SMALL GROUPS REVISITED:

A PSYCHO-PASTORAL STUDY

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Introduction

Writing about small groups[1] in the eighties may be considered as an attempt at tracing the history of a phenomenon once at its peak of interest but now an anachronistic topic. For some this might appear like resuscitating a controversial issue already buried a decade ago. The small group phenomenon witnessed a sharp increase of interest and became a constant focus of attention during the decades following World War II only to taper off during the seventies. This is particularly noticeable in surveying the psychological literature on the subject and in observing the growth and decline of this phenomenon in church-related settings. This historical fact allows us, however, to view and assess the small group phenomenon 'at a distance', retrospectively, without being biased by the popular enthusiasm so prevalent at the time.

Another reason for justifying our concern in addressing the issue is Church-related. Within the Catholic Church, the movement towards integrating small groups into its life and structure had a rather slow and cautious beginning and only lately has the process been brought to the surface. Since Vatican II especially, many small groups ("basic communities" for instance) have cropped up within the Church and serious discussions have been held in trying to establish a clear position on the matter.

It is my contention that small groups in the Church have a "raison d'être" that emanates not simply from the datum of experience in a particular moment in time, but which derives intrinsically from the nature and purpose of the Church itself. They owe their validity not merely to their contingent upsurge at different times and places, but to a theological understanding of their role. My thesis is that besides psychological, social and

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1. In this article, the term "small group" refers principally to interpersonal or sharing groups as opposed to task-groups. Further distinctions and clarifications on types of groups will be developed later.

cultural explanations of small groups, there exists a solid theological basis for their justification and hence valid pastoral applications.

We need to distinguish what is essential from what is arbitrary about these groups, thereby purifying them from all misconceptions, abuses and exaggerations, so that instead of condemning and abolishing them, we may appreciate and make optimum use of this effective medium.

Our approach is multi-disciplinary. We want to study this phenomenon not only from the theological and pastoral standpoint but also from the psychological, social and cultural perspective. Only then shall we be in a position to make a comprehensive evaluation. We start then by establishing the theological roots of small groups, then study the socio-cultural factors that brought them about, present a psychological picture of their structure and functioning, derive some pastoral applications and finally make an overall assessment.

Theological Basis

It often happens in human history that the occurrence of certain events, like the emergence of new movements, or the development of new trends in society, provoke the reaction of thinkers from various disciplines. When these social phenomena are somehow related to religious notions, one expects theologians to pronounce judgment on their significance. These social realities are equally judged upon both as arguments to discredit religion and as proofs for a transcendent being.

With the appearance and spread of small groups one would have expected a similar theological interpretation. But as it turned out, theologians were not so much intrigued by these groups. They rather kept aloof, at least in terms of formulating an explicit theology of small groups, and preferred to leave the task to pastoral counsellors and religious educators.[2]

Without claiming to develop such a theology, in this section we shall indicate the Scriptural and traditional background for the notion of small groups, explain the idea of church in terms of small communities, and refer to a group-centred orientation in Christian worship.

It is beyond the scope of this article to demonstrate that the community aspect of Christianity finds its roots in the Scriptures, both in the Old and in the New Testament. The whole history of salvation is punctuated with God's dealings with His people as a community and not just as individuals (cf. the covenant, collective sin, collective repentance). What psychologists learned early and theologians perhaps late, the Bible puts at its very beginning − that persons are relational beings. They are meant to be together, live together, work together − and therefore also pray, worship, and relate to God together as a group or community. Let us here simply

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2. Among the few exceptions to this was Thomas Oden (1972) who made a serious and honest attempt of theologising on the group experience.

outline the importance of group consciousness as revealed to, and lived by, the early Christians.

It is interesting to note that the Eucharist was set within the framework of a paschal meal, of a fraternal meal of disciples with their rabbi, and hence in a "small group" setting, whereas the religion of the time was centred around the universal gathering at the temple in Jersualem. And that small group of apostles was not just part of the Church but the Church in its totality, present and alive at the local level.

Luke's gospel begins and ends at temple scenes, while the Acts at scenes taking place in private houses – the Cenacle and Paul's house in Rome. Luke thus insists on the twofold belonging of Christians: to the "massive" liturgy at the temple and to a "small group" liturgy in private homes.

