

Religious socialisation and political involvement of Christians: The experience of basic ecclesial communities in Kinshasa

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One of the major pastoral achievements of Cardinal Joseph-Albert Malula (1917–1989) in his role as bishop was to set up basic ecclesial communities in the diocese of Kinshasa. This visible frame of reference for inculturated pastoral care was not just a response to the opportuneness of the moment; it was also met the need to reawaken and breathe new life into the laity. In this respect the pastoral option taken by the diocese of Kinshasa clearly followed the declaration published by the bishops of Africa and Madagascar at the 1974 Synod on evangelisation (although it actually preceded the latter): “The paramount task of these communities, rooted and integrated as they are in the life of their peoples, is to spread the Gospel, set priorities in the provision of pastoral care, take the initiatives needed to fulfil the mission of the Church, pick out the traditional elements in the faith that are to be preserved and draw the necessary boundaries so that the Gospel can penetrate all spheres of life and establish itself within them.”²¹⁴ This ambitious aim forms the starting point for a number of reflections on both the new form of social interaction that the basic ecclesial communities have brought with them and on the political involvement of the laity.

To this end I shall first look at the political effectiveness of Church activity. I will start by introducing Cardinal Malula’s ecclesial project in order to put the emergence of basic ecclesial communities in the diocese of Kinshasa in context. I shall then look at the impact of basic ecclesial communities on the religious socialisation of the people

²¹⁴ « Promouvoir l'évangélisation dans la coresponsabilité », in: *Documentation catholique*, 1664, 17 November 1974, 995-996.

of Kinshasa.²¹⁵ After that I will deal with the adjustments that the democratisation process has inevitably brought about in the political involvement of Christians. I shall end my remarks by drawing a number of conclusions and making some proposals.

The origins of basic ecclesial communities in Kinshasa

The phenomenon of ecclesial communities in the Democratic Republic of Congo is, of course, not entirely new.²¹⁶ The involvement of Christianity in a society in upheaval following independence was discussed in general terms at the sixth plenary assembly of the Congolese Bishops' Conference in 1961. This required the existence of vibrant Christian communities prepared to embrace new forms of social coexistence. The diocese of Kinshasa found itself confronted by new pastoral tasks and an array of challenges in a rapidly expanding city where social life was changing fast. To meet these challenges the diocese had to go to the places where the people of Kinshasa were living their lives. It also had to take into account the various groups the people belonged to and the large number of different networks within the city. By incorporating such issues as individualisation, geographical mobility, social differentiation and functional specialisation²¹⁷ in his pastoral considerations, the Bishop of Kinshasa succeeded in establishing links with the natural human networks in the city. Malula resolved to restructure the parishes²¹⁸ and found striking words to communicate his decision: "We must explode the existing parishes and break them up into small communities on a human scale."²¹⁹ This was a far from idealistic notion lacking any basis in reality. It was in line with the decentralisation of the Church advocated by the Second Vatican Council. Faithful to its spirit, the Bishop of Kinshasa planned

²¹⁵ Kinshasa is the capital of the Democratic Republic of Congo.

²¹⁶ See the report of the 6th Plenary Assembly of the Congolese Bishops' Conference: *Actes de la VIème Assemblée plénière de l'épiscopat du Congo (20 novembre – 2 décembre 1961)*, Léopoldville 1961.

²¹⁷ For more information on the transformation of the urban area in Kinshasa and associated problems of pastoral adjustment see León de Saint Moulin, *Visage de Kinshasa et Problèmes de pastorale*, Kinshasa 1969.

²¹⁸ For the relevant reflections see *Mission de l'Eglise à Kinshasa*, Kinshasa, Archdiocese of Kinshasa 1970.

