

**Life in Community**  
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## **Towards an Introduction**

As Salvatorians we are and feel connected in many ways, especially through prayer and through the idea of our founder, Fr. Jordan. Our Salvatorian life is grounded in a life in community. We need this foundation as the source of our Salvatorian life where we draw fresh courage and new ideas and where we drink from the Holy Spirit. Therefore, it is important to nourish and deepen this community.

Each name of the three branches united under the roof of the Salvatorian Family reflects the way of life chosen by its members: a community. But what does this community look like in concrete terms and how would/could this find expression within in the Salvatorian Family? A closer look reveals that all three branches have communities that are more or less functioning. As there has virtually been no literature on this subject so far, it is high time to explore the issue of community life on a deeper level, not least of all because the Salvatorian Charter<sup>1</sup> challenges us to live as a loving community.

In each of the branches, communities are established differently and under varying conditions. For the Lay Salvatorians<sup>a</sup> it has often been the case that a group started together with a Salvatorian Priest or a Salvatorian Sister. Salvatorian formation is a central issue in the process of building community. However, little or no attention was given to the “private” needs of the members, even though these play an essential role in the development of true community. The reasons for this are many, ranging from additional efforts needed for accompaniment and the available time, to a lack of experience in leading a group or, in simply understanding the necessity of establishing leaders among those interested. Daily life as seen from each particular perspective is often very different for clerical persons and lay people – as is the understanding that each has of the others’ way of life.

So what can community life really look like in each of the branches and within the whole family? We might begin by exploring the concepts of community, society and group.

## **What is a community?**

In Mt 18:20 we read: *“For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them”*. This already expresses the basic idea of the (Christian) community (or society, see below). So it takes a couple of like-minded people having something in common. These people have some kind of emotional closeness or, as one might casually say, they are on the same wavelength. They cultivate immediate and close mutual relationships. This is the sociological definition of community.<sup>2</sup> In general, community is a complex term designating the mutual relationship of people sharing religious goals, worldviews, political or ideological ideas, spiritual ideals or some narrow practical purpose as their common basis, which has developed over time.<sup>3</sup>

The rules of the early monastic communities also aimed at a practical realization of the Gospel by balancing prayer and active work (*“ora et labora”*) and demanded a modest and fraternal life in community.<sup>4</sup>

When asking for the reasons for, or about the common ground of a community, the answer is often not easy to comprehend for people from the outside. Various studies<sup>5</sup> show that the

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<sup>a</sup> As I only know the establishment of communities of Lay Salvatorians in detail I would like to look at these as an example. Similarities with the two other Salvatorian communities are not excluded, however.

reasons for joining a community are difficult to assess, but the main reason lies in a long-term fulfillment of emotional expectations and desires.

Unmistakable signs of an emerging community are a developing solidarity among the members and their subsequent personal relationships. Therefore, there is no open conflict of interests in true communities. Rather, the members try to reach a consensus, which is to say that they try to share convictions, values and customs.

## Differences between community and society

As opposed to communities, the association of individuals in a society is based on rational considerations. In a society many individuals profit from each other in order to reach a particular individual goal. The focus is on an exchange of service and return – so we could speak of a “community of interests”. A society is composed of various groups and communities.

Society refers to humankind as a whole, as well as to particular groups of people, like a nation or an ethnic group. But society can also refer to a limited and structured context of people (like “the Swedish society”) or to a cluster in the social network of people that can be defined by the interactions of its members.<sup>6</sup>

## So now, what is a group?

A group normally consists of 3 to 25 people at most. These people have a common group goal, which provides the motivation for their behavior. The group is characterized by a “we” feeling. This is to say that all members see themselves as part of a greater whole and act accordingly.

Each group has its own system of common norms and values serving to reach the common goal of the group. The fundamental values determining the actions of the members are derived from these norms.

A group is also characterized by a distribution of roles which makes it easier to reach the group goal. Despite the “we” feeling, a certain distance between the members persists. A true consensus is not yet needed.

## A group beginning to show traits of a community

A group can be characterized as having traits of a community, for example, when the members have developed a particular closeness and try to reach a consensus when taking decisions. They all feel “at home” and are interested in avoiding or limiting conflicts. The ideal they pursue is to have no latent conflicts within the group.



Figure 1

Such a group consists of members that have known each other for a longer period of time. When new persons join the group (even if only temporarily) or others leave, the group structure is disrupted. This always has an effect on each individual member. Most often the level of the relationships and the openness within the group are reduced.

