

Characteristics of a Schoenstatt Community

With its associated emphasis on attachments, the pedagogy* of the Schoenstatt spirituality places great importance on the education of the person by and through the community. Education is especially important today, given the prevailing and increasingly destructive influences which damage those essential qualities beloved by God. Pedagogical work is of great importance to the development of the small group community. In this chapter we will explain the work with “life groups”*.

In a lecture given in 1950, Father Kentenich spoke about the importance of life groups within the movement. His words facilitate our understanding of what he expected of the group- a “life group” that functions as a “living cell” in the Schoenstatt Movement.

1. The Schoenstatt Group as Means of Education

The work developed in a small group can be viewed, after the family, as a second, personal educational arena. (unlike the "public" educational field, the school, etc)
We are going to consider three aspects of the reality of such a group:

- ❖ Essence
- ❖ Value
- ❖ Inner workings

a. Essence

When we speak of "catholic group work" we refer to small, select, leadership circles getting together to work on their spiritual education and formation. When we say "group work," we are talking about both the internal (personal or individual) and the external (openly shared or combined) work done by small groups. **Internal** work refers to efforts devoted to the spiritual formation of the person (e.g., everyday sanctity) or their personality. **External** work includes service projects, apostolic work, parish work, or any other endeavor that, coming from the group, affects the life of the church or the community. These distinctions reflect how we work toward forming the **new man** (internal) and the **new community** (external).

b. Value

History is full of examples of small groups and associations which became the origin of revolutions and great movements for renewal. Marked upheavals in social and cultural norms or religious traditions do not come about by revolution, but by the fervent, devoted deliberations of small groups. Think, for example, about the enormous movement of renewal that began with Christ and his small group of apostles. Another example is the foundation of religious orders such as the Jesuits, the Franciscans, and the Carmelites. In this way, we understand the words of Pope Pious X: "what is of most importance today? Some say to construct churches; which is important, but certainly not most important. Others speak of training educators and to encourage vocations to the priesthood. Yes, all this is valuable but not most important. The most important

thing in each parish, are the small groups, the select, leadership circles, the communities". Schoenstatt is a movement of renewal as well- it's mission is to renew the world for Christ.

Let us consider:

- ❖ What has been our experience with group work?
- ❖ Have we overestimated or underestimated the impact of small group work?

The ideal outcome is to carefully educate and develop leadership circles in order to mold them into role models who then attract, motivate, and lead others to desire to be better- more holy, apostolic, and dedicated.

In these times, organizations, mobilizations and various aggressive trends are occurring within the population. We do not want to "step back" or retreat to the catacombs in an anxious quest for our own security. Rather, when we do speak of stepping back to the catacombs, we mean to start working intently on our plans, in order to enable a renewal of society from our efforts. As we see and experience dangerous trends that could lead to wholesale changes in our society, we must be able to give an answer- **our answer** - to individuals and families.

As Schoenstatt members, have we fallen into conformism as time goes by? Are we aware that we seek to cultivate leadership circles, because, in doing so, we want to stimulate and catch the attention of the masses. We ourselves have to present an irresistible "question mark" for those around us, so that others will want to know more about us. This is our aim: to be the vital yeast that makes the dough ferment thoroughly.

c. How groups work in Schoenstatt

In the light of what is to come, but also in what we have already experienced, the work of the groups should have the following characteristics:

- ❖ Creativity
- ❖ Inner life
- ❖ High goals
- ❖ Conquering (winning over) the world

• Creativity:

The group must be like "a grain of wheat that falls to the ground and dies" (John 12,24). They must exercise creative faithfulness as the first Christians did, and as Christians of all times have been required to do, either when persecuted or compelled to **give an answer for the times**.

• Inner life

We should meditate on this point. How much work has been done in the Catholic media in recent years, with spiritual retreats taking place day and night? Nevertheless, "we

toiled all night and caught nothing in our nets. (Luke 5,4). Think of the importance of the inner life that both the educator and the priest must have. We must also attach great importance to being both instruments* and educators. This includes the consciousness of being attached to the Lord, to being betrothed with the divine force of the Lord. Father Kentenich intended that this deep inner life develop out of the group experience.