²¹⁹ Malula, J.-A., *L'Eglise à l'heure de l'africanité*, Kinshasa 1973, 11.

to open up pastoral care and adapt it to the social changes taking place in the city. In his own words, "To decentralise Church activities, work effectively and reflect natural social structures in the structures of the Church it is vital that we develop or set up basic communities to be run by the laity."²²⁰ The Bishop of Kinshasa evidently wished to foster brotherly cooperation between priests and lay people, each according to his calling, in order to take Christ's message into people's lives in a more modern way, i.e. primarily in the residential areas.²²¹

The path chosen by Malula broke with the mission of the traditional parish as it had been inherited from the missionaries. As a geographical grouping of believers that attested to the reality of the body of Christ in its Sunday meetings and other spiritual activities, the parish did not permit the formation of a community. Giving the parish back its natural dynamism and support became a constant preoccupation of the new Bishop of Kinshasa. His pastoral mission was governed by a clearly defined strategy in response to the calling of God's Church, whose shepherd he had become: to establish a fraternal communion. This was an effective and verifiable calling underpinned by a participatory model rooted in the social and cultural reality of Kinshasa. It brought about such significant restructuring that it is justifiable to talk of a genuine ecclesial renewal. This restructuring included reorganising the parish, the laity, the liturgy and the ministries.

Let us start with the liturgy. It is an established fact that the new vision of the Church that emerged in Kinshasa gave a new meaning to the Sunday gathering, which became the task of the basic ecclesial community. It decided to establish a link between *didascalía* (catechesis), *marturia* (witness of life), *diakonia* (taking care of the needy) and the liturgy. The inclusion of *diakonia* in the ritual of the Zairian mass is, in fact, an indicator of the fraternal organisation of the Church.²²² In its understanding of the Word of God the Eucharistic community is, indeed, a missionary community that bears witness to its communion with Jesus Christ through its welfare and social work

²²⁰ Saint Moulin, L. d., *Œuvres complètes du cardinal Malula*, Volume 4, Kinshasa 1997, 40.

²²¹ *Ibid.*, 67-68.

²²² Cf. Ndongala, I., "L'Eglise de Dieu qui est à Kinshasa (1979-1989). Contribution à l'étude de l'image de l'Eglise-fraternité", in: Cheza. M. / Spijker, G.v., (eds.), *Théologiens et théologiennes dans l'Afrique d'aujourd'hui*, Paris, Yaoundé 2007, 191-193.

in the world. The reclassification of this communion changed the face of the parish. Not only did the parish as the basic pastoral unit undergo restructuring but, as a result, one of its main activities – sacramentalisation – was repositioned as a new service to society.

Meetings were held in both the basic ecclesial communities and the parishes as part of this service for a better world. Subsequently, the plan to shape the collective ethos and social conduct of the Congolese, which was first and foremost the responsibility of the Christian social elites and Catholic works, was abandoned in order to give priority to training, organising and structuring a community of dedicated Christian lay adults.²²³ In addition, training was organised for parish monitors and meetings were held for the *bayangeli* (those responsible for the basic ecclesial communities) and the members of the core team. Mention should also be made of the training organised for the Renewal in the Spirit leaders at the Catholic faculties in Kinshasa. In addition, new lay positions were introduced in Kinshasa: the parish *Mokambi* (lay person responsible for the parish), the parish assistant and the pastoral animator.²²⁴ The positions of parish assistant and pastoral animator could also be held by women.²²⁵

Basic ecclesial communities and religious socialisation

As we have seen, the basic ecclesial communities in Kinshasa were originally organised on a brotherly relationship model. Even today, the legitimising images that govern the organisation are taken from the imagery of brotherhood. By closely observing the basic ecclesial communities and studying the statements and practices of Kinshasa's Christians it can be seen that the concept of *ndeko* or brother continues to characterise relationships in the basic ecclesial communities. This term, commonly used in a context in which the integration of the

²²³ Cf. Ngongala Maduku, I., "L'engagement des chrétiens dans la société congolaise (RDC). Evolution de la pensée et des pratiques à Kinshasa", in: *Spiritus*, 48 (2007) Issue 189, 445-453.

²²⁴ See Santedi Kinkupu, L., (ed.), *L'avenir des ministères laïcs. Enjeux ecclésiologiques et perspectives pastorales. Actes du Colloque célébrant le 20ème anniversaire de l'Institution des Ministères laïcs à Kinshasa (du 19 au 24/11/1995)*, Kinshasa 1995.

