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Small Christian Communities as a New Way of *Becoming Church*: Practice, Progress and Prospects

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We have to insist on building church life and work on Basic Christian Communities in both rural and urban areas. Church life must be based on the communities in which everyday life and work take place: those basic and manageable social groups whose members can experience real inter-personal relationships and feel a sense of communal belonging, both in living and working. (AMECEA Study Conference on “Planning for the Church in Eastern Africa in the 1980s,” Nairobi, Kenya, 1973).

The fortunes and prospects of Small Christian Communities (SCCs) have risen and waned both historically and contextually. Various rendered as “basic ecclesial communities,” “living ecclesial communities,” “basic Christian communities,” “basic church communities,” “vital Christian communities,” “grassroots Christian communities,” “small communities,” or “basic family communities,” SCCs owe their origin to several factors.¹²⁷ In Eastern Africa, SCCs emerged in the 1970s as neighborhood associations or groups of Christians, under the auspices of the Association of Member Episcopal Conferences of Eastern Africa (AMECEA).¹²⁸ The seminal option

¹²⁷ Apparently there are as many as 3,000 names, expressions, titles and terms for SCCs/BECs. Healey, J./ Hinton, J., Explanation of Terms, in: Healey, J. /Hinton, J. (ed.), *Small Christian Communities Today, Capturing the New Moment*, New York 2005, 8.

¹²⁸ Joseph Healey traces the origin of SCCs in Africa to the emergence of “Living Ecclesial Communities” in: Zaire (now DR Congo) in 1961. “Timeline in the History and Development of Small Christian Communities (SCCs) in Africa Especially Eastern Africa.” Available at: <http://www.smallchristiancommunities.org/africa/africa-continent/107-timeline-in-the-history-and-development-of-small-christian-communities-sccs-in-africa-especially-eastern-africa.html>.

by AMECEA to build SCCs as “local churches” inaugurated a new ecclesiological reality in the region.

Initially conceived of as a pastoral strategy of evangelization and inculturation of the church in Africa, SCCs offered alternative ecclesial communities to correct the anonymity and impersonality characteristic of membership in the large parish structure. “SCCs were meant to be cells where the Christian faith would be intensely lived and shared. They were in fact seen as the ecclesiastical extension of the African extended family or clan.”¹²⁹ Often described in ecclesiological terms as “church in the neighborhood,”¹³⁰ they were to be small enough to facilitate close and meaningful relationship and flexible enough to address a variety of issues in the everyday life of Christians. In brief, SCCs were hailed as a new way of being church and a “church on the move” under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.¹³¹

The ecclesiological expression of SCCs corresponds to uniquely African values of interdependence, harmony, cooperation and hospitality that are constitutive elements of the human community. Commonly rendered as “Ubuntu”, this anthropological principle grounds the fundamental understanding of person-in-community as wholeness, relationality and solidarity.¹³² In light of this understanding, official texts defining SCCs as local churches emphasize the aspects of communal belonging, inter-relationship and a shared vision of and responsibility for the mission of the church in the local context.

As expressions of the church in its local context, there is no exclusive definition of Small Christian Communities. The purposes for such associations vary from place to place, but they follow some

¹²⁹ Magesa, L., *Anatomy of Inculturation, Transforming the Church in Africa*, New York 2004, 43. See also: Cieslikiewicz, G., *Pastoral Involvement of Parish-Based SCCs in Dar es Salaam*, in: Healey, J./ Hinton, J., *Small Christian Communities Today*, 101.

¹³⁰ Mejia, R., *The Church in the Neighborhood, Meetings for the Animation of Small Christian Communities*, Nairobi 1992; Omolo, A., *Small Communities Light Up Neighborhoods in Kisumu*, Healey, J./ Hinton, J., *Small Christian Communities Today*, 110-114.

¹³¹ Healey, J./ Hinton, J., *Introduction, A Second Wind*, in: Healey, J./ Hinton, J., *Small Christian Communities Today*, 4, 6.