## Four stages of the formation of a community

Let us now look at the process of group formation because a group does not come about overnight but passes through

different stages. Figure 1 shows four different stages of the development of community as defined by Morgan Scott Peck, a US psychiatrist and psychotherapist.

Generally, each community can be assigned to one of these stages.<sup>b7</sup> The transitions are fluid, but they are distinguished by characteristic traits.

### 1. Stage of Pseudo-Community

This is how every group and every community begins – and everyone knows this stage of rather insignificant “small talk”. The group behaves as if already being a community, as if there were only minor individual differences among its members and no reasons for conflicts. This state is maintained by means of “good manners”: A lot is tolerated and/or unpleasant details are “swallowed” in order to avoid any possible offense; nobody must be disturbed or even treated with hostility. “Misunderstandings” are dismissed with a smile. In case of danger the members quickly change the subject.

- **Stage of Pseudo-community**  
☞ *pretense at harmony, attempt (try) at assimilation*
- **Stage of Chaos**  
☞ *permanent conflicts, resistance, rage and anger, not-being-understood*
- **Stage of emptiness**  
☞ *vulnerability, deep exchange, members start to speak about themselves and their needs*
- **Stage of authenticity**  
☞ *a common hearty energy is explored, love without a motive*

Figure 2

The climate of a “perfect world” prevails: Each person tries to participate as well as possible and is attentive and considerate. There are hardly any in-depth conversations or discussions and if so, they remain on a strictly factual level – somehow noncommittal, polite, artificial, boring, sterile and therefore unproductive – leaving enough room for the members to withdraw easily.

There is almost no hierarchical order; a sharing of responsibilities is possible, but normally occurs on just a small scale. However, the sharing of responsibilities at this stage must not be confused

with the simple support or willingness to help which are prompted by the pretense or maintenance of harmony.

### 2. Stage of Chaos

After some time, the group reaches a point where the personal limits of the members’ tolerance diminish. Mutual strengths and weaknesses become more manifest – which sooner or later leads to dissensions. These are no longer to be hidden, but need to be triggered. The members are beginning to convert or heal each other; they associate with, and/or distance themselves from, others. Conflicts are constantly hanging in the air – defense, anger, rage and not-being-understood become the order of the day, often mixed with fighting for rank – and the group begins to define rules. In principle the only issue is winning or losing and some groups break up in the process or fall back to stage 1.

But if the group survives this unpleasant process without destroying itself or falling back to the stage of a pseudo-community it will gradually enter the stage of “emptiness”.

### 3. Stage of Emptiness

The transition from chaos to emptiness is rarely a dramatic one. Quite the contrary, it often takes painfully long. The stage of emptiness is a phase of very hard work. It is a time when the members are trying to clear away any obstacles between themselves and the community. They recognize their own vulnerability and are aware of the necessity to talk about their personal needs. Risk-taking and courage are needed now and, even though the members

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<sup>b</sup> In a similar sense defined as a “forming, storming, norming, performing model” by B. Tuckman; however, his model refers more to the formation of management or leadership teams.

might often feel relieved, they also feel wretched every so often. The reason is that much of what they seemingly have to give up and sacrifice together with their personal integrity are universal human characteristics: prejudice, premature judgments about facts, rigid expectations, the desire to expand one's "personal ideology and world view", the urge to win, the fear of making a fool of oneself, and the need to always be in control. There might also be very personal issues like some hidden grievance, disgust or deep fear of one's own vulnerability or smallness.

Finally, courage takes over and the members begin to talk openly and without immediate assignments of value. The moment comes when a member can precisely and authentically address an issue without anyone feeling a need to change the subject. The group silently listens and takes in all the details. One of the members will carefully pick up the thread, commenting more or less on what has been said or presenting another authentic issue. Instead of a need to escape from "nakedness" there is a growing respect because a second member has followed the first. If further members follow in a similar way the process is accomplished – the community has been born. In most cases this is a decisive moment deeply felt by all of the members; it seems as if a spirit of peace and relief is descending upon everybody.

#### **4. Stage of Authenticity**

In a single moment everything has changed. Trust and unconditional love are spreading. Weaknesses and shortcomings can be tolerated with humor. The members know their mutual and personal no-go areas, which they respect and enter with due regard acting with the necessary attentiveness. Everything reminds one of an orchestral piece. People work with a precise sense of time like a finely tuned orchestra directed by an invisible heavenly conductor. Many of them now actually feel the presence of God in the room and in their cooperation.