The "small group" was therefore a determining factor in the establishment of the early Church. It helped her to affirm her own personality with regards to Judaism and to become aware of some of her essential characteristics. The problem of small groups today cannot theologically be considered independent of the origins of the Church. We are not dealing with a modern, passing fad but with a deep-rooted religious need seeking a form of expression in contemporary Church life.

Not only the notion of small groups in general but even more specifically the small interpersonal or sharing groups have a long history in the Church. The life of Jesus with the twelve apostles resembled in many ways that of a modern psychological group. They spent long periods in sharing personally their joys and sorrows, hopes and fears, needs and desires, aspirations and frustrations.[3]

We have already mentioned how the early Church started out as a small group movement. As Hobart Mowrer (1972) points out, in small group meetings there was a very high degree of personal self-disclosure among early Christians known at the time by the Greek term "exomologesis." These continued until the beginning of the fourth century A.D. when, following the Council of Nicaea, confessions began to take place privately. By the end of the 12th century, at least in the western church, self-disclosure or confession before a group had disappeared completely. The Middle Ages saw the blossoming of new religious orders which began as small groups. Finally, whenever and wherever the church faced persecution, it had recourse to small-group meetings for its vitality, mutual support and renewal.

Besides the Biblical and traditional support for small groups, there is also an ecclesiological basis. For the theological validity of small groups in the Church stems not only from historical tradition but also from the intrinsic nature of the Church as a community. The Church is made up of persons who share the same faith, have a common hope and practice mutual

3. In his final chapter on "Sharing Groups in the Church," Leslie (1970) elaborates on this point.

love. Together they form the "Mystical Body of Christ." This union finds concrete expression in local communities, in small groups that meet to share and live together their Christian experience.

Though the development of these groups into small Christian communities may incur the danger of a schism from the universal Church, this risk should not blind us from their vital role in integrating Christians into the Church. As the Catholic theologian Congar (1959, p.51) aptly remarks:

> The profound mystery of the Church in its wholeness, has often been rediscovered by being lived from below, in small groups that found the Church in her fulness through little Church cells, in whose constitution the religious subject was normally and communally active.

Besides having an intrinsic value, these small groups also play a role with regards to the whole Church. Rather than viewing them as an appendix to the Church, we should see them as vital means for a fully authentic formation of the Christian community. Rather than as obstacles to be discarded and shelved, they ought to be considered as a gateway to the church for some people today. They serve as windows for the Church through which to see the world around it and allow for continuous fresh air to enter. Rather than as a threat, like robbers trying to deprive the Church of its spiritual treasures, they become ambassadors that express the needs of people from various sectors in life and at the same time as messengers to proclaim the good news to their members. Instead of dreading the danger that these groups might weaken the Church's authority and destroy its hierarchical institution, we should rejoice that they are strengthening unity among people and building genuine Christian communities.

The small group movement also appears as a place for challenging and questioning the Church. Particularly within the Catholic Church, they emerged as in opposition to a highly centralized authority, excessive bureaucracy, and rigid hierarchical control. It turned out that some people having difficulties with the institutional church were finding refuge in groups that shared their frustrations. Since most revolutions in society and many "schismatic" reforms in the Church found their inspiration in the small group model, it is not surprising that the Catholic Church suspected them of threatening its unity.

That the small group movement was a healthy reaction to anonymity and rigid institutionalisation, is frankly admitted by Catholic thinkers. The French theologian, Yves Congar (1971) avowed before Protestant and Orthodox audiences:

> Our own age is marked by the need for the small, intimate, warm group, the need to band together; this, evidently, in reaction to the anonymity characteristic of the macro-organizations of the technological era, but also to a Church in which a pyramidal hierarchical structure and the primacy given to social regimentation are always in danger of strangling the element of community.

And another Catholic intellectual, Henri Denis (1971) stated:

> The centralizing Roman model with its monolithic character is too formal. We may exepct the institution to renew its own substance in two essential directions: in the direction of small communities and in the direction of an all-embracing community that will manifest the unity of Christ which underlies all tensions and differences. The issue for the Christianity of tomorrow is to unify these two non-contradictory movements.

If the Church is to take seriously these "signs of the times" contained in small groups, it has to adopt an attitude beyond that of sheer tolerance to one of encouragement, support and even of initiative in creating small sharing groups. It would become a basic need and requirement, rather than a spiritual luxury for Christians to join such a group. For these groups offer a concrete alternative to alienation through belongingness, to anonymity through personal involvement, and to loneliness through community support.