²²⁵ On this topic see my article "Femmes et Hommes partenaires égaux de l'Eglise-famille de Dieu dans la réalité ecclésiale de Kinshasa?", in: *Mission de l'Eglise* 80 (2006) issue 150, Jan-Mar 2006, 67-70.

members of a society is hierarchical, points to a shift in relations between the people of Kinshasa. *Ndeko* is not used exclusively to refer to the person reborn in Christ or a brother in faith, but also to any person who, created in God's image, bears a divine likeness, regardless of age, sex, race, religion, etc. The semantic extension of the term has a practical impact because its roots lie in the ethics of brotherhood. The values and standards inherent in Malula's pastoral option were taken on board by the Christians of Kinshasa to such an extent that they included them in their liturgical celebrations (slogans, songs and rites), institutional practices (clinics, centres for the disabled), gestures (greeting) and everyday expressions (naming). All these "Christian products" were adopted by the people of Kinshasa and other followers of the Catholic faith. We will come back to this later.

The term *lisanga* applied to these human-scale communities is in itself very significant.²²⁶ It has more than just a descriptive and sociological meaning. Let us attempt to trace the ecclesiology contained in the term. *Lisanga* derives from the verb *kosangana* (to meet, gather or assemble,) and means meeting or assembly.²²⁷ This term, which has since become common currency in Kinshasa, is used to refer to an assembly of Christians. In the religious context, the term "lisanga" takes on an expressive meaning that places it in the same context as terms used to express communion. It appears in this sense in the credo, where it means the communion of saints (*lisanga lya basantu*). Used in a broader sense the term refers to the Christians who receive Communion through the body and blood of Christ and who are united in the one body of Christ through the Holy Spirit. The *lisanga* created here through the Holy Spirit is consistent with the body of Christ. It is, therefore, the assembly called into being by the Father: the Church in the sense of *lisanga lya bana ba Nzambe* (gathering

²²⁶ The name given to these communities in Kinshasa has varied. At first they were called "basic ecclesial communities" ("Communautés ecclésiales de base", CEB), later they were known as "living ecclesial communities" ("Communautés ecclésiales vivantes", CEV) and finally as "living basic ecclesial communities" ("Communautés ecclésiales vivantes de base", CEVB).

²²⁷ In the political vocabulary of the DRC *lisanga* means assembly, association, party or parliament. See Tumbwe, K., "Le français, langue de la politique au Zaïre? Observation du langage politique depuis le début du processus de transition vers la démarche", in: D'Ans, A.-M., (ed.), *Langage et politique. Les mots de la démocratie dans les pays du Sud de l'espace francophone*, Paris 1995, 80.

of the children of God). The religious vocabulary of Catholics and the life of their communities create a link between these two entities (*lisanga*–basic ecclesial community and *lisanga*–Church).

The experience of the Church has shown the extent to which the *lisanga* is a place for learning and embracing a new form of social interaction. As such it serves to deepen and spread the faith and to integrate it into everyday life. It defines the basic ecclesial community as a place of evangelisation where a sense of responsibility for different Church affairs can be fostered. It is an agent of inculturation and a vehicle for integral human development – an expression of the Church as a “sign of the presence of Christ in the world”.²²⁸ It should be added that the basic ecclesial communities play a part in, and even drive, social change.

As places of community development the basic ecclesial communities promote socialisation based on a number of values that contribute to the emergence of a new form of social coexistence: tolerance, brotherhood, hospitality, mutual support, solidarity and gratuitousness. This socialisation supports discussion, dialogue, participation and the election of leaders. It requires an ethic based on “differential brotherhood”, which promotes differences and combines them in brotherhood by bridging blood ties, language and ethnic barriers, social differences, political affiliations and religious denominations. One particular mechanism employed to cement this brotherhood is the ritual greeting used by Christians in Kinshasa.

The Christian greeting in Kinshasa consists of three parts that include the terms peace, brotherhood and joy. The arrangement of the terms in the form of a climax creates a reciprocal relationship between the speaker(s) and the person(s) they are greeting.²²⁹ The social basis for this relationship is not simply a polite formula or

²²⁸ Das Zweite Vatikanische Konzil, *Das Dekret über die Missionstätigkeit der Kirche Ad Gentes*, in: Rahner, K./Vorgrimler, H.(ed.), *Kleines Konzilskompendium. Sämtliche Texte des Zweiten Vatikanums mit Einführungen und ausführlichem Sachregister*, Freiburg i. Br. 1982, 624-627, no. 15.