¹³² See: Mason, C., *Why Africa Matters*, New York, 2010, 124-125.

broad patterns in terms of the mode of operation. Typically, outside of the standard parish devotional routine, SCCs meet regularly to pray together and reflect on the word of God. This reflection either anticipates the liturgical readings of the week or focuses on them retrospectively. Besides the reflection on the word of God, SCCs offer a locus for discussing common concerns of the local Christians. Furthermore, they create a forum for members to plan particular activities either in their locality or toward the fulfillment of certain tasks assigned to the SCCs at the level of the parish community. More importantly, the opportunity and occasion to meet as local Christians serve to strengthen the bonds of communion among members of Small Christian Communities.

SCCs, CEBs, BECs. . . .: varieties of ecclesiological expressions

Small Christians Communities are present in various forms in different parts of the world, but they have gained a distinctive ecclesiological notoriety in Latin America. In this wider context the specificity or uniqueness of SCCs in Africa does not appear obvious. In some instances, they have been compared to and confused with the Latin American model of *Comunidades Eclesiales de Base* (CEBs). The similarities between both models of SCCs are noticeable, but the distinctions are clear. The same can be said of the historical trajectory of the two models. On the evidence of history, they are contemporaries, albeit they developed on opposite ends of the globe.¹³³ Their emergence is coterminous, such that “it would be hard to establish clearly whether one was prior to the other in logic or historical development.”¹³⁴

Some criticisms of SCCs as pale replicas of CEBs or products of the negative influences of CEBs seem unfair and baseless. In the context of African ecclesiology, Oliver Onwubiko has lambasted BECs (or CEBs) as “anti-church” and “anti-institutional church” and claimed “that the BEC developed some specific dim characteristics, ecclesologically speaking, because of lack of priests and priestly supervision.”¹³⁵

¹³³ See: Healey, Timeline.

¹³⁴ Haight, R., *Christian Community in History*, Volume 2, New York 2005, 409.

¹³⁵ Onwubiko, O., *The Church in Mission, In the Light of Ecclesia in Africa*, Nairobi 2001, 166-167. See my critique of his position in my: *From Crisis to Kairos, The Mission of the Church in the Time of HIV/AIDS, Refugees and Poverty*, Nairobi 2005, 82.

His criticism, it must be said, is redolent of a theological position that incorrectly assumes institutionalization and clerical control as essential elements of ecclesiological configuration. As I will point out below, clerical control and supervision account for some of the factors militating against SCCs and BECs as actualizations of the church in the local milieu.

Undoubtedly, the Latin American model of CEBs rests on a deeper and much more articulated theology of liberation. This is partly due to the fact that the socio-political and economic context of the Latin American model is very different from that of the African model of Small Christian Communities. Whereas the former developed a strong consciousness and praxis of political engagement in view of resisting systemic and structural forces of oppression and marginalization, such cannot be said for the latter African model, where “social issues are still marginal in the life of SCCs.”¹³⁶ “The fact remains that up to now African SCCs have been more effective in prayer and mutual assistance among their members than in the sociopolitical life.”¹³⁷ Yet the desire for a more socially relevant and theologically meaningful experience of the community called church remains the shared characteristic of both models.

In considering SCCs in Africa, one needs to pay attention to the context of their evolution and practice. As indicated above, SCCs followed a clearly discernable path of development in Eastern Africa. In particular, they received the approval and endorsement of ecclesiastical leadership. Several official documents of the leadership of the church in Eastern Africa affirm the enduring value, pastoral necessity and ecclesiological status of SCCs in the dioceses and archdioceses of the region. Such ecclesiastical support for SCCs cannot be presumed in the rest of the church in Africa. In West Africa, for example, with a few exceptions, the development of SCCs appears to be less patterned or systematic and more sporadic. In some parts of Nigeria, for example, SCCs are referred to as “zones”. They engage in a variety of activities, including prayer and devotions. Besides the focus on fundraising or planning to take part in the activities of the parish, these “zones” can hardly be called church in the neighborhood in the theological sense

¹³⁶ Cieslikiewicz, *Pastoral Involvement of Parish-Based SCCs in Dar es Salaam*, 99.