To end this section, we should briefly mention the importance of the liturgical element in the small groups. On one hand, dissatisfaction was experienced in large liturgical gatherings where members of the congregation felt more like spectators than participants and with little personal communication. On the other hand, once small groups are established, the need to celebrate arises spontaneously. Such celebration, be it eucharistic, liturgical or para-liturgical, becomes a spontaneous natural development in the dynamics of the group's life, and hence a genuine expression of what the group is experiencing and living. At this point, the "transcendent" dimension, the presence of God actively alive in this particular community, integrates and transforms the human interaction.

Socio-Cultural Factors

Having briefly discussed the theological foundations of small groups and making them object of theological reflection, we shall now study the main socio-cultural factors that led or contributed to the emergence of small groups. How do we account for this "most rapidly spreading social phenomenon in this century", as Carl Rogers (1970, p.1) calls it?

It is a fact that the small group phenomenon has penetrated almost all spheres of life: psychological (from individual to small group counselling or psychotherapy); pedagogical (from lectures by professors to more active participation by students in small group discussion); social (teamwork, decision-making process); administrative (councils, committees, commissions); religious (small group liturgy, communitarian reconciliation services, group baptisms, prayer groups).

This shift from individual to small group activities must correspond to some basic human needs, values, aspirations. It is a shift from the impersonal computerized culture to a need for personal identity, from the

anonymity of a crowd to the interpersonal atmosphere in the small group, from individualistic to communal interests, from institutional rigidity to spontaneity and creativity.

In explaining the spread of encounter groups, Rogers (1967, p.22) says:

> The intensive group experience appears to be one cultural attempt to meet the isolation of contemporary life. ... it seems to be at least a partial answer, to the loneliness of modern man and his search for new meanings for his life.

The small group movement had its historical roots in the "group dynamics" trend after World War II, in the development of "group psychotherapy" especially with war veterans, and on a more "normal" basis, with the "human potential movement" especially the Esalen centre. Multiple applications of the small group "technique" were being made not only in therapeutic and educational settings, but also in industrial and social sectors. Why not therefore in the religious field as well? If the Church can provide a structure for these groups, it can play a distinctive role in fulfilling personal and social needs and at the same time provide opportunities for meaningful religious experiences.

Various authors have speculated on the factors that account for the rise of the interpersonal group movement. John Casteel (1968) offers five possible tendencies which I summarize: Interpersonal groups are becoming the basic units for carrying on the functions of our society; they have called forth an expanding body of research into group theory and practice; they represent a concern for the person; they have high functional value in an open future; they provide for total communication. (pp.16 – 31)

Jean-Thierry Maertens (1971) elaborates on the following cultural factors as contributing to the creation of primary groups: Escape from social control; need for conscientization; a search for personal and affective acceptance; possibilities for integration in society; necessity for defending a project; shifting from general principles to personal demands; a rediscovery of the word. (pp.52 – 64)

Sigmund Freud (1922) naturally offers a psycho-analytic interpretation to explain the group phenomenon. The small group brings together brothers to kill their father, and after the murder they meet to discharge their guilt and build a fraternal society where no one could take the place of the dead.

The needs that were prevalent at the time of emergence of interpersonal groups are still present today. We have simply become more aware of them and hence have sought ways and means of fulfilling them. It is my personal impression, however, that the process has tended to become artificial. We first notice that our day-to-day relationships are superficial and impersonal because of time pressure on our work, the business-like fashion of carrying out our daily duties, etc. Then we create something where interpersonal relations and deep sharing are possible. We invent a technique or structure to cater for that lacuna or void.

If so conceived, sharing or encounter groups become like a drug, a pill, to be taken periodically to solve one's socio-affective problems. This may unfortunately have been the case in the U.S. and some European countries. In countries like Southern Europe and Latin America, where interpersonal relations and warm contact are more naturally expressed, the need for encounter groups, sensitivity-training, etc. was less felt. There was less need to structure and organize opportunities for authentic, deep personal interactions. From my own experience of conducting various encounter groups with Americans, North and South Europeans, Indians and Africans, I have often sensed a big difference in the members' attitude towards these workshops. And especially when I had to facilitate culturally heterogeneous groups, I noticed a remarkable difference in the participants' behaviour during versus outside the sessions.