²²⁹ The greeting builds to a climax as follows:

<i>1st speaker</i>	<i>2nd speaker</i>
Peace (boboto)	Brotherhood (bondeko)
Brotherhood (bondeko)	Joy (esengo)

random wish, but a responsibility that has its origins in baptism. As an expression of evangelical values, the greeting trilogy unites the Jewish greeting (peace) with the Greek greeting (joy). These two greetings embrace brotherhood as a positive salutation. Analysis shows that the greeting used by the Christians of Kinshasa, by combining the wish for brotherhood with the wish for peace and joy, actually declines conviviality by turning peacemaking into a requirement of Christian life. The three terms of the trilogy “peace, brotherhood, joy” deserve particular attention, since they are based on an implicit prior expectation, which is evidence of a thematic cohesion. It should be emphasised that the semantic presupposition of this trilogy accords brotherhood a central role. The creative expansion of the basic ecclesial communities has resulted in an extension of the trilogy to include love, work, justice and other concepts, depending on the circumstances.

Seen from the above perspective, the commonplace gesture of greeting acquires a pragmatic value in Kinshasa both in terms of identification and integration. It is an expression of a very special form of coexistence which could have an impact on today’s disintegrating social life. Here, the Church’s field of action intersects dynamics and structures that originate in politics, are dependent on the economy, and communicate values. For Cardinal J.-A. Malula, taking these dynamics and structures into account means seeing the fight for justice as one of the primary challenges of the Gospel and, therefore, of the Church’s mission. It is no coincidence that this approach to the Church’s mission emerged after the 1971 Synod on justice and the 1974 Synod on evangelisation. Indeed, it would seem that, in the wake of these two synods, Church–world dialogue and welfare work became an integral part of missionary activities. This is a useful perspective that confronts evangelisation with economic and political issues and obliges it to consider the ethical dimension. Faithful to this aspect of the mission, the Bishop of Kinshasa made the development of an intensive, pervasive reawakening of the laity a pastoral priority. To avoid any misunderstandings, let me make it quite clear that, despite the remarkable progress achieved by the Synod of the diocese of Kinshasa, the basic ecclesial communities, the parishes and the diocese were not the scene of any ecclesial social analysis or political involvement. Eschewing any activities with a political impact, the Christians in Kinshasa restricted themselves to

social and charitable work. In general, the basic ecclesial communities in Kinshasa remained mired in a non-political culture and had very little influence on political life in the DRC.

The transition from the social to the political sphere

As numerous theologians have remarked, the communion ecclesiology of the last Council promised a new look at values which, set in a global context, would give due consideration to social, cultural, economic and political issues. It has already been pointed out that these values found an anchor in Kinshasa in the basic ecclesial communities. Nevertheless, these communities – apart from a few cautious attempts to open up to the outside world – have retained their ecclesiocentric character. This can be explained in part by the context in which they were created. When the basic ecclesial communities in Kinshasa first saw the light of day, the dictatorship was at its height and there was a return to “authenticité” in politics. The driving force behind the formation of the basic ecclesial communities was of a religious and cultural character. The integration of their members was planned and implemented by means of their participation in religious meetings and practices. This helps to explain why the basic ecclesial communities excelled in the practice of solidarity, concentrating in particular on alleviating material hardship. This is very much to their credit. Nevertheless, it must also be said that the basic ecclesial communities did not dare to address the causes of the social marginalisation of the population. They were conspicuous rather for their demobilising, apolitical stance, accompanied by a blinkered focus on charitable works. Could it have been any other way, given that the communities reproduced the structures and options of the parish? This is an important question, because the ethic of brotherhood that underpins religious socialisation, as it has been practised in the basic ecclesial communities, calls for a rediscovery of the political scope of the Christian message.

It is clear that in the initial stages of their development the basic ecclesial communities were imbued with a spirit of brotherhood that was expressed in various spontaneous, natural and formal demonstrations of solidarity (support for families in mourning, financial support for the poor, the needy and priests, support for widows, prisoners and children accused of witchcraft, etc.). As we shall see, these practices

created a sense of meaning and made it possible to address the social, economic and environmental challenges of the day. I shall restrict myself here to economic issues.

