol and icon of the community of believers in Christ. God chooses the family as the first channel of life and of all human and evangelical values. It is a great blessing for us in Africa that the family is highly in the authentic root of our cultures. Thus we have a double resource for placing the family in the highest esteem and giving it the autonomy, space and support it needs to carry out its very central role in the formation of the members of our African and Catholic community.

However, to do this effectively we must pay greater heed to the experience of the family in African continent today. Being within the social and economic systems in the continent, the family, including eh Christian family in Africa is subject to many developments that do not give the priority to the family as it should. Among these are some which impinge directly on the educative function of the family. Some of the dangers to the educative role of the family come from the media which invades the family space without due regard to family values. In addition, economic constraints create situations where it is incredibly difficult for families to

stay together. Parents have to find work to be able to provide for the family, but work opportunities often have no consideration for interests of the family.

In many cases, parents have little time with their children, who are brought up by other agents including hired care-givers. The primary right and duty of parents to educate their children is overtaken even by well-meaning arrangements such as schools. In many countries, schools seem to have taken priority over families in the education of the children. Children leave their homes early, both in life and in the day, for school and return late. Frequently family evenings are taken up by School “homework”. In the guise of its vital importance, the school has been allowed to overwhelm the family in terms of time, leaving little or no time for living, praying or playing as family. These are among grave dangers to the educative and formative role of the family, and there are many others.

Husbands and wives consumed in excesses of work are unable to have the kind of quality time that affords them the companionship that is the grace of Christian marriage. As images of the love of Christ for the Church, husbands and wives need to spend time together, and to help each other thrive, in the search for fullness of life to which Christ invites each one.

The Church, constituted of the parish, the Diocese and the universal community ought to take these concerns of priority of place of the family in the formation role for Christians very seriously, and to propose ways of creating a culture that supports the space and role of the family. Initiatives in support of families as educators are not nearly enough, and Catholic laity are in a special position to propose and offer new and creative forums through which families priority in Christian formation of their members can be cultivated. Apostolic outreaches, such as those by the ‘Marriage Encounter’ ought to be encouraged and made increasingly culturally appropriate and financially affordable so as to support couples and families in their mission. Catholic laity who have the benefit of good formation ought to prioritize new ways of ministering to families in order to give them the courage to choose life in the midst of the challenges to families that cloud their daily lives.

We have had the ravages of HIV and AIDS which together with other forms of disease have done much to destroy the confidence of the family. It is thus most heartening to see the tremendous efforts made by the Church in multiple levels, to bring compassion and professional health services to the support of families devastated by such illnesses. In deed illness and catastrophe have often been occasions for families to rediscover the essence of the family vocation, living together the graces of forgiveness, compassion and humility that only the grace of God could mediate. These families, enjoying the support of the Christian community, have witnessed to us the grace of Christ’s unfailing love for his people, in good times as well as in bad, in sickness and in health.

## **2. The Parish as the place of Christian Initiation and Catechesis**

Essentially the Parish is public gathering of neighborhood Church, the first and most immediate public visibility of the community. This has been a very important symbol of the Church in Africa, making the Church a home for a people on the move –literally and

symbolically. Young people seeking new places to begin livelihood away from home often find that the most welcoming place to find communion is in the worshiping community of the parish. Refugees and other migrants find the same solace in the parish. These are but two examples of the symbolism of home and rest and welcome that the parish presents, for a pilgrim people. In this home is found the formation both of the welcoming community that is disposed in a continuous space of openness and welcome, and of mission to the world. The parish is an open community, welcoming to the varieties of persons that make up the Parish community, and those coming from outside. In its Eucharistic centre, the parish celebrates its mysterious identity as a community that is open and generous to the world, and confident of the hope that God gives in the varieties of people that live in or pass by their vicinity.

As the most basic public level of the Church, the parish provides its members with the formation for mission by its very being. The parish is present as an actor in the public sphere, and is duty bound to interact proactively with other neighborhood communities, modeling Christian charity and commitment to justice and human rights. The parish does this through its members, the lay faithful in communion with their pastor, who in carrying out their mission are formed into the community in whose name they act. Thus the formation for the sacraments and their celebration at parish level is the inner formation of her members comparable to the school of Jesus and his disciples. But the formation continues in the mission-field, where like in the Acts of the Apostles, the Christian community remains in discipleship, even as it interacts with the public world in its mission.

