

# Sturdy Roots

## An Educational Resource for Studying the Heritage and Spirit of the School Sisters of Notre Dame

### Who has Sturdy Roots?

Each of the Units of the North American Major Area (NAMA), The District of Africa, The District of Latin America, The Generalate, The Munich Motherhouse, The Region of Japan and The Region of Guam has a Sturdy Roots basket available for School Sisters of Notre Dame and friends.

### What are the contents of the picnic basket, “Sturdy Roots”?

Sheer silk bag containing a tablecloth: four napkins in sheer silk bag. (Dry clean when needed)  
Family Tree photo album of School Sisters of Notre Dame  
Seeds of Hope: two photo albums of newer members  
*Stepping to the Tune of Universal Peace*: video with written directions

S. Rosel Feder, SSND teaches three Dances for Universal Peace via video to high school seniors. This activity could begin the session, especially if the facilitator could teach “Haida” to the group. It is a Jewish dance done while waiting for people to gather.

Pair of ballet slippers to be worn by leader of dance

Sheer silk bag with plastic topics: topics adhere to tablecloth and include:

1) Family Tree, 2) Education, 3) Seeds of Hope, 4) Woman of the Word, 5) Case Study in Courage, 6) Living in Wartime, 7) Needlework.

The title of the project, “Sturdy Roots,” is taken from the motto that was often used by Mother Theresa Gerhardinger, foundress of the School Sisters of Notre Dame. “All the Works of God, proceed slowly and in pain, but then their *roots are sturdier*, and their flowering the lovelier.” This motto is included in the plastic topics named above. Facilitator directions are available to explore its meaning with a group. These are described later in this set of directions.

Sturdy Roots CDs (2) include each topic named above using primary source material from letters and chronicles of the School Sisters of Notre Dame.

The segment entitled “Needlework” gives additional background material for the role of needlework in SSND education. It is helpful to study this topic before presenting the basket.

(If the group would like to do a process the facilitator may want to download copies of Mother Theresa’s Letter on American Children #728 under “Education.” Check with Facilitator Directions under Education for further options.)

These Facilitator's Directions plus inventory of contents of basket are found in a plastic sleeve.

## **Facilitator's Directions: How to Use the "Sturdy Roots" Basket?**

The FACILITATOR brings the Sturdy Roots picnic basket to the meeting place, preferably with a round table available. If the group is small, fewer than 10 people, they could be invited to sit around the table.

If the group is larger, it may be helpful to plan a "fish bowl" process where 5 or 6 chairs are placed around the table. Volunteers are invited to join a discussion by sitting around the table. There could be two extra chairs that are empty. The FACILITATOR invites members of the audience to join the others at the table if they have a specific question. After that question is discussed the audience member returns to her seat, allowing for others to join the discussion, and so on. In one setting a couple invited four other couples to join them at a "Winter Picnic" at their home. After a "picnic foods" meal, the FACILITATOR invited the group to join her around a big kitchen table.

FACILITATOR: Welcome the participants and introduce the topic by saying: Now we're going to explore some of the Sturdy Roots of the School Sisters of Notre Dame. We'll be using a conversational style as is appropriate for a picnic. Please ask questions and comment as you feel inclined. The Facilitator may want to ask someone prior to the gathering to ask the first question, "Why a picnic basket?"

FACILITATOR: The creator of this picnic basket shared the following. The St. Louis Art Museum offered various cultural suitcases to teachers. If you were teaching about Germany, they had a suitcase filled with memorabilia that represented the German culture. A teacher could borrow it and share the contents with a class.

The author chose a picnic basket to carry some of the stories of the School Sisters of Notre Dame because it conveys the idea of community, a relaxed atmosphere, and sharing stories. Sixteen \*Longaberger picnic baskets were donated to the School Sisters of Notre Dame, providing a quality product which can be shipped to various parts of the congregation. Research revealed that a filled basket is a symbol of the womb. (*Dreams and Symbols: Man's Unconscious*, 1969. This seemed an appropriate container to hold the story of a religious community dedicated to the education of women, the poor, and youth.

FACILITATOR: (waits for the next question, probably "What's in the basket?") Opens the lid, and unfolds the tablecloth, saying: More than one hundred School Sisters of Notre Dame have helped create Sturdy Roots. This is an educational resource for sharing the heritage and spirit of the School Sisters of Notre Dame. This handmade tablecloth is the centerpiece of the project. It exemplifies the importance of needlework in the story of the sisters.

\*Longaberger sells fine quality hand made baskets and pottery. For more information contact them at 1-800-966-0374 or at [www.longaberger.com](http://www.longaberger.com)

The FACILITATOR may want to share excerpts of data described under the topic of Needlework found on CD as well as what follows.

Recently, (February, 2005), an article appeared on the importance of teaching children to sew. A recent study explained: "...that children ages 8 – 12 showed elevated creativity after sewing a simple project. Children who sew during these critical years of development show increased creativity and self-esteem and appear to build skills in creative problem solving and perseverance." (For more information log onto [www.sewing.org](http://www.sewing.org))

For nineteenth century European young women, demonstrating a proficiency in needlework was a critical sign of their education. In European paintings one will often see a wealthy woman doing needlework. This shows she has the leisure for needlework and indicates she has married into wealth. On the American frontier this was evident in fine quilts that a young woman created. Accomplishment of such a task meant she was ready for marriage. Another common practice was stitching a sampler exemplifying the quality of work that a young woman had accomplished. Needlework was an important part of education for School Sisters of Notre Dame.