This is how our leadership circles should work in order to develop a deep inner life. Working in this manner within the groups in Schoenstatt is already foreseen from an organizational point of view.

We are now ready to show how we can apply our pedagogical principles to the groups. For example, we encourage the Spiritual Daily Order and regular spiritual direction. All these methods of education exist in order to motivate and help us to develop a vital inner life. Whoever wishes to be well prepared for the fights to come, and believes him/herself to have a special mission, will be able to resist the fight only if he cultivates this vital inner life. Only then can the desired fruitfulness be realized.

Let us ask ourselves:

- ❖ Are we guiding our people towards the cultivation of their inner life?
- ❖ Do we care about their spiritual reading, about their praying, about their meditation as part of their daily life?

Spiritual reading, praying and meditation are our ways of making our inner life grow. We propose an education where religious and moral elements are organically accentuated.

One of the illnesses of education and society today is that man believes in himself and his own human methods above all else. He doesn't understand the power of the Holy Spirit's breath and therefore doesn't have the simplicity, innocence, and childlike confidence of the children of God. This simplicity has always existed within us, but must be stimulated.

- High Goals

"Establish the highest goal. Do it without staggering and you will be astonished of the results" (Dom. J.B. Chauchard).

We have to establish high goals without assigning them as a "must," but as an "if you freely choose to". In other words, the goals must be **internally** generated, and constitute an **internal imperative**.

The tragedy of our times is that we do not know what to do with our select groups. Often this happens because we ourselves, as the educators, do not have a deep vital religious inner life. If we are empty inside ourselves, our small groups will not be creative and effective in fostering and encouraging the improvement of their inner lives. Life enkindles life, inner life enkindles inner life.

- Conquering the world

Another specific feature of the leadership groups is that they are eager to renew or win over the world.

We should take care that our groups, our families do not become isolated. No! No, we have to conquer the world for Christ. We live within the world, not apart from it. The essence of leadership formation is to ferment the dough. We cultivate a leadership circle that seeks sanctity for the sake of others and not for itself. On the contrary, it is moved to help others achieve a greater everyday sanctity- an excellence in servant leadership.

2. Working with groups in Schoenstatt

Father Kentenich believed in the importance of working with small groups. Concrete objectives are established for the mentor and the leader of the group to work toward.

If we consider the group from another point of view, we could say: Schoenstatt wants to rescue the natural and supernatural organism of attachments*. That is why Schoenstatt is defined as "a Family". We belong to Schoenstatt since we have sealed the covenant of love with the Virgin Mary. Now, in respect to this deep bonding, we begin a special relationship with its founder and the members of the family. In whatever organizational level* we freely decide to participate, it will always be this way.

One can belong to the Apostolic League without participating in a group, even though their members usually integrate into one. In general, we promote this and most of those who belong to the Apostolic League, especially in Latin America, integrate into a group.

In the apostolic leagues (of families, mothers, youth or university men/women) usually a mentor conducts a group for a determined period (usually two and a half years, depending on the branch). When the group has sealed the Covenant of Love with Mary, a leader in that group is assigned and the mentors step back into the role of supporting the new leaders for a few months. In this way the mentor becomes "dispensable" or "unnecessary" in the normal functioning of the group. Later on, the group independently discerns and chooses a new married leader. In order to fulfill their job as a guide, they must have very clear what is the final pedagogical aim of the group. Having clear objectives helps our work as educators.

What I want is not your possessions but you after all, children should not have to shave up for their parents, but parents for their children. So I will very gladly spend for you everything I have and expend myself as well. If I love you more, will you love me less?

2 Corinthians 12:14-15

3. A Group of groups

First of all, we are talking about a group of individuals. This group of individuals has the peculiarity of being a group of groups. Each one should always be respected and protected. It is of utmost importance to have this basic fact always in mind.

In Schoenstatt, we speak of the ideal of creating a new community established by the new person. In this case we are speaking about a new community established by new individuals. That is to say, individuals renewed, transformed, and strengthened in their Christian life.

In the passage quoted before, Fr. Kentenich stated that large movements of renewal are born from the efforts of small, but devoted groups. Christ himself chose the Twelve from among His disciples, with whom He formed a small community. He then founded the Church, which has existed in continuity over twenty centuries.