There is scope to develop the awareness of the parish as a space of the corporate dimension of mission in the African Church. A great deal is done to help the faithful be aware of and active in individual mission and many lay Christians are conscious of their being on mission in their family and the work-place. What can seem to be wanting in many cases is the active presence of the parish community on mission, taking a public stance and action in favor of civic and Christian values. Some parishes in informal settlement in Nairobi, for example, have been part of joint action together with other faith communities, in making the plight of the poor known and respected in their neighbourhoods. No doubt such action requires good discernment, keen attention to possible interpretations and careful planning. Yet the intricacy of it should be an encouragement rather than discouragement, for parish involvement and for using the opportunities to help the Christian celebrate its identity actively.

The parish principally remains as the place where the liturgy provides an occasion for formation through the collaboration in encountering the Divine, and in some guidance essentially through the breaking the word and sacrament.

There is scope to open up to the maturity of the human quest that lay Christians are engaged in. In response to this, some parishes provide forums for education and adult faith formation even in non-liturgical settings. Such matters as family relations, the basics of financial management in the home, understanding the national constitutional dispensation and legal rights and duties are not irrelevant to the education to an integral and responsible Christian life.

Finally, African parishes need to wake up to the profound hunger of the Christian community for a deeper understanding of the faith. Accordingly, there is need to create forums for theologizing the laity. If the task is left to other forums, then it continues to be the preserve of only some of the members of the Church. While not all the members of the Church may have the desire or need to study theology, the increasing numbers of laity who desire a deeper appreciation of the Scriptures, Theology, and especially the social teaching of the Church, should be able to find such in parish or inter-parish formation forums. Such formation will enable us live our Christian vocation more deeply, and embrace our social engagement with greater appreciation and co-responsibility. It will give us a milieu in which to deepen our lived Africa cultures and the wealth of the Christian message found in them, instead of relegating most lay persons to a fear for African cultural religiosity which is their rich heritage and through which they can come to more comprehensive living of the Christian vocation. It is true that these things are studied in Theological institutions and in universities. Most Catholics will not be found in those institutions or in the Religious studies faculties that wrap their minds about these questions. Yet these are fundamental questions which every mature Christian needs to face for themselves and so to reconcile with the heritage we pass on to our children; a rich heritage of God's actions and presence in our history as well as our current experiences.

### **3. The Small Christian Community as places for deepening and sharing faith**

Pope John Paul II in *Christifidelis Laici*, 26, recommends that Parishes would develop basic communities which are small and able to communicate the Word of God among themselves. With good leadership and in communion with the parish and its leadership, the Small Christian communities have great potential for service and love among members and for evangelization.

The Small Christian communities in Africa have been a great support to the deepening and sharing of faith. They are faced with challenges of bringing the gift and challenge of the gospel to the shared realities of the neighborhood, where the real joys and hopes, the fear and difficulties of living in the African reality are experienced. Thus they have a major formative potential since they are the first level of the public sharing of faith responsibility for many people. This is particularly true because most parish church communities are so large that it is difficult for members of a parish to know each other personally, and to interact meaningfully. SCCs have the potential to enable lay Christians to display Christian leadership at the service of their immediate faith community. They are a milieu where Christians cannot ignore the diversity of the religious environment in which they live, and where they can exercise religious receptivity towards affiliates of other religions and churches. It is a milieu in which the exercise of social justice and responsibility in the local surroundings can be apprehended meaningfully, becoming an experience of the social responsibility of being Christian.

SCCs as a milieu for formation and education still face many challenges. In some areas, there is not yet felt the trust among members to go beyond the prayer sessions to grappling with social realities in their midst. Consequently, burning issues in the African daily reality, such as ethnicity and injustices in the sharing of common resources, remain outside the ambit of the

Christian discernment and proximate formation of most SCCs. In some cases, the parish can tend to be over-bearing on SCCs, depriving them of the freedom to develop their own character and charism. In such cases, the Christians may not find any value in belonging to the parish as well as the SCC since the one repeats the other. Other difficulties facing SCCs include the absence of young people who obviously do not feel that their interests and needs are addressed in the SCCs.

All these challenges call for at least two kinds of strategic interventions in the conduct of SCCs, namely, a discerning reconsideration of approaches to SCCs with a view to enabling laity be more able to let their faith challenge their lives communally, and a particular effort in leadership development for SCCs so as to facilitate their evolution into more effective places and spaces for education and formation of their members. Leadership development as such, guided by the Christian spirit of service and benefiting from modern sciences of leadership should not be denied the Christian community for the sake of the growth of the whole.

