

Community in Dialogue: "To love someone means to tell him: you shall not die."

by Matteo Tagliaferri, C.M.

Trivigliano, June 21, 1991- *"A few months ago we began our human experience - an experience of hospitality and love. Hospitality and love for all of us who need it, and especially need it without being aware of the need. After all everybody has his wounds, and each one is wounded there where he is not loved."* These words began a letter that I wrote to the first young members of the Community in Dialogue, who asked me what convictions animated our journey.

The Story: It all began on a cold February day in 1991. I found myself in a small parish in the mountains of central Italy, near Aquila, at an altitude of 1400 meters. In the midst of so much snow, a desperate father approached me on behalf of his son - a drug addict: *"he needs to enter a Community for social services, otherwise the judge will sentence him to prison "*. The father had been wounded in one arm, the son had lived without his mother from early years. At a National Congress for Marian Youth, for whom I was then Assistant, I had met Father Pierino Gelmini, founder of the *"Community Encounter"*; it seemed natural to turn to him. However, I knew that Danilo - the young man's name - had been in his Community, so he could not readmit him. The time granted by the judge was brief. I was able to persuade the judge to allow me to keep him with me at Casamaina - the village covered by snow. In the meantime I would search out a Community for the young man. To compound things, that same week two other young drug addicts left two different Roman hospitals; they had no one, they were also seropositive.

The Community today: Now four years since the beginning of our journey, the young people of the Community in Dialogue number more than 150. They themselves are the protagonists of their own human redemption and the rediscovery of their proper human dignity. Around thirty are women; there are also family groups.

The Community is divided into ten groups or Centers. Five live in a large building which the Bishop of Anagni has placed at their disposition in Trivigliano. The other five Centers are in different buildings, two also in the territory of Trivigliano, the other three in the Communes of Ardena, Selva di Paliano, Castelliri. In addition to these, there is a Center where they are first received in the commune of Frosinone.

Just a month ago the journey concluded for another twelve youngsters. On this occasion, young Rita expressed her feelings in these words: *"I, a woman rich*

with love in the depths of my being, will be a fountain from which life will gush forth ". "In the beginning there is always a struggle for each individual and for everyone against the little confidence in the powers we have within us to conquer confusion and egoism. But precisely those who have already suffered very much are met and rediscovered, always in a better way on the road of life. They always learn to participate more in a life-giving climate, they always become more responsible and capable of loving. Thus learning to dialogue, to support one another day by day, reanimates the person in each one of us. Weariness and sacrifice don't matter, because a person's will to live in the profoundest dimensions, in sentiments and affections, in the reality of one's own future - believed in once again as possible and newly reflected on - such a will is stronger than every fear and sacrifice: this is what it means to be a human being! " (From the letter to the first youngsters).

Some Principles: The youngsters themselves are the motor that drives the Community. Little by little, they assume all the responsibilities - even the most important - for people, for administration, for technical and juridical details. Paul keeps the accounts for the whole Community; he also completed secondary school while in the Community. These are the miracles of the love that expresses itself with *"the sweat of one's brow and the strength of one's arm"*. The responsibility in Community is assumed and lived by each one as a possibility for participation and growth. Each one can give rather than receive, can rediscover one's proper human dignity and a positive self-image. One conviction - the foundation of the life of the Community - is the constant belief in the possibilities of the redemption of persons from every form of emarginization and solitude. One principle which directs behavior in Community, e.g. says: *"Always believe in the possibilities of your neighbor, as others believed in yours, when you yourself didn't believe in them."* Therefore the journey in Community stimulates better self-knowledge by means of dialogue. From moments of reflection and confrontation comes suitable behavior, always more adequate in the face of the problems of life. Accepting the suffering that such a force brings with it shows itself in the courage not to weaken when facing more difficult relations. Moreover it favors rediscovery of the joy of living in moderation day by day, making values one's own, chosen always with greater freedom. And thus there awakens wonder and a hymn to the Creator and Father who seems to repeat continually: *"I have created life and I do not will death!"* In other words, *"I am happy and I want you to live, my son!"*