Thanks to the religious solidarity created by the new social links, the basic ecclesial communities were able to turn their attention to economic problems. The law of the market and a price explosion were in the process of demolishing social cohesion. This is something that should not be forgotten. The “realistic pricing” operation of 1978 provided a practical opportunity to demonstrate what a brotherhood can be when confronted with an economic problem. The establishment of a Christian community based on brotherhood enabled the basic ecclesial communities to reduce the large number of intermediaries and end speculation on the price of bread. The system set up in the basic ecclesial communities provided an alternative to a profit-based society. I will not go into the economic impact of the “realistic pricing” operation here, but from my point of view it was a radical act that proved an effective antidote to speculation and a utilitarian approach to social relationships. Beginning with the sale of bread, the operation quickly extended to other staple foods such as rice, cassava, beans, etc. and was eventually referred to as the “food bank”.²³⁰

Cardinal Malula also encouraged initiatives designed to free the local Church in Kinshasa from its dependence on the outside world. These initiatives, which stimulated practices of solidarity, also had an influence on the life of the basic ecclesial communities. Two of them, which arose from celebrations of the Eucharist and accorded a central role to brotherhood, deserve special mention: Pro Familia Dei and the Solidarity and Sharing Fund.²³¹ Finally, for the sake of completeness, reference should also be made to the numerous initiatives that sprang up in the name of brotherhood: the pastoral activity for the poor called *Ekolo ya Bondeko*, the nutrition and health centres, and the *Bondeko* villages (training and rehabilitation centres for the disabled).

Although the basic ecclesial communities evidently play a big part in the religious socialisation of the people of Kinshasa, it should be

²³⁰ For details of these projects see Kalonji Ngoyi, N., “Les communautés de base dans l’archidiocèse de Kinshasa”, in: *Spiritus* 37 (1996) issue 143, 132-136, especially 133.

²³¹ These two works were financed from special collections to meet certain needs of the priests and nuns in the diocese and to help the poor and needy.

remembered that this socialisation does not provide any incentive to engage in political activity. The lay movements and associations and the basic ecclesial communities are primarily active in the social sphere, without extending their work to the political arena. At their level, the basic ecclesial communities reflect the role of the institutional Church, which is to act as a tribune and provide relief. Since involvement in everyday political affairs is subject to decisions taken by the episcopate, the laity are absolved of any social responsibility of a political nature that could make the government face up to its responsibilities. Similarly, they are required to steer clear of any political involvement that would bring in the Church. The best evidence of this is the censorship by the episcopate of the prophetism of the “Christian marchers”.²³²

As pointed out above, the basic ecclesial communities therefore remain places of pastoral innovation and social welfare work. It is now time to see how they can develop into places that offer a message of liberation for society and can thus lay the foundations of a new social and political order.

Elements for a preparatory stage of political involvement

According to a common belief, the primary mission of the Church is essentially religious in character. However, it should not be forgotten that this mission also has a socio-political dimension. I shall not get involved here in the discussion on “the Church keeps out of politics”. Suffice it to say that hiding behind the neutrality of the Church is nothing more than a thinly veiled abdication of responsibility inspired by the “demon of purity” and reinforced by the desire to “keep one’s hands clean”. This neutrality, which is merely a camouflage and an insult to reality, is detrimental to Jesus’ cause and benefits those who hold the sabre (the sceptre or the rod). An alliance is thus forged between altar and throne, to the great disappointment of those lost along the way, bowed down, battered and broken by social injustice. As R. Mehl observes, “[...] a Church that is, in effect, hand in glove

²³² It is generally felt that the bishops paid only lip service in their support for the victims of President Mobutu’s henchmen because they had not authorised the Christian march of 16 February 1992. The fact of the matter is that the march of hope did not give rise to a crisis between believers and the state, but rather to a crisis between believers and some bishops.

with those in power, whose value system it accepts at least, can never be a Church of the poor, the downtrodden and the outcasts. However much it declares its political neutrality at all the levels of its hierarchy – out of a conscious or unconscious desire to avoid embarrassing those in power – that neutrality in itself constitutes a political act of allegiance.”²³³ The accuracy of this observation leads me to the conclusion that the Church’s professed neutrality ultimately prevents it from completing its mission.

