

# **Testimonies of the Saint Vincent de Paul Society about Central Italy's Earthquake**

**Antonio Gianfico**, National President of the Saint Vincent de Paul Society

Good morning to all, I am Antonio Gianfico and I have the honor of being the National President of the Saint Vincent de Paul Society. Last year, a terrible earthquake that killed 299 people hit areas in central Italy. Damage to homes and infrastructure was enormous.

In the aftermath of the first violent tremor of last year's 24 August earthquake, a solidarity race took off by means of a fundraiser among the Italian Vincentians. Not only that, but many of us, especially those closest to the affected areas, immediately took action, even with small gestures of proximity and support, such as providing linens and basic necessities to those admitted to the Aquila Hospital and, above all, comforting words with the delicacy and love typical of our volunteers.

Meanwhile, offers began to arrive and there was no time to waste. The Saint Vincent de Paul Society decided to direct its efforts toward recovering productive activity and reactivating the economic drive in order to engage more families in reclaiming the territory, warding off the exodus to other places. For this reason, we organized various inspections to gain awareness of the damage and evaluate possible assistance.

Therefore, the first interventions were in support of families transferred to the Adriatic Coast and to the homeless elderly, who were received in some retirement homes. In partnership with other associations, and with the involvement of public, private, and religious institutions, it was decided to finance small, targeted projects, compatible with our modest resources, but sufficiently decisive to get some family productive activities quickly restarted. In that way, some small, prefabricated wooden houses appeared near collapsed houses and unstable barns were repaired and reinforced to allow animals to be sheltered.

A camper was acquired for a needy family, some tractors for those who had to resume cultivating the land. Some head of cattle were purchased for cattle farmers. We contributed to a cheese factory, a butcher shop, a bakery, a pasta factory, a clothing store, honey production, and renting a mobile kitchen. Finally, a sports facility and a multifunctional center are about to be finished in conjunction with other institutions.

I will turn the microphone over to our friends who came to tell us their experiences: Gabriele with his family. When we met him, he had lost his smile and had no prospects. It is a joy for me to see him today, smiling and looking to the future with courage and determination, despite the many difficulties.

**Gabriele Piciacchia** from Accumoli, a hamlet of Amatrice

Good morning, my name is Gabriele. I am here with my wife Sara and with Simone, one of my sons. I am from Accumoli, the epicenter of the 24 August 2016 earthquake. I own a dairy company that, before the earthquake, produced milk. I live with my two sons, Maurizio and Simone, now young men, and with my wife Sara, who is originally from Pescara del Tronto, a village that is known, sadly, for its total destruction and for its 50 dead, many of whom were very dear to her.

That night, when the earth trembled terribly, clocks stopped at 3:36, the time at which we lost 300 lives and everything that had been built in the past centuries. My home collapsed: my old 1866 farmhouse, proudly bought by my grandfather – who emigrated to America – with the savings of his hard work in the coal mines. That night, the roofs of the stables were severely damaged, where about 80 dairy cows were housed.

With the help of my family, I did not allow myself to lose heart. We relied on my small mechanical workshop in order to live and, in the raging bad weather, I continued the work I love so much and for which I gave my all. After the second devastating tremor of 30 October, I had to surrender. Damage to the roofs of the structures had become unsustainable, because the roof above the helpless animals literally was falling apart and we could not jeopardize our lives and theirs.

My beloved Romanian worker, our employee for many years, died of a heart attack out of fear. My family and I had to move to a small old caravan among thousands of problems. The cows, still miraculously unscathed, despite the continuous crumbling, were sold, actually, sold at a loss to a large stable, which, nevertheless, continued to care for them, just as I did and wanted to do.

This choice, although painful for me, guaranteed the safety of my family and saved the cattle from certain death. After I sold my animals, someone pointed out to me that I was wrong, because if I wanted to be compensated for their real value, I should have let them die there under the rubble. But I am a dairy farmer and, as such, I “raise” the animals, with care and respect, as is right, so I have no regret about the decision made, not good on the economic level, but good for me.

Then, thanks to the arrival of a small, well-kept old cabin, donated to us by two fantastic sisters from Friuli, and thanks to groups of volunteers, from the Alpine army and others, all from northern Italy, who positioned it, we managed to stay in the territory. We thus avoided being “deported” to the coast, which none of us wanted to accept, especially our sons, who are now attached to the territory as much as and even more so than previously. Therefore, with the dignity that befits a family and the security that the cottage offered and still offers us, we tried to get started again.

The state did not help us much, at least until now. The red tape of bureaucracy, the inability to confront quickly the effects of this calamity, the weak steps of a slow and complex country where no one succeeds in taking any real responsibility, have made us weaker, more uncertain of the future.

The older of our sons, a bit dispirited, for now is working at jobs with firms outside the area to earn something, while waiting to get back here soon to our business that he also loves and sincerely wants to carry forward.

However, the fraternity and solidarity of Italy showed itself to us: a good, generous, empathetic Italy. Among those helping are the “Saint Vincent de Paul Society” and the “Volunteer Group of Brianza,” which gave us a financial contribution to repair one of the damaged roofs and which also aided us in repurchasing a first part of livestock for this new business.

Now, exactly one year after the earthquake, we assisted with much emotion at the birth of a wonderful calf whom we named “Federico” in honor of Frédéric Ozanam, founder of the Saint Vincent de Paul Society. Federico, a helpless little being, now runs and moos happily in our meadows. Just by observing him, we understood that life always conquers death. Thank God for fraternity and love.