From the very beginning, Schoenstatt looked for and gave more emphasis to the education of small life groups. They were thought of as groups aimed to enkindle the world and the Church by its being and action.

The renewed church that we want to see bloom and the new world we look forward to build start in the sacramental family. The Schoenstatt family group is precisely the sprout and the anticipation of the renewed church and the new society. It is a workshop where the new person and the new Christian community grow from the family cell. There one experiences the potential realization of the world that we wish to build, because we are not going to change the world with words but with deeds.

After all, though we should have ten thousand teachers in Christ, yet you do not have many fathers. For I become your father in Christ Jesus though through the glad tidings.

1 Corinthians 4:15

4. Characteristics of the Schoenstatt Group

The Schoenstatt group is not simply a group of good friends, nor a circle of intellectuals who engage in ideological speculation. Neither is it a mere business team, book review, nor a self sanctity club. We want our groups to know how to cultivate friendliness, a proper formation, and active and serious work in their self education. All this creates an organic unity. Our groups are called to be a community of grace, of life, of ideals that later on, can act as yeast in their environment.

In the Schoenstatt group there are five fundamental characteristics. The group is:

- A fraternal community
- A covenant community
- A community of ideals
- A community of spiritual education and growth
- A community of apostolic action

The mentors as well as the leaders of the groups should always have these five pillars in mind. The weakness in one or more of them would lead to a lack of fruitfulness, and the pedagogical work can bear poor results. For any evaluation of their work, the mentors and leaders must ask themselves how they promoted these five characteristics.

Each characteristic is intimately linked to the other since the group is an organic unit. However, we will describe them separately in order to make their understanding easier.

4.1 The Group as a Fraternal Community

We seek to form in the group a community of hearts, a fraternal community in the natural and supernatural plane, where everyone shares and takes responsibility for each other. Encouraging a strong community of brothers and sisters, we seek to overcome the kind of society that reigns today, one distinguished by indifference and spiritual isolation among people.

Our work as mentors aims to slowly strengthen a true community of hearts whose spirit should be warm with genuine affection for one another. Their loyalty should go beyond weak interests, and their spirit should be to live **in, with, and for** the other. That is why the mentors of the groups go out of their way in order to create a community, giving of themselves and cultivating ties among the members of the group. Each new experience contributes to the education of a community of brothers and sisters. Beyond human sympathies and antipathies, beyond personality differences, what must prevail is the reality of being brothers and sisters in Mary and Christ, and therefore, being responsible for each other.

No one should be left behind. Every person must have their own place; each one must be won over as a member, and each one must be able to rely on the other. What we try to achieve in the groups is not only a sense of spiritual fraternity, but also a natural union that should be and feel deeply human. Everything that happens to the other is important; each one's problem matters to others. The supernatural bond can be lived, experienced, and tested precisely in the natural bond. Otherwise, we would doubt its authenticity. It is important that we know the actual situation of each individual. We should be interested in their issues, their jobs, their challenges, their aspiration and needs.

We want to reach the ideal Fr Kentenich talks about in Heavenwards:

Do you know the land so warm and dear
Which eternal love has built itself;
Where noble hearts beat with affection
And bear with each other in the joy of sacrifice;
Where they glow and shelter one another
And blow as one into the heart on God;
Where streams of love well forth with might
To quench the thirst of the world of love?
This wonderland is known to me ...

The mentors and the leaders of the group have a big job in this aspect. Not only must they create a supportive environment, they adopt each person in their hearts, approaching all of them and establishing personal ties. In other words, they weave a network of personal attachments and create a family environment.

At the beginning, individuals that make up a group may not be acquainted with each other. The mentor should foster an exchange in which every person can share information such as their family history, their faith journey and religious experience, their jobs, studies and so forth.

Sharing and community support should not be limited to the group meetings. The mentors and leaders should encourage other opportunities such as picnics, birthday

and anniversary celebrations. It is important to keep up-to-date lists with important dates to remember.

The group should also participate in the life of the branch and the movement at large. Each group should understand itself as being vital parts of a larger whole. Mentors should encourage participation in meetings and retreats scheduled by the branch and special celebration dates of the Movement (October 18 / May 31)

All this contributes to the group, in that the family is important and that the group becomes a family in itself. We are not only interested in that the groups know of the great ideals but also in the importance of what is going on with others in the group, such as an illness or difficulties that somebody might be going through-needless to say always respecting the privacy of each person.