¹³⁷ Cieslikiewicz, *Pastoral Involvement of Parish-Based SCCs in Dar es Salaam*, 103.

of the term, as I have outlined above. In Central Africa region, a form of SCCs has existed since the early 1960s. The emergence of these groups can be attributed to the charismatic Cardinal Joseph Malula who worked tirelessly to promote inculturation of the gospel not only in the context of liturgy (for example, the Zairean Rite of the Roman Missal), but also in the practice of Christian life in concrete context of the parish.¹³⁸ In this pastoral context, lay leaders were trained and commissioned to take active responsibility for the organization and leadership of parish life (as “Mokambi” or “head of the parish”), while Christians were encouraged to gather in small communities or living ecclesial communities for the purposes of promoting Christian devotion and providing mutual self-help.¹³⁹

Considered as local churches, SCCs face particular challenges that ought to be understood in the cultural, theological and sociological contexts of these Small Christian Communities. Some of these challenges are evident in the following areas.

Gender in the ecclesiological practice of SCCs

A plethora of studies have observed the tendency of SCCs to attract a predominantly female membership, leaving out the influential male members of the community.¹⁴⁰ “One of the greatest challenges for the communities today is to succeed in getting men involved in the life of SCCs.... It has been noticed that SCCs tend to turn easily into simple prayer groups where the presence of women prevail.”¹⁴¹

Besides this gender imbalance, there is a cultural factor. Given the highly patriarchal cultures of Africa, it is difficult, at best, and impossible, at worst, to create and sustain neighborhood Christian communities where women assume leadership positions unhindered or where men

¹³⁸ Uzukwu, E., *Worship as Body Language, Introduction to Christian Worship, An Orientation*, Collegeville, Minnesota 1997, 302ff.

¹³⁹ See: Healey, *Timeline*; Léonard Santedi Kinkupu, *Catholic Theology, African Approaches and Elaborations from the Democratic Republic of the Congo*. Available at: <http://theo.kuleuven.be/insect/page/66/>.

¹⁴⁰ See for example: Uzukwu, E., *A Listening Church, Autonomy and Communion in African Churches*, New York, 118.

¹⁴¹ Cieslikiewicz, *Pastoral Involvement of Parish-Based SCCs in Dar es Salaam*, 101-102. A similar challenge concerns the inclusion of youth in Small Christian Communities or the formation of SCCs of the youth.

would be content to play subsidiary roles. It is not uncommon that where few men participate in SCCs, such men 'naturally' take over the running of the communities; conversely, women tend to or are coerced to acquiesce to the authority of the male members of Small Christian Communities.

Taken together, such cultural factors consistently militate against the functionality and effectiveness of SCCs as loci of ecclesial communion, pastoral cooperation and equal participation. However, viewed from a wider perspective, the higher proportion of female membership of SCCs and their relative lack of effective authority mirrors ministerial practices in the universal church which prioritizes male authority and domination. Notwithstanding this situation, ample room exists for a positive valuation of SCCs as the place where women "assume a voice in a patriarchal culture" as well as relative authority and prominence in the community of the church.¹⁴²

Lay leadership of SCCs

From the perspective of the theology of the church and the sociology of religious organization, SCCs are lay-led and lay-run ecclesial communities. In SCCs, "the laity carry forward the cause of the gospel ... and are the vessels, the vehicles of ecclesial reality even on the level of direction and decision-making."¹⁴³ Ideally, under this arrangement, membership includes ordained clergy who participate on equal footing as other lay members. In reality, however, this is rarely the case. Just as male domination of SCCs mirrors practices in the larger ecclesial community and secular society, sometimes the involvement of clergy in SCCs turns them into "clerically supervised community."¹⁴⁴ Consequently, clergy control and domination of the affairs of SCCs undermine their creativity and functionality as a community of lay faithful called to be the church in the neighborhood.

¹⁴² Haight, *Christian Community*, in: *History*, 419; Nasimiyu-Wasike, A., *The Role of Women in Small Christian Communities*, in: Radoli, A., (ed.), *The Local Church with a Human Face*, Eldoret 1996, 181-202; Radoli, A., (ed.), *How Local is the Local Church? Small Christian Communities and the Church in Eastern Africa*, Eldoret 1993.

¹⁴³ Boff, L., *EcclesioGenesis, The Base Communities Reinvent the Church*, New York, 1986, 2.

¹⁴⁴ Uzukwu, *Worship as Body Language*, 31.