The celebration of the Eucharistic liturgy in the context of SCCs is a very common experience in many urban and rural communities. It seems that the visit of the parish priest to the SCCs often becomes the occasion for the Eucharistic celebration. This a great opportunity to increase the awareness of the reality of the paschal mystery in the lives of the members of the SCC. However, often this opportunity is missed when the celebration is a replica of the one if the larger parish setting. Within the rubrics of the universal Church, there is scope to celebrate the Eucharist creatively and so make it an occasion to celebrate the life of the community and thus increase the sense of union with Christ which is the privilege of Christians as members of His body.

With such formative experiences, good leadership and community dynamics, a SCC can conceivably confront the question, for example, of the declining moral standards within their community. They can develop the sensitivities as well as the courage to take stances vis-à-vis moral deviance using ethical choices and caring and committed approaches. As it is, issues of increasing deviance tend to be neglected and allowed to develop to unchecked levels by which time reactive attacks have little hope of having much impact.

New communities of laity in the Church have been a great gift, revitalizing the formation of Christian laity to deeper commitment to their baptismal vocation – to develop relationship with the divine, in imitation of Jesus Christ, as beloved children of God who infuse the values of the Good News in today's social realities. There is a flowering of these communities in the Church, most of which are associates of religious orders and others which are of their own lay foundation. Following the council of the Pope John Paul II in his speech to the members of new communities, most of these are in communion with the local and universal Church. They are a reason for the renewal in Catholic family lives and vocations to the priesthood and religious life, as well as they provide hope for the continuation of a vibrant and deeply rooted Christian family culture in Africa.

The communities will do well to safeguard these values and their adherence to the 'criteria for ecclesiality' (*Christifidelis Laici*, 30) of which they are proud guardians. The increase in membership and in quality of the formation in these communities is desirable for the growth of

the Church at large, and especially for the deepening of the formation of Christian laity in Community, prayer, and service.

These communities also offer a special gift to the Church beyond the borders of parish and diocese, since their communion heightens awareness of social and human issues at a scale above the local. In this way, advocacy on behalf of justice can be moved from local action to nation and cross-border awareness and advocacy, informed by Christian values and the social teaching of the Church. The knowledge and utilization of these riches of the universal Church for the betterment of African communities and social realities can be promoted through these communities which already have bases in their solid Christian formation.

Lay Christians are encouraged to follow the drive of the Holy spirituality that connects with their personal deepest aspirations and that these be given wide range in the Parishes. Neighborhood SCCs continue to be encouraged since they represent the places where we live and build our societies, by our positive involvement or our apathy. Both of these have consequences in an on-going way.

This section would have been clearer if it was limited to three or four main ideas, e.g. formation in leadership, the testimony that SCCs can give by their exemplar life style, their importance in the teaching of the Church and the challenges they face in today's African sociopolitical and economic reality. As it stands, this section has good points but it lacks clarity, especially in the last three paragraphs.

#### **4. Catholic Schools and Universities as places of Culture and Youth Formation.**

Catholic Schools and universities in Africa have played a great role in the human formation of young people in the continent, and share credit with others for the development and modernization of the continent. They continue to present opportune forums for formation of youth and even adults in the joys and challenges of the Christian and human vocation. Not only are they called to be centers of excellence, but also invited to bring the message of the fullness of life that the gospel proposes to the entire world, in the midst of all other fields of human endeavor for excellence.

Ideally, in line with the tradition developed over many years, and delineated very ably in recent magisterial documents, (cf. various documents of the Congregation for Catholic Education on Catholic Schools in the last 50 years, and especially John Paul II's *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* on the Mission of the Catholic University) the Catholic Schools and universities endeavor to teach the truth as discovered by human search in the arts and sciences, as well as discovered in the various wisdom traditions of the world. Together with this, the light of the revelation through Jesus Christ is presented not as mere theory, but a lived message, permeating the institutions. Because of this component, the method and means of formation are always in need of evaluation and review, since the living of the message is mediated through contemporary cultures.

Particular concern for Catholic Institutions of Education is duly placed on an evaluation of the alumni of these schools and the contribution they make to society. As I have discussed elsewhere (Churu, 2011) the fact that the continent of Africa is under the leadership of Christian educated leaders and yet suffers corruption on grand scale on all fronts of public life is a reason for soul-searching self-evaluation on the part of Catholic Institutions of Education. Teklemariam has put similar questions to Catholic Higher Education with relation to environmental degradation, dictatorial regimes, family life among others (Teklemariam 2011). Catholic schools and especially universities ought to be prophetic communities which render credibility to the radical living of the gospel, in relations among themselves and in their outreach to society beyond themselves.

When the Eucharist is celebrated in the Catholic School and university, it brings together all these hopes and aspirations of the young people and their educators, the concerns of the communities because of whom they engage the social political and religious realities on their day throughout their research, outreach, teaching and learning.