My little children for whom I am again suffering birth pangs until Christ is completely and permanently formed within you. Would that I were with you now and could coax you vocally, for I am fearful and perplexed about you

Galatians 4: 19-20

4.2 The Group as a Covenant Community

In addition to developing the horizontal dimension of the group (the relationship among the members of the group), we also develop its vertical dimension (the relationship to the MTA, the Lord and the supernatural world). We do this mainly through prayer and attachment to the Schoenstatt Shrine. Moved by this supernatural life, the group obtains strength and fruitfulness in both dimensions.

The bonds of love, fidelity and responsibility that the members of the Schoenstatt movement weave with one another find their source in the Covenant of Love with our Mother and Queen of Schoenstatt. That is why the human community that we develop in the group is open to the supernatural reality of a personal Father, Son and Holy Spirit. This reality becomes closer and more familiar to us with the presence of the MTA in the shrine.

Thus, the group does not stay only in the horizontal dimension; it wants to become, with all its might, a community of faith, of individuals and married couples who together seek God, and do not rest until they find Him.

This supernatural projection of the group becomes a reality when it progressively becomes a community of prayer. The mentors are called to motivate the groups toward the achievement of a vital spiritual life. It is common to find people in the groups who have not developed the habit of praying together as a family.

Eventually they will learn how to do this in the group. It helps to start every meeting with a prayer, the reading of a Gospel passage, petitions of praise and thanksgiving to the Lord, and singing.

The habit of praying together in the group meetings must be introduced from the very beginning by the mentors. Later on, the other members of the group should also be able to conduct it.

In addition to promoting prayer at the beginning of the meeting, the mentors and other members of the group should also promote periodic opportunities to pray together in the Shrine. This decidedly strengthens life in the group and also fosters a sense of belonging to the Schoenstatt Movement.

Understanding the shrine, becoming familiar with its symbols, learning its history, offering the group to our Mother and Queen, trusting the group's growth and development to Her, all help to lead members of the group onto the secured or protected path.

This is the critical role and beautiful task of the mentor: beyond words, the mentor must live their faith and covenant with the Virgin Mary. In doing so, they help the group to also live their faith and come to seal and live the covenant of love with the Virgin Mary. As the individuals in the group extend themselves into the vertical dimension, they receive the assurance of the graces that come from living the covenant life.

The mentors will not be satisfied until the group enters into the reality of the covenant of love. Only the covenant of love with the MTA reinforces fraternal bonds, promotes growth in holiness, and gives covenant stability to the group. The covenant of love is also the source of inner transformation and apostolic spirit that enables the group grow.

4.3 The Group as a Community of Ideals

The group's life depends on its dedication to reach high goals. These goals then lead them to the Christian ideal of marriage, family life and to the Marian renewal of the world.

The strength and vitality of individuals and of the group are awakened when they have high goals. A person or a group without horizons, without dreams of reaching high goals exhausts itself. Therefore, our groups are considered to be a community of ideals, a community that is guided to reach high goals. They seek to overcome the mediocrity of the monotonous spiritual lives that we see in so many Christians today. Many times we submit to a type of Christianity that "flows with the current" or otherwise accommodates itself with the minimum necessary e.g. Christmas mass or Ash Wednesday.

Schoenstatt wants us to broaden our horizons and to pursue the gospel ideals. Since Schoenstatt is a Marian movement, The Blessed Mother herself takes care of leading us to live the real values of the Gospel.

Having an ideal means striving toward high goals that should release us from a mediocre and passive life. The negative aspects of our times should not lead us to constant criticism or discouragement, but to a more serious and enthusiastic commitment to our historic mission to build a new society.

The group mentor's task is to enthuse and teach the ideals and aspirations that Schoenstatt wants to show. The group mentors accept these tasks freely and do not act by imposition or obligation but by living out the Christian ideals. With the witness of their own lives, they are called to radiate the greatness of these ideals and to show the world the importance of the sanctity in life.