A sincere embrace from my family and me goes to all those who have been lavish and still do all they can for us, hoping that soon many other happy little calves will run next to Federico. For our part, throughout our lives we will try to give back all that has been given to us, with good works toward the most unfortunate and disadvantaged. For now, thanks to all.

The Family of Gabriele, Sara, Maurizio, and Simone

**Antonio Gianfico**

Thank you Gabriele, your words touch us. Now I introduce Oriana and Mauro. When we met them, we immediately thought of Our Lady and Saint Joseph, for they were living in a stable as they had!

**Oriana Girolami** from Sommati, a hamlet of Amatrice

Good morning to all. My name is Oriana. I am with my husband Mauro and we come from Amatrice. On 24 August 2016, we lost many friends, the house where we lived, part of our work activities: the bed and breakfast and the butcher shop. Only the stable was not damaged and, in fact, for eight months my family and I lived there. We made a bedroom, a bathroom, and a kitchen at our own expense.

I remember little of that terrible night, only gazes fixed in emptiness, lost in the maze of pain and fear, all with tears in their eyes. Only Elena, my granddaughter, who was four and a half months old, smiled. She was not aware of anything. She did not realize that she had been awakened in the middle of the night by the tremor, that dust covered her. She did not grasp that she had gone out the window, then to pass onto the roof of the house next door. She was unaware that, in the midst of darkness, dust, screams, and general chaos, she was passed immediately from the hands of her grandfather to those of her cousin, who with a ladder had helped her onto the roof. She did not comprehend anything. Her smile was, is, and always will be my strength to move forward.

That terrible night transformed the laughing Amatrician basin into a valley of death and devastation. For our community there are no words of comfort that serve to heal this wound, which will remain forever imprinted in our hearts. With time, maybe the smiles will come back on our faces and they will remind us of those who are no longer, certainly with a tear, but surely with so much love. It is also for them that we need to rebuild and start again, strong as the mountains that surround us, united as a big family.

We lost our identity, because that tremor destroyed everything we believed was ours forever, but we should not lose strength. I know it has been tough, but gradually we must abandon the thought of that nightmare, embrace hope and start again, because, for now and forever, 2016 will be year zero.

I am here to bear witness to the many gestures of solidarity and kindness that the Italian people have shown to us. Thank you! Special thanks go to the Order of Friars Minor Capuchin and to the Saint Vincent de Paul Society. They were always close to me, both spiritually and materially. They brought my family peace, love, and serenity with their concrete help. Finally, I would like to thank the Holy Father, Pope Francis, for giving voice to those who do not have one.

Thank you all.

**Antonio Gianfico**

Thank you, Oriana, your tenacity and that of Mauro are an example for us all. Now I am particularly happy to have Daniele here, a 28-year-old young man who is not discouraged.

**Daniele Gianfermi** from Norcia

Good morning to all. My name is Daniele and I come from Norcia. I have a companion, Mariangela, and a daughter, Gioia [Joy], joy in every sense whenever I can hold her tight.

The earthquake took away my home, a place of affection, and my work, a place of accomplishment as a man and as father of a family. In spite of everything, one year after the devastating tremors that destroyed Central Italy, I am here to tell you with certainty that the earthquake in our communities **will not have the last word**. We are already protagonists of our rebirth because, although wounded in the soul, we have found ourselves more united and supportive among one another.

I am here to bear witness also to the many gestures of solidarity and KINDNESS that I received and that gave me strength to go forward and to see light in the midst of rubble. I thank the Diocesan Caritas [Catholic Charities] of Spoleto-Norcia and the Saint Vincent de Paul Society. They were close to me in these very difficult months, with delicacy and with great kindness. I felt my hand held and never was left alone.

Before the earthquake, I worked in a butcher shop, but afterwards the owner could no longer guarantee me a job. Being a professional in the processing of cold cuts and cheeses, I decided to buy a van and to go to the gourmet fairs around Italy to sell my products, but also to make those of my land known. The purchase of the refrigerated van, which enabled me to start this new business, was possible thanks to the collaboration between Caritas and the Saint Vincent de Paul Society.

I am putting everything into it, often sacrificing time from my dearest loved ones. I like to be in the midst of people, though not everyone understands at times your distress and the difficulties that you are experiencing. I am still paying installments on a home that is no longer and this often discourages me, but I go on because in my heart I sense the presence and the humanitarian and moral help of all the people who buy our products.

I remain driven by a strong sense of hope. I am still young, but I already have experienced other “earthquakes,” in my life, such as the tragic loss of a brother tired of living. How many existential ruins, behind the death of a dear one, shake your conscience? The doubt of not having done enough grips and consumes you little by little, leaving you with a sense of emptiness that I managed to fill only by making a new family for myself.

From my family and my land I want to start again!

Thank you all!

**Antonio Gianfico**

Thanks Daniele, young men like you are the future of our country!

This experience, unfortunately born of a tragic event, once again has highlighted the great resources of our people, their generosity, the kindness that gives strength and hope, which unites the one who gives and the one who receives, when it is the virtue of Charity that guides our actions.

The Vincentian Charism, which is already 400 years old, teaches us that the great truths and fundamental values that govern our existence have no time, no getting old; rather, they are renewed every time we stretch out our hand to those who suffer, to those who need it even just for comfort, to those poor who are our true masters in life.

Happy Anniversary to all!