I presume, therefore, that there exist cultural differences in the origin and manner of development of the small group movement. But even within each culture, I think we witness a variety of ways in which the movement takes its roots, spreads its branches and reaps its fruits. The accusation, for instance, that encounter groups are more fruitful among intellectuals, the upper middle-class society, and among youths, cannot be easily refuted. It seems that such groups appeal more to these "sub-cultures" because of their social context, enivronmental setting and verbal content.

Finally, besides cultural causes, there are also cultural effects of inter-personal groups. They can be effective in breaking down barriers and removing inter-cultural or inter-racial prejudice. Through openness, mutual acceptance and respect for the other person as unique and different, an atmosphere is created where race, culture or creed are experienced as a richness rather than as an obstacle for communication. In an empirical study of cultural factors in groups, Bogia (1979, p.25) concludes:

> There seems to be a marked respect for differences, and a concentrated effort to understand the other person's point of view. The group members appear to have a high level of trust that the others will treat each one as a highly valued individual, rather than as a stereotype. Attempting to understand the other culture or sub-culture is one main factor in facilitating the group process.

Psycho-Social Presentation

Given the socio-cultural background of small groups, what actually happens in these groups, how do they function and develop? In this section we shall delve deeper into the study of these groups by examining their anatomical structure, physiological functioning and biological growth. For as with the body and with personality, one can study a group's structure, dynamics and phases of development. This section, therefore, will first examine the structure of small groups in terms of their nature, types and

levels, then the group dynamics or processes involved, and finally the life of the group in its stages of development.

Group Structure

What is a group? From the many definitions suggested according to various criteria, we propose the following: A group is a number of persons having a common interest or purpose and are in interaction with each other.

Groups may be classified into primary and secondary. "Primary groups" as Charles Cooley called them, sometimes referred to as restricted groups, micro-groups, or simply small groups, are such that personal interaction among all members is possible, i.e. where each member knows all the others and may establish a personal relationship with them, exemplified by the family, circle of friends, gang, etc. In a "secondary group" such personal relationship with *all* members is not possible, as for example in a school, a Company, a large community.

A useful way of distinguishing groups is that between socio-groups, or task-oriented, and psyche-groups, or person-centred, relational. The former include discussion groups, action groups, committees, etc. while the latter include sharing groups, growth groups, encounter groups, counselling or therapy groups. This distinction in terms of the nature and goals of the group is not as clear-cut as it appears in theory. For in practice, whatever the type of group, there often exists a tension between task roles and group maintenance, between accomplishing a task and caring for interpersonal needs. And the two are not independent of each other.

In the case of church groups especially, a balanced combination of these two aspects becomes necessary. For the role of these groups is not only to cater for personal needs and build a cohesive community but also to reach out to the world outside themselves. And because it is a Christian group, the faith-dimension has to be present. The group has to be God-centred, spiritually motivated, and inspired by religious attitudes. In other words, it has to develop into a Christian community experience.

Structurally, a group operates at three different levels which are present at any time of its functioning. These are the *content* level (subject-matter, agenda, topic for discussion), the *functional* level (procedure, method) and the *socio-affective* level (interpersonal relations in the group).

Group Processes

The basic processes that we shall mention in this section occur in every group. But although they are common to all groups, they differ in the manner and moment in which they manifest themselves depending on the nature, structure and goals of the group. Hence, church groups, since they are composed of human beings, also come under the same psychological laws and processes proper to group psychology. However, they have their own specific form of expression and specific motivation among members.

Leadership: The role of leadership in general is to help the group

achieve its goal and to facilitate the means conducive to this end. Actually, this should be every member's role, but the leader[4] exercises it in a privileged formal manner. More specifically, we may define the leader's triple function in the group as corresponding to the three levels mentioned earlier. Thus, on the content level, it consists in clarifying, on the procedure level that of organizing or co-ordinating, and on the socio-affective level that of facilitating interpersonal relations among members. As to leadership style, this may range from autocratic, through "laissez-faire" to democratic, depending on various personal and situational factors.

Members' Participation: To participate in a group means to contribute directly or indirectly to the attainment of the group's common goal. This requires an adequate motivation and a group consciousness on the part of the members. However, members do not all participate in the same way, nor do they exercise the same role. There exists various types of categories of interactions in a group. The standard classification used is that of Robert F. Bales (1950). His twelve categories are grouped into two main areas: Socio-operative or task-oriented and Socio-affective or person-centred. The former are subdivided into question-type (asks for information, opinion, or suggestion) and answer-type (gives information, opinion, or suggestion). The latter are subdivided into positive factors (shows solidarity, shows tension release, agrees) and negative factors (shows antagonism, shows tension, disagrees). The optimal group ought to permit such diverse modes of participaton, orientate them for the common goal and know how to make use of them to increase group awareness.