But now, caution is needed! This stage does not come about automatically and continue to exist; it always requires hard work. If things are left to themselves or not given enough attention - for example, loosely run meetings, more superficiality, arrival of new members, etc. – the group will easily fall back to the second stage and will need to work through the process again.

At this point each group – or community – must ask itself whether its members already are "of one heart and soul" as reported in Acts 4:32-35 in Scripture:

- *standing together with trust and love → i.e. being of one heart and soul;*
- *having the call to proclaim the Gospel at the center of their community;*
- *having a loving deaconry – almost a community of goods*

and have therefore reached stage 4, or whether they are at one of the other three stages presented above. But do not fear if you find yourself at the second or even only at the first stage – the important thing is to recognize the process, to enter into it and to accept the challenge.

#### **But where to begin...?**

Living and being together in a community requires honesty and trust. Before we can draw the necessary conclusions, we need to see clearly where we are, and then take the right decisions and move forward towards becoming a true community.

At the onset we should think about which person to entrust with accompanying the group<sup>c</sup> because the influence and the decisions of this person are paramount for the group to prosper. In the case of the Community of the Divine Savior this responsibility normally lies with Sisters and Brothers/Fathers. In the future the Lay Salvatorians need to assume this responsibility themselves if their community is to become autarchic and authentic<sup>d</sup>.

The accompanying person should have several years of experience with Salvatorian community life and should possibly also have lived in various groups/communities. He/she should have a mature personality, like to work with people and be open to new experiences.

The Salvatorian Family is a spiritual community – but not only this! The statement: “Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.” (Mt 4:4) can actually take on another positive perspective here. If, for example, a group meets only once a month for a short time of prayer and/or the sharing of a Bible passage, it will never become a true community. It will rather remain within the first stage; their discussions, their exchange, and their living together will not reach any considerable depth. Therefore a group should start early to look for other connecting elements and interests – which may even be of a completely profane nature. A group might have a common interest in cookery, in manual skills, in sports or culture, etc. Whatever they find, the important thing is for the members to be able to also find a common basis in “normal life”. A very essential responsibility in accompanying a group lies in deciding on the necessary steps towards becoming a community and in monitoring their implementation. Possible objections about risks, for example, sooner or later the group could slide into the profane, lie in the guidance of the accompanying person as well as in the constant motivation of the group itself.

Joint activities and undertakings shape the group and reveal the strengths and weaknesses of its members. Weaknesses must not necessarily be a disadvantage; the group should rather be challenged to find and develop solutions together. Joint recreational activities, pilgrimages, hiking with the Bible, taking courses, etc. deepen the sense of community and promote group dynamic processes<sup>e</sup>.

Another issue is to look at the respective personalities in the group and at the ego of each member. The more evenly these are distributed in a group, the “easier” it will be for the members. It is therefore not a matter of indifference to decide which persons will join which group. This requires a certain sensitivity. But in some cases even this does not help and difficulties begin to increase. A person who is not socially competent will not be happy with the Salvatorian Family in the long run, and vice versa. This would obstruct the development of a true community and the group would unfortunately get stuck at the stage of chaos – which is certainly not a desirable state of affairs.

Thus, the group needs good accompaniment and the team of coordinators or leaders of the unit need to change the composition of groups for the benefit of community; or, in some cases, individuals have to be dismissed. It is not surprising that this often becomes a major challenge, especially for the person accompanying the group. The development of a group is always an adventure – but also always a walk with God – which is something to rely on.

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<sup>c</sup> This refers to the person responsible for the community in question

<sup>d</sup> Also a requirement for the approval of the Holy See

<sup>e</sup> Group dynamic refers to the interaction and the mutual relationships between the members of a group. It describes the behavior of individuals within the group, the formation of the group and the way a group functions.

## **A Matter of region and mentality<sup>8</sup>**

With international communities, special attention has to be given to the particular differences of mentality and therefore to the regions. A kind of reality, for example, that does not present any problems in a Western context can lead to complete disharmony in an African or Asian context and vice versa. Human beings are not alike, neither in their appearance nor in the way they feel.