A strong rationale for the development and growth of SCCs stems from the fact that they serve as a means of localizing the church. This implies a greater sense of ownership among Christians and increased participation of the laity. Put differently, SCCs represent a form of ecclesiological devolution that allows lay Christians to assume and exercise leadership roles at local level. Accordingly, lay Christians facilitate activities such as catechesis and the planning and preparation for various sacraments. In some parts of sub-Saharan Africa, parish catechetical programmes have been devolved to Small Christian Communities. Each SCCs has its catechist or an equivalent minister responsible for recruiting members for and organizing a variety of sacramental and formational activities and services. For example, besides the Eucharist celebrated on a regular basis in SCCs, sacraments, such as baptism, marriage, anointing of the sick, and burial, are offered through the network of Small Christian Communities. This arrangement gives a vivid expression to SCCs as the church in the neighborhood.

Notwithstanding the observation in the preceding paragraph, in particular instances, the devolution of pastoral and sacrament activities to the SCCs creates a bureaucratic hurdle in which the local catechist and/or local leaders assume the unofficial role of gatekeepers of the sacraments. They are at liberty to impose conditions and create regulations that serve to determine access to certain sacraments by the local Christians. In extreme circumstances, the imposition of conditions and regulations can deteriorate into punitive measures. According to a firsthand account, leaders of one SCC in Tanzania, refused the rite of Christian burial to a deceased member of the SCC on account of his non-attendance at meetings. While this represents an extreme case, other examples include refusal of registration for baptism and wedding for non-payment of dues, fees or levies. In its extreme form, this practice undermines the very essence and rationale of Small Christian Communities as expressions of the church in the local context.

Ecclesial identity of SCCs: a new way of being church?

A related challenge concerns the theological evaluation and precise meaning of the oft-repeated expression that SCCs are a new way of being church. In particular instances, where the parish

structure remains dominant and parish-based devotional groups or sodalities remain vibrant, questions emerge concerning the ecclesiological status of Small Christian Communities. "Indeed, while some dioceses in Eastern Africa see the function of SCCs as replacing the parishes, others do not see the situation in that way."¹⁴⁵ For the most part, however, the parish structure of the church remains widespread and deeply rooted. As a result, "the popularity of pre-SCC parish structure more often than not reduces the SCC to a prayer group instead of a new burgeoning church structure for the renewal of the community and the transformation of society."¹⁴⁶

Furthermore, taken as expressions of the church in the neighborhood, SCCs contend with particular challenges that are not so evident in a parish-based structure. In SCCs that are situated in areas where a variety of ethnic affiliations and configurations exists, membership can tend to be defined by such considerations as ethnicity and cultural affiliation. Thus, where SCCs are supposed to bridge such gaps, their organization can reinforce the lines of division and separation. The level of belonging and participation of membership would depend on how much members feel at home in the community. The more ethnically homogenous, the deeper the sense of belonging, but also the deeper the level of exclusivity of the group. The temptation for SCCs to develop exclusivist tendencies has been noted and condemned by the two African Synods.¹⁴⁷

A variant of this tendency of exclusivity of membership along particular ethnic lines exists at a sociological level. Not unlike the

¹⁴⁵ Uzukwu, A., *Listening Church*, 119; in a similar manner, Boff distinguishes and juxtaposes two "postconciliar" and "post-Medellin" ecclesiological models: a. "the church as grand institution" of dioceses and parishes; b. church as "the network of the basic communities." Both models converge in a "dialectical interaction" of mutual reinforcement and renewal – with the former not seeking to absorb the latter into its bureaucracy nor the latter attempting to replace the former and "present itself as the only way of being church today," 7-9. Also see SCCs as means of renewing and transforming the institutional church, "Introduction: A Second Wind," in: Healey, J., /Hinton, J., *Small Christian Communities Today*, 3.

¹⁴⁶ Uzukwu, A *Listening Church*, 119.

¹⁴⁷ John Paul II, *Ecclesia in Africa (Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation)*, 1995, no. 89; *Propositio 35 of the Second African Synod (2009)*. See also Cieslikiewicz, "Pastoral Involvement of Parish-Based SCCs in Dar es Salaam," 105.