Communication: This issue is omnipresent during a group experience and takes place along several dimensions. The group becomes aware of different levels of wavelengths of communication: intellectual vs. affective, functional vs. personal, here-and-now vs. back-home situations, judgmental vs. empathic, absolute-objective vs. relative-subjective, etc. The vocabulary used develops into a language that characterizes the particular group: convention of words, use of first names, I – you talk, polite vs. informal form of address. Many groups also have to deal with periods of silence, which some members perceive as negative and empty while others as positive and communicative. One must distinguish sterile, blocking periods of silence from fertile, expressive and enriching moments of quiet. Finally, the importance of non-verbal communication: as the group develops it expresses itself more non-verbally, bodily signals and messages are adopted, gestures and postures are interpreted.

Psychological Roles: It is to be expected that a person's character will come out in small group behaviour. One can make up a whole inventory of

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4. Other terms used for leader are: facilitator, moderator, coordinator, chairperson, enabler, animator... We use the term 'leader' here cognizant of the fact that the term itself betrays the style.

the typical, almost stereotypical, roles that individual members play during sessions. Thus we find the "catalyst" or ice-breaker to whom the group turns to set the ball rolling; the "expert" or resource person who speaks as the one who knows it all; the "co-leader" who feels the need to assist the leader; the "observer-analyst" who participates by making shrewd psychological interpretations; the "critic" who constantly reacts by adopting an alternative view-point; the "diplomat" who seeks strategies to negotiate a compromise in group conflicts; the "chatter-box" who narrates at length by talking a lot to say little; the "paternalist" who benevolently condescends to rescue victims needing help; the group "supergo" or conscience who moralises on the group's behaviour; the "scapegoat" on to whom the members usually project and turn to as an escape; the "satellite" or passive follower; the "dominator", "supporter", "blocker", etc. This list may serve as a model to help members identify their own dominant role and that of others, and for the leader to learn how to deal with them by orientating them towards the benefit of the group.

Group Development

In reading the literature on the developmental stages of a group one feels at a loss in trying to identify these stages. Every author proposes his or her own pattern and claims verification from empirical data and experience. However, I have the impression that authors are all talking about the same phenomenon though perceived, formulated or at times interpreted differently.

Clinebell (1977) describes six stages in the life of a growth group: Initial anxiety; the honeymoon; frustration and questioning; risking and trusting; effective group work; closing. Leslie (1970) limits them to four: Defensiveness due to anxiety; expression of personal feelings; emergence of norms, patterns, roles; consolidation and action. Brown & Deits (1975) enumerate seven predictable stages in encounter groups: Testing stage; leader dependence; family stage; peer competition; play stage; subgroup stage; work stage. Reid (1969) adopts the model of individual growth and shows parallel developments in a group through the following stages: Dependence; resistance to freedom; adolescent rebellion; celebration and independence; inter-dependence.

Other authors, especially on the European continent,[5] consider the stages following initial uncertainty in terms of individuation, identification, enchantment-disenchantment, productivity, integration. Or more simply in terms of the cycle freezing-defreezing-refreezing.

In a more systematic study of a group over a five-year period, Bennis & Shepard (1978) hypothesize that there are two major phases in group development: Phase I that of dependence, pertaining to authority relations;

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5. See for example, Max Pagès (1968), Roger Mucchielli (1968).

phase II that of inter-dependence, pertaining to personal relations. The former contains three sub-phases: dependence-flight; counterdependence-flight; resolution-catharsis. The corresponding sub-phases of the latter major phases are: enchantment-flight; disenchantment-fight; consensual validation. The "dependence" and "interdependence" areas actually correspond to Bion's "dependency" and "pairing" modalities, to which he adds a "fight-flight" modality. The conceptualization into the two major dimensions of attitudes towards leader and towards members is close to Schutz's (1968) notion of group compatibility as a particular blend of orientations towards authority and towards personal intimacy. And for that matter it dates to Freud's (1922) assertion that "each member is bound by libidinal ties on one hand to the leader... and on the other hand to the other members of the group" (p.45).