So how can it be possible to build an international (true) community? Well, above all, this takes a lot of tolerance, an understanding of the different life situations and of the environment, as well as the necessary acceptance. The idea is not to simply accept everything, but to reach a reasonable level of acceptance. As Salvatorian men and women we find support in our universality<sup>9</sup> which is based on the Catholic-Christian philosophy of life<sup>10</sup> and in our mutual desire to learn by trusting God and by allowing ourselves to be enriched by our (foreign) brothers and sisters. If we succeed in offering as many people as possible an opportunity to recognize the value and the chance of such a community, a truly great work can arise, just as intended and envisioned by Fr. Jordan.<sup>f</sup>

## **Living in community – in matters great and small**

If the life of a “small group” only just functions, it is time to look beyond our own “horizon”. The unit of a country or region must also strive to live as a true community.

As mentioned above, various activities can help to establish and maintain a feeling of “we”. It is up to the coordinating or leading team to provide for the particular elements needed. Apart from the regular large meetings, educational events, courses, excursions or projects can be favorable.<sup>11</sup> At least there might be projects of the Salvatorian Family with the participation of some groups or members of the branches. Some of these projects and activities could even take on an international dimension.<sup>g</sup>

## **What are we able to bear?**

This is a question to be asked not only by each individual but sometimes also by smaller or larger communities as a whole. Reasons for dissonances can be sudden events like death, a (severe) illness of a member, constant appeals from outside, intrigues and many other things; as well as creeping changes, all of which put a strain on the community structure,.

Experience has shown that communities with few members are far less able to deal with such challenges than larger ones. In other words, there is a “critical mass” below which a “problem” becomes a real challenge – sometimes even leading to the breakup of the community.

A higher number of individuals or a higher number of single groups belonging to a community provide a better distribution. Members who do not really feel at home in one group can easily change to another group. The saying “a problem shared is a problem halved” has a true application here, for when many people share a “problem”, each individual feels the problem with less intensity than in a small group. Here, as well, it is up to the accompanying person, the coordinating team or the leadership team to look for possible solutions.

And yet, each one is confronted with this key question:

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<sup>f</sup> See Salvatorian Charter, chapter 1. paragraph 2.

<sup>g</sup> Possible examples are joint social projects with the Fathers and the Sisters or their institutions (→ SOFIA, etc.), which are already in place.

## **Am I capable of living in community – or not?**

One requirement for each group or community that seeks deeper relationships, in other words, that wants to become an authentic community, is the social capability of its members. Certainly, everyone will have some criteria ready at hand. When these are assembled it will quickly become obvious which of the existing differences need to recede to the background in a true community. Here are some starting points, with no claim to completeness:

- How strong is my consent to and acceptance of what we share as a community?
- Am I really willing to engage myself or do I want only to co-exist?
- Am I willing to be committed to the other members of the community, to submit to them (unconditionally)?
- I do not exclude others, but do I subconsciously exclude myself because I do not really want to belong or because I do not (yet) want to engage myself?
- Is my determination to remain in the community strong enough to survive storms, conflict and bad times?
- Am I willing to balance my fundamental freedom, my individual being in order to leave room for other people/experiences?

So, it is important for us to regularly look in the mirror at our own unvarnished image and examine our willingness for self-knowledge and self-correction. Do I succeed in creating an environment that gives others the freedom to be themselves and to have and express their true feelings?

This echoes one of the statements by Fr. Bonaventura Lüthen SDS, which might be most accurate in the context of relationship and community and which might become a key phrase for every kind of Salvatorian community: “Treat every person in such a way that he or she will be pleased to have met you.”

## **True community – or simply a community of purpose**

When looking at old and young religious communities, we discover that community is a pillar of each of their spiritualities. It is the real bearer of religious tradition and religious cult<sup>12</sup>. So, community has a very essential function and is one of the major pillars of such an association of like-minded people. Of course, this refers above all to a spiritual community, but even here the definition says:

*A religious community is a group of people within the Roman-Catholic Church who practice their faith in their own original way. This means for example that a particular charism like freedom or community is important, that a certain saint takes an important position or that there is a particular culture of prayer in order to intensify the religious orientation.*<sup>13</sup>

This reveals that true community is what we need and have to strive for – whether in our larger or in our smaller units.<sup>h</sup>

Therefore, our Salvatorian communities must clearly distinguish themselves from other associations like parish groups or groups in similar contexts. Most of these tend to be communities of purpose and the primary focus is not on living together as brothers and sisters. So, though the members certainly respect one another and some may even interact as

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<sup>h</sup> See section above: “But where to begin...?”

friends, they do not need to like each other very much. Finally, it is this passage from *Gaudium et Spes* that points the way:

*God, Who has fatherly concern for everyone, has willed that all men should constitute one family and treat one another in a spirit of brotherhood. For having been created in the image of God, Who "from one man has created the whole human race and made them live all over the face of the earth" (Acts 17:26), all men are called to one and the same goal, namely God Himself.*<sup>14</sup>

Even though we do not yet have true communities in each of our units we must not lose heart or even be put off. Instead, we should accept the challenge and set this as our medium or long-term goal.<sup>i</sup>

### **Far away – and yet so near...**

Our contemporary world is marked by modern means of communication. TV, radio and Internet accompany everyday life in many parts of the world and people can hardly imagine living without them. Even in very remote areas<sup>15</sup> mobile phones are available and people use the social networks to keep in touch. Above all it is the Internet that offers many possibilities to establish contacts with other people, even across large distances, and to develop new forms of community.

### **Internet forums, blogs, videophone & the like**

These tools are tools allowing people to establish communication and a flow of information across countries and continents.

An **Internet forum**, often also called web forum, is a virtual platform to exchange and archive ideas, opinions and experiences. Communication in forums is asynchronous, i.e. entries are not answered directly and instantly but with a time delay that can take hours, days or even weeks. The advantage is that people at their various locations can choose the best moment to write or to answer an entry, which is helpful especially when communicating across different time zones. Usually, a forum website has a main theme and offers various directories or sub forums for different sub themes. You can write so-called postings which can be read and answered by others. All the contributions connected with a particular posting are called a thread or a topic. By beginning a new thread you start a new discussion.<sup>16</sup> This makes it easier to keep track of a topic than with email communication. Further possibilities are an exchange of documents, pictures or videos, surveys or votes on certain issues, etc. Thus, a web forum is a strong tool for modern communication and it is very practical for groups or communities desiring to keep in touch across time zones or geographical distances. A password keeps it unavailable to outsiders so that it can only be used by authorized members.



Figure 3

A **blob** or **weblog** is convenient for the exchange of articles, ideas, prayers etc. This tool allows a group or community to share spiritual texts and reflections together with embedded

<sup>i</sup> See Salvatorian Charter, chapter IV. ff.



pictures, video clips and audio files. Even though a blog is more like a kind of diary or journal, it can be written and edited by several persons. Translation tools even make it possible to communicate in different languages. Some of these sites are already considered to be internet publications and are given ISS numbers.<sup>17</sup>

**Videophone** is telephoning with a visual image similar to video telephony. Skype and Team Viewer are other such suitable computer programs. In the case of Team Viewer several people can work at a document simultaneously even across continents. And there can be no doubts that direct eye contact is an additional advantage.

All of these opportunities open up new horizons and possibilities that are already being used in various other religious congregations.<sup>j</sup> In the Salvatorian Family these means are only just beginning to be used. In Matthew 11:17 we read: *“We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we sang a dirge, and you did not mourn”*; unfortunately, this can be applied here, as well. For, while so-called social media like Face Book, Twitter and Co. are finding many users, forums and blogs are being used much less, even though, here, the communication takes place in closed spaces and partially offers more security. A great deal of persuasive effort is still needed, as well as an understanding of virtual communities that have their own rights and duties.

## **Conclusion**

We have seen-that community can be divided into four stages depending on their degree of authenticity. It takes courage, perseverance and certainly a couple of setbacks for a community to pass through the first three stages. Not until the status of true community is reached can there be the kind of unconditional love that Fr. Jordan envisioned in his Spiritual Diary:

*“Others will feel attracted to join our community if they see love prevailing among us.”*

This is a worthy goal and an objective that can be achieved provided the members discern their vocation and use their talents for the benefit of all. Borders, oceans and continents are growing ever closer together in our time. Distances are decreasing and new media are opening up entirely new opportunities. Our task now is to get involved and to use them for the benefit and blessing of all. This might also enable us to achieve what is said in Philippians 1:27a:

*“As a community live in a manner worthy of the Gospel.”*

## **Reflection Questions**

1. Re-read the Salvatorian Family Charter in light of this article.
  - a. Note words or phrases that speak to you and ask, “What is this saying to me and how will I respond?”
  - b. What could be some implications for the Salvatorian Family in your area of the world, and/or globally?
2. In light of this article, if you were to revise the Salvatorian Family Charter, what would you add or change?

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<sup>j</sup> The religious congregation of the Society of Mary (Marianists) has been operating such "online-communities" for quite a while.

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