As close-knit community, every educational institution has the opportunity to build up lasting and quality relationships which model a different reality from the superficiality that characterizes most personal relationships in society today. To be able to sustain this, the university or school community ought to be a place where reconciliation is lived. While the youth must be taught to take responsibility for their choices, on the other hand forgiveness and reconciliation must not be withheld or given conditionally.

Catholic Schools and universities provide a forum in which the collaborative ministry between various gifts in the Church can be well manifested. Often lay people work with religious and clergy as lecturers, administrators and other ministers. In these institutions the model of respect and collaboration among the variety of gifts can be wonderful for the young in their endeavor to choose between different vocations and careers. The array of possibilities without disregarding the beauty of each is a resource for their formation. In this respect therefore, it is important that various members of the University or School do not set themselves in competition with each other. There should not be allowed to develop the fallacies that certain vocations are more important than others, or more beneficial to the institution than others. Lay people working in Catholic universities and schools have the opportunity to be model ministers of the youth, showing commitment to the ministry as is proper to do in their vocation. Religious and clergy need to refrain from creating the impression or subscribing to the notion that the laity are only working in these institutions for financial gains. Many lay people working in these institutions are committed and finding fulfillment in service of the young people and of the church. All those who work in these institutions, be they lay or religious, attract remuneration as is fitting. The day when lay Christians were only employed in a position if there is no religious person to fill it ought to be allowed to be gone. If justice and commitment flow from all who work in the educational institutions, there is increased the possibility of a holistic formation for the clients of these institutions.

Such holistic formation includes the spiritual component where the encounter with the sacred, as community and as individual, is given a fair share of time and methodological preparation.



It would include giving energy to helping young people develop and assess their relationships with each other, with parents and important others, with authority. Among these also would be education to peaceful co-existence, and reconciliatory dispositions using real situations. Such are skills and assets that will stand to them throughout life, and the lack of which also become life liabilities. It should include a conscious and sustained consideration of the attitudes to work and ways of making livelihoods, as well as the skills and resources for discernment of the ethical choices arising therein. Catholic schools and universities in Africa may be well advised to develop productive units wherein students can work and develop hands on experiences of being productive. In deed one of the menaces of formation, including that for priesthood and religious life, is the separation of formation years from work/production years. With extended periods when young people learnt to be in school without having to be financially responsible for their livelihoods, attitudes of dependency become ingrained. A discerning look on the economic situation of a continent with not few educated people should invite Catholic educators to serious review of our educational approaches. Catholic education ought to provide leadership for a different and prophetic courage in educational paradigms rather than submitting, with little initiative, to the pattern of the states.

None of these aspects being included and safeguarded in the Catholic Education paradigm can militate against strong intellectual formation. Indeed, Catholic schools and universities have proved that robust education to sports and work increases the ability of learners to apprehend intellectual rigor and produces a person who is disposed to a balanced approach to life's challenges.

Just like might be said of parishes, Catholic Schools have an opportunity to extend their education services to the parents of children in school and to the alumni. The most formative experience of being able to interrogate and share on faith and meanings and to profit from expert input on pertinent issues from the perspective of faith can be taken up and put to good use in Catholic education institutions. A rather sad day is one on which Catholic schools submit so totally to the government driven directives that they subordinate their mission to take care of holistic development of students, and yield to national 'measures' of success which may not live up to mandate of Catholic education. In this regard, the competitive spirit among schools, which may at one time have been useful for helping students be motivated to do better academically, seems to have outlived its usefulness and even become a liability. Yet, as Kato (2011:20) observes, "Today in many Catholic education institutions catechesis is not given enough time, human and financial resources necessary to instill in children and the youth Christian values and principles. A lot of energy and resources is given to pass examinations secular subjects." Many Catholic schools remain seemingly unable to extract themselves from these cut-throat races which have paraded education as the mere acquisition of high grades, irrespective of other values. It is a situation that needs urgent and concerted attention within the Church to effect shift of emphasis and direction in favour of authentic Catholic education.

## **Conclusion**

In this paper, we have surveyed the education and formation experiences, opportunities and possibilities in family, Small Christian Community, Parish and Educational Institutions of the

Catholic Church in Africa. At every stage of life, the Christian is in the school of Jesus Christ, the Lord of life and Master of History. Every milieu and every age presents a good place for formation. If the formation-foundations in the institutions discussed above are well done, the possibility of on-going formation in all other settings irrespective of their seeming distance from the centre of the Church can be greatly enhanced.

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