Combining this literature with my own experience, I would summarize the phases of group development by postulating an initial phase of uncertainty (about the group and its task, about the leader, oneself, the other members) followed by the group-leader relationship (in terms of authority and dependence), the relationship between the members (in terms of interdependence), and final integration (or at times disintegration). In no real group are the developmental stages clear-cut and distinct. Rather, they overlap, recur, and their traces remain present in the later stages.

Pastoral Applications

In the previous section, we focused on the psycho-social angle of small groups. Whatever was said there applies to groups in the church. Thus, the pastoral aspect was already present even though implicitly. In this section, we shall deal more explicitly with the applications of group psychology to pastoral settings. More concretely, we shall describe the different types of small groups in the church, their role and effectiveness.

The number of types of groups that can be created in the church are as many as we allow our creativity to come up with. In practice, the ones that have already been created and are functioning effectively centre either geographically around the local church, parish, etc. or else around a particular category of people. They function as reflection groups, prayer groups, action groups, sharing groups, and so on.

Certain small groups are created more in function of the type of members than in view of the goal aimed at. Hence, we see many marriage or pre-marriage groups, youth groups, students' groups, family groups, groups for singles, etc. but fewer groups "in mission", whose heterogeneity characterizes the whole church more than the others do.

By studying the role and function of these groups in the Church, we understand better their pastoral application. From the ecclesiological point of view, these small groups if properly constituted already contain the local church in embryonic form. But that should not serve as an excuse to

separate themselves from the institutionalized local church. On the contrary they should act as a support for the church and as its link with the people.

Small group sharing is designed to deepen intrapersonal awareness and interpersonal communication. Already as such, it fulfils at the personal level a role of liberation of the individual to interior freedom and hence openness to God, and at the interpersonal level a role of witnessing to genuine fraternal love and Christian community spirit. These groups, however, must transcend themselves in order to become also witnesses and signs to the world of those values so rarely found in the socio-political world — love, reconciliation, hope, forgiveness.

Small groups have also been used effectively for educational purposes as ongoing formation for their members, as means for enriching liturgical celebrations, as improving communication through preaching, and as leading to action in the world. It is also my personal conviction that these groups can play a vital role in the ecumenical movement. I believe that in order best to foster, promote and ensure unity among Christians, small sharing groups composed of members from different religious denominations would be more effective than top level meetings among leaders. A change of attitude from below may prove more fruitful than a formal doctrinal declaration from above.

What about the actual effectiveness of these groups? One of the learning experiences in such groups is that members become more aware of their inter-relatedness and mutual dependence for support and challenge. The experience of human sinfulness followed by God's forgiveness and reconciliation is highlighted in these groups. The experience of crucifixion followed by resurrection is lived in terms of growing through suffering, dying leading to living. These spiritual benefits are thus spelled out by Leslie (1970, p.115):

> ... the small, sharing group can provide an especially good laboratory for doing theology, for experiencing both the problems of life and the ways of thinking about them in Christian terminology. Thus, incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection, are seen both as historic events in the life of Christ and as symbols articulating eternal truths in the life of man.

Small groups are not only beneficial to the members but also, and in a special way, to the leaders. They lower the barriers between priests and laity. Through them, the priest gets to know his people more personally, adopts a more democratic and less authoritative role, feels supported and encouraged by his parishioners. The personal, spiritual growth of the priest himself is thereby enhanced. As Brown & Deits (1975) so aptly remark: "For a pastor to discover the blocks to his own effectiveness, and then to begin to work on them, may be the single most dramatic and beneficial effect of the groups upon the life of a church." (p.59)

Finally, let us recall that small groups in the church are three-

dimensional. There is the intra-personal dimension leading to the individual's personal growth – intellectually, psychologically, spiritually. There is the "outward" dimension leading to deep interpersonal relationship and trust in the group, but also reaching out to those outside the group. And the spiritual, transcendent, or "upward" dimension, since the group meets in the realization that "where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in their midst." (Matthew 18:20) It is in the harmonious integration of these dimensions that a group truly develops and matures.

Small Groups Revisited

Having presented the small group movement in its various aspects, it is time now to make an overall evaluation in terms of its past achievements, its present status and its future orientation. This requires an honest appraisal of its potentialities and limitations, a clear assessment of its positive uses and potential abuses, and a genuine discernment in reading the "signs of the times".