Together for others: A new Center for youth, purchased by the Confreres of the Roman Province, opened just a month ago. This better enables us to give a hand to family groups which we have in Community. We named this latest Center *"Harmony of Life"*, to underline the need for harmony within the person, between history and nature, between the individual and society, between conscience and wisdom. Harmony is born within one who above all *"knows"* what love is through experience, within a society and a culture often distracted

and broken, because it overlooks precisely the most precious good, which is love. Animated therefore by such love, many groups and Centers for listening are the first help, the first welcome and orientation for many youngsters who are found in Community. I would like to recall the determining collaboration with the Daughters of Charity in Rome, who placed at our disposition a part of their building for women at Ardena. Other collaborators were found in the center for listening of the Vincentian parish at Tor Sapienza, and in other Vincentian groups. They are present and attentive to the human spirit, something often overlooked by public institutions. Much work is carried out in families of the young people who have suffered such experiences. They are among those most tried families in our society. But, thanks to solidarity, they show to all, that, together with courage, they can meet and resolve problems. From the beginning of such an experience, a phrase that one repeats in Community is this: To love someone means to say to him: you shall not die; to love him in Christ means to give him a complete resurrection.

Father Antonio Felli, a confrere, also worked with me for a year with great love and dedication, directing the spiritual formation of the groups. I surely do not know what I would have done without the help of my brother, Fr George Tagliaferri, a diocesan priest, especially for the administration.

What does this experience teach us: The interest which the community raised in the territory and with public institutions, has convinced me even more how much persons who struggle against their misery and their human poverty can become "*masters*" of life, can say things that count, and be critical consciences in the face of that social mentality which in them has become a motive of such great mistakes and suffering. In fact, being a support for the solution of social and family problems can be very influential in helping persons who laboriously fight and reclaim their dignity. And these are not only words, but strong messages, cried out by those rescued, with the force and the concreteness of their flesh which has suffered.

In a society which capitalizes money and new undertakings, where the most important problems seem to be economic, these youngsters shout that the true problems are those which we carry within ourselves - they are our human poverty, often hidden behind the cloak of self-interest. In the Community one capitalizes - one learns to capitalize gestures of love, deeds of love, concrete love, composed of struggle and sacrifice. New roads open in places where there seemed to be only chaos and solitude. This journey of liberation always has its beginning with small gestures of human fraternity: the first pieces of wood offered on the cold, icy days by a "*drunkard*" of Casamaina, the pasta and oil offered by the old woman to the first three youths of the Community, the parents who furnished them with the first tools for work, the workshop outfitted for working in aluminum by the Vincentian volunteers of Rome, the large building in Trivigliano placed at their disposition by the bishop of Anagni, that

of Castelliri made available to them by the bishop of Sora, Msgr Brandolini, a confrere.

Such solidarity is beautiful and great, because it conquers fear which makes us so egotistical and indifferent; it is like gestures of light amidst such darkness. The same light, the same warmth, spreads through so many youth who relive in Community - light and warmth which they themselves continue to enkindle like a fire that is nourished by their own forces, by their own courage. This happens in the generosity of the person who rises at night to stand alongside the latest arrival from the streets; or in telling the truth to one who because of excessive fear, has always hidden from himself; or in the courage of him who continues to struggle despite difficulties which appear insurmountable.

We still wish - and not just for ourselves - that other hearths of solidarity might be enkindled in our society, so that we can all be warmed and illumined by such a fire - especially whoever suffers most from the greatest egoism.

Father Matthew Tagliaferri

Meetings for Formation and Evaluation of the Journey

MONDAY: Determining objectives together; drawing up work plans.

TUESDAY: 30 Minutes of Meditation (before supper), free evening and TV.

WEDNESDAY: Formator: meeting to face the question - who is ready and willing to grow.

THURSDAY: An evening together - Community songfest.

FRIDAY: Getting to know oneself to become free: formative meeting (after supper)

SATURDAY: To be yourself in the joy of putting it all together: written accounts

SUNDAY: The joy of finding oneself in values that are experienced together (various initiatives).

Principles

1. Respect others with love.
2. Be attentive and wise today in what you do, tomorrow it could even be to your advantage.
3. Learn to deal moderately with all that daily life offers and you will have what is necessary for tomorrow.
4. When darkness is within you and around you, ask for help; trust yourself confidently to the one who is journeying with you.
5. Put your heart in your responsibilities, carry them out well, if you are interested in growing.
6. Freedom means getting to know the motives which inspire your behavior, therefore accept confrontation with others serenely.
7. Always believe in the possibilities of your neighbor, as others believed in yours, when you yourself didn't believe in them.

8. When faced with weighty and difficult situations and you no longer know what to say or do, remember that you can "*choose to love*".
9. You truly grow and mature when you feel able to give rather than receive, understand rather than be understood.
10. Without honesty and sincerity you can not achieve all this and be born again as a person.

(William W. Sheldon, translator)