Latin American model, a noticeable feature of SCCs in Africa is that they have tended to draw their membership from the class of the poor and socially disadvantaged: “Small Christian Communities are still the church of the poor and for the poor, helping to create an alternative from the base.”¹⁴⁸ The condition of women has been analyzed above, but the key point here is the difficulty of SCCs to attract a more socially diverse and integrated membership. Membership tends to be socially exclusive – SCCs of the poor organize themselves separately from SCCs of the middle class or the rich. Given the fact that SCCs are organized geographically and in light of the fact that such geographical configurations are also markers of economic and social affiliation, it would be difficult to overcome this challenge.

However, it is important to note that one of the interesting features of SCCs is that they can be intentional communities. This means that geographical or socio-economic boundaries are not rigid lines of demarcation for determining membership. Ideally, the development of more socially diverse and economically integrated Small Christian Communities remains a strong possibility. Unfortunately, where such intentional communities exists, the social and economic bonds have proved stronger than Christian and egalitarian principles. As a result, “despite the support of the hierarchy for this new way of being church, its appeal is more pronounced among the poorer classes than among the middle class.”¹⁴⁹

The future of SCCs as a new way of being church

Despite the challenges facing SCCs in their self-understanding as “local churches,” it would be patently false to suggest that SCCs do not allow for a positive valuation of the theology and practice of the church in Africa. Several factors suggest positive and bright prospects for SCCs as “kairos” events in the life of the church and “today’s new way of being church from the bottom up.”¹⁵⁰

Without a doubt, SCCs have facilitated a new understanding and experience of the church in Africa. In local churches where they are

¹⁴⁸ Healey, J. / Hinton, J., Introduction: A Second Wind, 3.

¹⁴⁹ Uzukwu, A., Listening Church, 118.

¹⁵⁰ Healey, J., Twelve Case Studies of Small Christian Communities in Eastern Africa, in: Radoli, How Local is the Local Church?, 96.

integrated into the functioning of the community and, therefore, benefit from the resources of the parishes for leadership, faith formation and empowerment for service and ministry in fields as diverse as children, youth, single mothers, widows, widowers, charitable assistance, health, marriage counseling, support groups, income generating activities, etc., they constitute ecclesologically relevant and beneficial communities. Due to the emergence and growth of SCCs, the church is no longer considered a remote reality subject solely to the direction of the ordained clergy. Whether as CEBs, BECs or SCCs, they “represent for some churches – such as the Roman Catholic Church whose parish congregations can be excessively large – a more effective organizational unit for making God’s word and sacrament relevant to actual everyday life.”¹⁵¹ As ecclesial communities, they embody the meaning of the church as the community of God’s people and the family of God, where women and men feel a sense of belonging, celebrate their shared faith and take responsibility for the mission of the church in the local context. “The privileged place for translating this model of Church as Family into reality is the Small Christian Community (SCC). The SCC is the church in the neighborhood, which helps to promote communion and co-responsibility, and give every member a sense of belonging.”¹⁵²

In terms of the ecclesiological profile of SCCs in the church, the last two African synods have affirmed the significance of SCCs as essential to the growth of the church in Africa. Although we can expect the level of interest and support to vary from place to place, the warrant supplied by the two synods will boost the ecclesiological profile and development of Small Christian Communities.

The first African Synod (1994) specifically recognized SCCs as the theological mainstay of the model of Church as Family of God. According to the synod, “the Church as Family cannot reach her full potential as Church unless she is divided into communities small enough to foster close human relationships.”¹⁵³ Such communities are characterized by their commitment to the proclamation of the

¹⁵¹ Haight, *Christian Community in History*, 409.

¹⁵² Orobator, A.E., *Theology Brewed*, in: *An African Pot*, New York 2008, 90-91.

¹⁵³ John Paul II, *Ecclesia in Africa*, no. 89.

gospel; they are attentive to the word of God, inclusive of all people, and animate members in taking responsibility for the life and mission of the church in the world.

In the context of the social mission of the church, the Second African Synod (2009) underlined the critical status and role of SCCs as agents, signs, loci, custodians and promoters of reconciliation, justice and peace. “Together with the parish, the SCCs and the movements and associations can be helpful places for accepting and living the gift of reconciliation offered by Christ our peace. Each member of the community must become a ‘guardian and host’ to the other: this is the meaning of the sign of peace in the celebration of the Eucharist.”¹⁵⁴ Several Episcopal conferences and diocese have underlined these aspects of the ecclesiological roles of SCCs in their particular contexts and circumstances.