We must be realistic and honestly admit the dangers to which the small group movement is exposed, the abuses it underwent, the exaggerations and idolatry of which it was the object. But we must also point out whether these negative aspects are sufficient proof to pronounce a death sentence on the movement or rather an appeal for prudence, responsibility and sound theological judgment.

Participating in an interpersonal group involves a risk. There is no certain guarantee that this particular group will obtain the benefits that are usually attributed to these experiences. It may even turn out to be detrimental, especially if certain precautions are not taken. Interpersonal groups in the church are meant mainly for relatively normal healthy people. If a severely neurotic person or a psychotic tries to use these groups as a substitute for therapy sessions, the result might be frustration in that person and blockage in the group. Growth groups risk becoming closed, exclusive, turned in on themselves instead of reaching out to the world with all its social ills. As Clinebell (1977) ironically remarks, "growth groups need not be used as psychological fiddling while the world burns." (p.148)

Some authors find more threat than promise in the small group movement. Andrew Greeley (1970), a well-known Catholic priest-sociologist, wrote: "One wonders whether the current romance between American Catholicism and group dynamics can lead to anything but tragedy." (p.10) The danger of substituting psychology for religion, of worshipping small groups as idols, cannot be easily discarded. This danger is made more explicit by Milson (1974, p.10):

> One's misgivings about encounter groups arise when the subject and the practice cease to be a simple technique, an aspect of a helping process, and becomes more a way of life ... a faith, a

religion. Then we begin to ask whether or not it has become a poor secularist substitute for the Christian gospel. Or we may ask whether human fulfilment or wholeness is to be found by digging in our own personalities, and the souls of others and the group consciousness.

The same author also expresses his reservations about undue reliance upon encounter groups for helping us to a clearer self-identity and a deeper self-awareness, recalling that one's identity comes also from historical, cultural and metaphysical factors.

Serious reservations about the small group movement are exposed in detail by Thomas Oden (1972). He claims that the basic difference between the secular group experience and Christian koinonia is that the latter makes explicit the trust that is implicit in the former. In developing the structure of "encounter theology", he affirms that "the encounter culture expresses an implicit theology that secularizes the basic categories of the Judeo-Christian tradition." (p.103)

I think that what Oden states applies not only to the small group movement but to many other natural, human or social phenomena. Work, love, joy, celebration, invention, these are all human realities and at the same time manifestations of the divine. After all, this is what the Incarnation is all about − the divine manifested in human form, Christ taking on humanity. To dissect an event, a human experience, into its so-called secular versus divine components, or human vs. Christian elements, is to create a dichotomy that ultimately refuses the Incarnation paradox.

Without making of small groups an absolute good or an ultimate end of Christian living, we must admit that they constitute important albeit unique strategies to make the church relevant today. Countless are the Christians, especially youth, who would have abandoned the church for its inability to be relevant to the needs of the modern world, were it not for the small group experience, that appealed to them as being a faith-experience. In this context, these groups challenge the Church to adapt its structures to the needs of contemporary men and women and to seek and live those values present in small groups. This should not lead, as some fear, to a division or opposition between the hierarchical Church and small groups, but to mutually enriching challenges leading to unity within plurality.

Instead of adopting an apologetic attitude towards the small group movement, trying to defend our traditional religious beliefs against this new threat as it were, we should look at the similarities existing between the two and discover how they can be mutually helpful. And further than that, why not consider the small group movement as an excellent opportunity, a God-sent blessing we might say, for encountering God? Even in conducting "secular" T-groups or "sensitivity-training groups", I have come across non-believers who through an awareness of themselves and of others were gradually led to their first experience of God.

The criticisms that are usually levelled against the small group movement concern exaggerations, abuses or misconceptions of valid principles of growth (openness, expression of feelings, experiencing the here-and-now, etc.). Such pitfalls are committed mostly by non-professionals trying to popularize the movement. But these liabilities of an otherwise valuable discovery should not prejudice us from appreciating its enormous assets.

Conclusion

In this article, I have not simply described a history of past events but critically reflected on present trends and realistically projected possible outcomes for the future. For once the powerful resources inherent in small groups are realised, the immense areas of applications could be tapped. This is especially true for the church, who in my opinion is only starting to explore the small group potential. In the coming years, I foresee a greater and better use of small groups in its hierarchical structure, in its decision-making process, in communication systems, in parish organization, in liturgical celebration, in catechetics, in discernment among religious communities, in pastoral renewal, in theological investigation and in the whole educational process at large.

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