FACILITATOR: The theme on the tablecloth is "The Vine and the Branches" taken from John 15, where Jesus says: 'I am the vine, you are the branches.' In her earliest written account of a mystical experience, young Caroline Gerhardinger, later Mother Theresa, the foundress of the School Sisters of Notre Dame wrote: "In Jesus! He has given me a part in his unspeakable mercy, his poverty, his hardship, suffering, anxiety and need. To him, now I write this: I cannot describe my interior peace. Now I am in Jesus. May He do what He wants with me. Him will I trust. He will remain in me, and I in Him; on Him I will build."

FACILITATOR: Mother Theresa wrote this when she was 25 years old, on March 15, 1822. Later in the same prayer she continues: "I know that my love is not yet sufficient, and my soul must be purified, but this purification I leave in the hand of the Vinedresser who will trim and prune the branches, even though this will be painful. All my life will be lived by God's grace in the service of Christ through the mediation of his holy mother. Amen."

*(Of Spiritual Matters: Letters of Mother M. Theresa Gerhardinger, edited by S. Mary Hester Valentine, SSND, 1977, #1.)*

FACILITATOR: It is because of this mystical experience of the foundress that the author chose the grapevine to serve as a metaphor of the history of the School Sisters of Notre Dame in this project.

FACILITATOR: Are there other questions? (Usually someone will notice that there are pieces of Velcro attached to the tablecloth and ask about them). Finding the small bag with plastic badges in it, the participants pick out one badge at a time, read aloud what it says and then attach it to the tablecloth.

FACILITATOR: Each of these is a bunch of grapes (notice background design) that signifies a different topic to be studied in Sturdy Roots. Each one signifies that the congregation is alive,

growing, being pruned, and nourishing others. It is a touchstone to the fine wine of Cana and recalls that “Do whatever He tells you” is a motto and invitation to School Sisters of Notre Dame.

When someone finds “Family Tree” show them the photo album which is in the basket. Similarly, when “Dances for Peace,” is chosen, pick out the ballet slippers and video.

FACILITATOR: Any other questions? “What else is in the basket?” Facilitator brings out two small photo albums and says: Usually someone asks if women are entering the School Sisters of Notre Dame. These are some photos of newer members from across the congregation. This is part of the topic, “Seeds of Hope.” This gives great hope! (Pass albums around)

FACILITATOR: A tablecloth would be incomplete without napkins. (Find the small bag containing the four napkins in various languages.) Display them on the tablecloth beginning with the German, “Alle werke...” followed by the English, “proceed slowly...” followed by the Japanese, “but then their roots are sturdier...” and concluding with the Spanish, “and their flowering the lovelier.”

Place the plastic badges with the motto under each napkin: All the works of God, (under German) Proceed slowly and in pain, (under English) but then, their roots are sturdier, (under Japanese) and their flowering the lovelier. (under Spanish)

The FACILITATOR repeats the words by saying: The origin of the School Sisters of Notre Dame is in Germany and continues:

“All the words of God...” think a minute. Can you remember a time when you felt God was doing a new “work” in your life? (Pause) Did it “proceed slowly and in pain?” Anyone like to share such an experience with the person sitting next to you?

After a few minutes of personal sharing the FACILITATOR continues: The School Sisters of Notre Dame are an international congregation rooted in more than thirty cultures around the world. Four sisters went to Japan in 1948, and in Japanese we read, “but then their roots are sturdier...” Recalling the “new work” God was doing in your life, can you name any roots in your own character, marriage, ministry, that are sturdier because of this experience? Invite comments.

And finally, “their flowering is lovelier.” What has flowered in your family, personality, church, because of this “work of God?”

Repeat the entire motto again saying, “All the works of God proceed slowly and in pain; but then their roots are sturdier and their flowering the lovelier.” This is the motto of the School Sisters of Notre Dame.

FACILITATOR: Now that we’ve looked at the contents of the picnic basket, would you want to take one example of a topic? (If yes, have copies of Mother Theresa’s letter on American

Children, available from the CD under Education. Check Facilitator Directions for additional ideas.)

The FACILITATOR distributes copies and says:

Let's read this together and see what American children were like when Mother Theresa first met them in 1847. Share on questions following the letter or invite comments.

FACILITATOR: Sturdy Roots contains other primary source material from the archives of the School Sisters of Notre Dame. If you found this interesting you may want to explore some of the other topics.

However, no session would be complete without a test! (Listen for moans) Here is the question: I want you to work in pairs and name one new thing you learned about the School Sisters of Notre Dame from our sharing. Invite comments.

Conclude with a familiar hymn and the Blessing of Mother Theresa that is found in our 1865 Holy Rule.

FACILITATOR: My dear friends, I commend you to the Holy Spirit, through the powerful intercession of the Blessed Virgin Mary, and entrust you forever to her blessed hands. Amen

Below is a photograph of the School Sisters of Notre Dame who coordinated and prepared kits for the making of tablecloths and napkins for Sturdy Roots. They are the staff of the Liturgical Fabric Arts Department, St. Louis, MO.

More than 100 School Sisters of Notre shared their gifts of needlework, technology, and support to make Sturdy Roots possible. Mr. Mark Braeger of the Communications Department at Elm Grove, WI utilized "Dreamweaver" to provide the creativity that brings archival material to life. We hope you find this educational resource "user friendly" and informative.

Judith Best, SSND  
June 16, 2005