In my view, there can be no doubt that in organising social relations based on the model of the family and brotherhood, the Church, which through its work attempts to anticipate the Kingdom of God heralded by Jesus, must not neglect the political dimension. Since the Church wishes to contribute to the construction of a humane and brotherly, divinely ordained world and therefore aims to achieve justice, liberty, peace and reconciliation in the here and now, it must regard itself as a prophet. The first African Synod moves in the direction of this prophetism in stating, “The Church [...] must continue to exercise her prophetic role and be the voice of the voiceless.”²³⁴ How can such a requirement be fulfilled in today’s reality? How can it be reflected in day-to-day activities? What means are available to the Church in Kinshasa to put this requirement into practice? I shall attempt to answer these questions, which are clearly of particular interest for the welfare work of the Church.

As a part of a society in crisis, the Church in the DRC is currently affected by the convulsions of the country’s democratisation process. The basic ecclesial communities in Kinshasa, which primarily concentrate on prayer and social work, have become an institution for social integration that plays a key role in ensuring cohesion and a way of life that bears the seal of brotherhood. In doing so, they have subjected themselves to the status quo, adopting a relatively conservative position. Hence they have not become places of social

²³³ Mehl, R., “Les groupes informels dans l’Eglise. Un point de vue protestant”, in: Metz, R./Schlick, J., (eds.), *Les groupes informels dans l’Eglise. 2ème Colloque du Cerdic. Strasbourg: 13-15 mai 1971*, Strasbourg 1971, 237.

²³⁴ *Post-synodal apostolic exhortation ECCLESIA IN AFRICA of the Holy Father John Paul II to the bishops, priests and deacons, men and women religious, and all the lay faithful on the Church in Africa and its evangelising mission towards the year 2000*, Announcements of the Apostolic See, No. 123, Bonn 1995, 50, no. 70. (emphasis in original).

analysis where the problems and upheavals mentioned in the bishops' declaration are examined.²³⁵ We can, therefore, say for certain that the religious foundation of the basic ecclesial communities does not lead to an institutional political involvement that could be described as protest or opposition. Here the following remarks made by Léon de Saint Moulin spring to mind: "[...] the role allocated to the basic ecclesial communities, which have mostly been organised as neighbourhood communities, undoubtedly exceeds their possibilities. They are a suitable instrument for dealing with neighbourhood problems, including the Christianisation of mourning and various aspects of education, but on their own they do not have the necessary strength to promote justice in the world or to fight against social structures that crush the poor."²³⁶ These remarks are undeniably true. Nevertheless, one should not go so far as to absolve the members of the basic ecclesial communities of any responsibility for socio-political integration. In this respect I feel there is a need to review the way in which basic ecclesial communities are run.

First of all, it should be noted that the basic ecclesial communities in Kinshasa draw the same boundaries as the parishes. This applies, in particular, to the difficulty involved in a liberating recognition of the Gospel message and to the limited potential for innovation among the believers. The way the communities are run at the moment, which still retains some remnants of the paternalistic model of authority, rests on a few members in leadership positions. This is a regrettable inadequacy characteristic of the empirical approach to the establishment of the basic ecclesial communities. It reinforces the clericalisation of lay people in positions of responsibility and encourages the transformation of basic ecclesial communities into parishes.

Attention must also be drawn to the dependence of the basic ecclesial communities on the *Lisanga* newspaper.²³⁷ This dependence prevents

²³⁵ See footnote 1.

²³⁶ Saint Moulin, L.d., "L'évangélisation en profondeur dans les écrits du Cardinal Malula. Pertinence pour la théologie africaine". The text will appear in *Mélanges L. Bertsch*.