Furthermore, theologians are taking keener interests in the function, theology and development of Small Christian Communities. More than ever before, there is a growing corpus of theological scholarship devoted to Small Christian Communities.¹⁵⁵ This suggests a growing theological expertise in the theology and practice of SCCs in the church. An offshoot of this increased level of theological interest and scholarship dedicated to SCCs is the fact that they are being integrated into the mainstream of theological education in seminaries and theological faculties and colleges in Africa. Examples are not hard to find. At least two theological colleges and faculties in Nairobi, Kenya, offer compulsory courses on Small Christian Communities. In one college, the theology of SCCs is an elective or optional course.

Finally, SCCs have become the loci of ecclesial mission and identity. The gathering of Christians in the neighborhood is not only in the name of the church but *is* church. In their localization and specificity, SCCs actualize the mission of the church as both “sign and agent of the kingdom of God”; in other words, “these small ‘churches’ empower

¹⁵⁴ Benedict XIV, *Africae Munus* (Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation), 2011, no. 134; see no. 169 and no. 131.

¹⁵⁵ Key monographs include Healey, J. /Hinton, J., *Small Christian Communities Today*; Radoli, *The Local Church with a Human Face; How Local is the Local Church?*; Healey, J., *Building the Church as Family of God, Evaluation of Small Christian Communities in Eastern Africa*. Available at: www.smallchristiancommunities.org.

Christian existence in active, Christian subjects, and this manifests itself in concrete ways.”¹⁵⁶ In this way, at their best, SCCs internalize, embody and exemplify the radical meaning of the theological insight that the church is a community of the people, for the people and by the people.

Conclusion: SCCs as communion and mission

In Eastern Africa, where SCCs have continued to thrive in their thousands, some members have developed a unique formula for greeting one another: one member calls out: “*Jumuia Ndogondogo!*” (‘Small Christian Community!’); the other responds: “*Roho mmoja, Moyo mmoja katika Kristu!*” (‘One spirit, one heart in Christ’). Communion of heart and spirit is central to the ecclesiological comprehension of Small Christian Communities. Their existence reflects the notion of the church as a communion of communities. Although part of the rationale for their existence is the fostering of close inter-personal relationship and communal belonging, they are not closed communities. Essentially, they are communities for mission: announcing the Good News in the local context of the community called church.

Although some would argue that SCCs have never really fulfilled their potential as the expression of the church alive and active in the local context of the Christian community, a definitive judgment on their success or failure would appear premature. In Africa, SCCs have experienced at least four decades of development and growth as the local embodiment of the meaning, theology and function of the church. Understandably, the rate of success varies from region to region. The initial enthusiastic proclamation of SCCs as the catalyst of a global ecclesiological renaissance has met with the realism of established ecclesial structures and hierarchical propensity for the preservation of the tried and tested pastoral strategies of evangelization and inculturation.¹⁵⁷ Thus, in assessing the fulfillment of the promise of SCCs, it is important to take a long view and affirm with Boff that “this is still

¹⁵⁶ Haight, *Christian Community in History*, 417.

¹⁵⁷ At the height of the flourishing of CEBs, Latin American liberation theologians referred to them using the evocative term ‘ecclesiogenesis’. Boff, *Ecclesiogenesis*, 2; see 4.

just beginning, still in process. It is not accomplished reality.”¹⁵⁸ Small Christian Communities represent a way of *becoming* church; they are not a finished product or prefabricated ecclesial reality. In this sense, *process* takes precedence over *event* as key markers of the ecclesiological comprehension of Small Christian Communities.

The significant factors of the future development of SCCs include the level and nature of interest from ecclesiastical leadership, the commitment to the formation and empowerment of the lay faithful and the relative strength of negative socio-economic and cultural factors, some of which have been outlined above. Along with the need for ongoing critical reflection on the present organization and practices of SCCs, much still needs to be done to develop the theology of Small Christian Communities as church in the neighborhood. This theology ought to facilitate the expansion of the missionary focus of SCCs to include attention to socio-political, ecological and economic conditions of their context. In this vein, SCCs in Africa would have much to learn from the history and praxis of the Latin American model, while, at the same time, developing a distinctively African model of Small Christian Communities as a new way of becoming church.

¹⁵⁸ Boff, *EcclesioGenesis*, 2.