Later, in stable groups which have already discerned their Schoenstatt vocation, this world of ideals becomes concrete in the "Marriage Ideal" and the "Group Ideal". In the introductory stage the important thing is to enthuse new members with the ideals of the movement. Make them aware of their mission to renew our society and family life. This will prevent complacency or becoming simply a group of buddies. On the other hand, little by little, they should feel attracted by the world of Schoenstatt and engaged in a great crusade for the renewal of the world in Christ.

By this shall all men know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.

John 13:35

4.4 The Group as a Community of Spiritual Education and Growth

In working with groups we seek the growth and (vitality) prospering of its members. The movement's ideals should shape their lives.

The Schoenstatt group is a living workshop, a forge of the new person and the new community, a workshop in which the Blessed Mother wants to be our Mother and educator. All she wants is to dwell in the Shrine as the educator of people and their hearts.

It is the task of the mentors to guide the group along the path to these goals. In order to grow in a spiritual way there must be a commitment to self education.

A strong Marian love, high ideals, high goals, and group meetings are what sustain the constant motivation for this growth. Thus, the mentor has to ensure that the group members do not fall into intellectual wandering or become mere buddies. Ideals have to bite into life and truly transform it.

There are different levels of education. In the intellectual field, members should grow in knowledge of the teachings of the Church and the world of Schoenstatt (In the book *200 Questions about Schoenstatt* the necessary bibliographic information can be found). To achieve this, a guided reading of the Gospel is vital to achieving this goal. Moreover, the group should cultivate and reinforce Marian attitudes and lifestyle. At the end of the each group meeting there should be an explicit statement of the group's shared spiritual intention. In this way the group meeting doesn't stay "in the air", but gives us a concrete spiritual task. Little by little, we seek to overcome the tragic separation of high spirit ideals and reality of our everyday lives. Thus, we reduce our tendency to artificially compartmentalize our "faith lives" and our daily realities.

The mentors also seek in this way to introduce the concept and practice of "the contributions to the capital of grace". They guide and give meaning to the effort of self education and spiritual training. In this way, all is well framed in the Covenant of Love with the MTA.

There is no growth without personal initiative and hard work. Mentors encourage spiritual formation and growth by assigning tasks to group members- both simple things and tasks of greater responsibility. In this way, individual and couples often discover new talents that may be concealed or hidden.

Monitors also need to make the group aware of the activities of the branch and other apostolic fields in the movement. In this way, they can better see the needs of the movement as a whole and develop specific initiatives to meet these needs.

4.5 The Group as an Apostolic Community

Schoenstatt, and thus the group is a decidedly apostolic community. This apostolate is primarily expressed by the testimony of our lives and by concrete apostolic actions.

Our groups should be centers of leadership exerting a strong apostolic influence. Groups faithful to the ideals of Schoenstatt are not closed-door communities or communities exhausted in their spiritual and fraternal development. They have a strong inner life, and each Schoenstatt member exercises an effective apostleship both in word and deed.

Mentors must create awareness that Schoenstatt is an educational movement in and for apostolic action. Without this integration of education and apostolic action, the life of the movement becomes distorted. Each group member is called to this apostolate as an individual. The mentors should be alert to gather up the initiatives that appear in this respect, and encourage members to commit themselves with specific tasks.

The lack of apostolic action freezes the life of the group and diminishes its horizon. Engagement in apostolic tasks tests the depth of the Covenant of Love and its fruitfulness. When a group is engaged in this task, it closely bonds the members and encourages a personal commitment that not only makes them grow but gives joy and strength to their group life.

With their presence and their experience, mentors are called to open doors and show the possibilities of an apostolate, whether in the movement itself, the larger Church community, or society at large. Mentors should do this in an orderly and balanced way that does not jeopardize interior life, fraternal relationship, cultivation of the family life.

These apostolic tasks do not always have to be carried out in the Church or the movement. Our whole life must have an apostolic projection. Monitors will seek to find the right time to show that family life is a privileged "apostolic field". They should also show that the apostolate is not always visible. Often, it can be silent and hidden from the eyes of the world, Especially when it has to do with prayer and the offered sacrifice for others.

And do not grieve the Holy Spirit or God (sadden Him, offend him) by whom you were sealed (marked, branded) for the day of the redemption. Let all bitterness, and indignation and wrath be banished from you with all malice, and become useful and kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.

Ephesians 4:32