²³⁷ This newspaper is published by the Archdiocese's commission for basic ecclesial communities. It deals with its chosen topics using the "see, judge and act" method. Although *Lisanga* is recognised and appreciated in all parishes, I feel it is time for the current editorial team to be replaced. An interdisciplinary team with people from many

new interpretations of the Gospel and confines the communities to an orthodoxy for the purposes of controlled inculturation. Reinforcing the autonomy of the basic ecclesial communities in their choice of topics for coverage would certainly prove beneficial. It would transform the communities from an object into a subject capable of working for social change. In saying this, it is not my intention to ignore or diminish the claim to leadership currently asserted by lay persons in respect of the management and aspirations of the communities. I simply wish to point out the necessity of training the laity to become pioneers of change. In the provision of this training, however, due heed must be paid to raising awareness among Christians and transferring responsibility to them. At all events it is quite clear that the assumption of responsibility is indispensable at a time when the Church is helping to consolidate the democratic process in the DRC. The Church's involvement in civic and electoral education in recent years lends topicality and a certain sense of urgency to the participation of the basic ecclesial communities in establishing the rule of law. To develop this line of thinking, I would suggest turning the basic ecclesial communities into political matrices that can reactivate the missionary conscience of Christians, revive the prophetic drive of the baptised and remobilise the resources available within civil society. In short, basic ecclesial communities should be places of training in the political culture of citizenship, change and transformation. This multifaceted training is especially important, because it can contribute to a transition from the social to the political and, therefore, to the emergence of a civic sphere and ultimately to the reordering of the political system.

Conclusions

For all its brevity I hope this presentation has succeeded in outlining the way in which Church activities must be extended to encompass political involvement in the current process of democratisation in the DRC. Hitherto, the basic ecclesial communities have concentrated on ecclesiocentric and ritual issues. In future, political issues will have to be included. Although the Church does not exercise any political

different areas would provide a valuable service for the basic ecclesial communities. Its task would no longer be restricted to editing the newspaper, but could be extended to training members of the basic ecclesial communities in social analysis.

power, it must strengthen its internal mechanisms and acquire political weight with the help of the members of the basic ecclesial communities. By providing guiding principles on the practical conduct of Christians in line with the Gospel and the social doctrine of the Church, the latter must help to transform Christians into social and political players in the public sphere. I have already said that I consider it the responsibility of the basic ecclesial communities to raise political awareness by moulding active Christians and political subjects who will be a part of tomorrow's civil society.

Past developments have shown that there is a need to improve the level of political education, training and knowledge of Christians. If the Church takes this task seriously, it will have to abandon the empiricism and instrumental perspective that are characteristic of the basic ecclesial community as an institution. More than 40 years after their creation, the basic ecclesial communities need to stop acting like one more cog in the bureaucratic machine of the diocese.²³⁸ To tap their potential for innovation, they must be treated as more than just receptacles for ideas and programmes drawn up by specialists trapped in their own certainties. I believe it is time for the Church to recognise the potential of the basic ecclesial communities within its hierarchy. It would benefit from the transformation of the basic communities into more structured laboratories for prophetic action, which would enable them to develop into an alternative social body, into places for training in democratic culture and a different form of social interaction.²³⁹

Using these ecclesial cells as a basis, the Church can lay the ground for a humane society that is worthy of the name. Moreover, it must ensure the emergence in the basic ecclesial communities of a committed civil society that will resolutely develop new group structures that are open to practical involvement. A creative invention of this kind, which could contribute to the rebuilding of the DRC, requires Christians to undergo three innovative forms of training (in addition to prayer and the spreading of God's word): social analysis, ethical reflection and

²³⁸ See René Otayek, "L'Eglise catholique au Burkina Faso. Un contre-pouvoir à contre temps de l'histoire?", in: Constantin, F. / Coulon. Ch., *Religion et transition démocratique en Afrique*, Paris 1997, 227.

²³⁹ On this point see Regan, J.E., *Catéchèse d'adultes le pourquoi et le comment*, Brussels, Montreal 2008.

action. This will require objective information on the social realities and the crisis in the DRC as well as a general change in attitudes. Would not such training be in line with the task assigned to the Church by the African bishops? Let us recall that this noble task was: “to work on transforming the city”²⁴⁰. This is undoubtedly also the mission of the basic ecclesial communities.

²⁴⁰ Closing message of the bishops at the first African Synod, in: Maurice Cheza, *Le synode africain. Histoire et textes*, Paris 1996, 226.

MISSION AND DIALOGUE

Approaches to a Communicative Understanding of Mission



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