

## **To go to the Source, Prayer and Service to the poor.**

The experience of the Community of Sant'Egidio began inside the Catholic Church more than thirties years ago, it is founded on attentive and joyful listening to the Word of the Lord. By this listening the attempt was born and is born every day, to answer the Lord's question: "Where is your brother, Abel?". We try to answer by discovering every day a growing number of brothers, ignored or unknown, close or distant.

The Gospel, which is at the base of our experience, was a word of affection towards today's men and women: from the word came an attitude of respect, but at the same time of a closeness which takes part to their hopes and anguishes: the Gospel was the way to begin and answer: "Yes, I am my brother's guardian!".

The history of the Community of Sant'Egidio is connected to a simple and fundamental intuition that a small group of students coming from a roman high school began to grow at the end of the sixties. This was the intuition: to discover the Gospel as the centre of one's life.

Those were difficult years. In Europe 1968 was at the origin of a great change in the consciences of younger people. This small group of students asked itself what it meant to live a true life. In those days ideologies had a strong appeal with their critical analysis of our society. Italy had changed in a few years: from the poor country it was, similar to the third world, it had started becoming rich. For the first time a generation was growing amongst material wealth. But it was also a generation which was asking itself what to do with its energies, what to do with its life. People spoke about revolution and about conservation. Maybe this was expressed more in the sense of "contradiction" than in "construction". Opposition to politics, to the church, to the educational system, to the western culture. But for us, high school students, the 1968 surge of contradiction met with an important fact: the discovery of the Gospel. Reading the Gospel raised questions. I would say that first of all it saved us from a dramatically ideological approach to reality. To come in touch with the Gospel meant to come in touch with a word which was authentic, not mystified. And from the Gospel another discovery came: the discovery of the poor. Rome, the city of wealth, the city of the Pope, the Capital of Italy was a city which still had many areas still the same as parts of the third world.

The first poor we met were the families of immigrants coming from the south of Italy and living in shantytowns along the Tiber river. Their children, which we taught to read and write, were our first poor friends.

The Gospel and the poor. Then, from the Gospel and from our common work for the poor a friendship was born, a communion which grew stronger also among us. These are the first ingredients, always present in the Community, like the bread and the wine, like the water and the bread. The Gospel, the poor and communion.

Years have passed. Despite our limits and our weakness, listening to the Scripture remains the centre of our fraternity among us and with the poor. The men and the women of Sant'Egidio, in vast majority lay people, leading an ordinary life – with their job, house, family, children – every evening, after having spent part of their day with their poor brothers, gather to listen to the Word of God which is preached in Rome in the Basilica of Santa Maria in Trastevere and in every city and where the community lives around the world.

At Sant'Egidio solidarity has been lived as the sharing of everybody's joys and hopes, grieves and anxieties, but especially the joys, hopes, grieves and anxieties of the poor. Solidarity also meant to feel the hopes and grieves of the other together with him. Solidarity stood, even in the hardest times, on the word of the Gospel. For us solidarity did not imply the desire to become a substitute of the institutions, but to live, simply, beside the poor, to consider them our friends, our brothers, our relatives.

This is the spirit all the members of Sant'Egidio work with, for free: with the immigrants, with the old-aged, with the homeless, with the gypsies, with the prisoners, with psychic-ill people, with AIDS-ill people. Every Community of Sant'Egidio, however small it may be, is characterised by its listening to the Gospel and by its solidarity towards the poor. It is solidarity in the great urban misery, where tiredness for living add to loneliness and isolation as an extra illness.

At the beginning of the world, at the beginning of human history and in the first pages of the Scripture, after the first murder in history, when Cain killed Abel, a question of the Lord resounded: "Where is Abel, your brother?" (Genesis 4,9). Since then this question has travelled through every generation and it is presented to us today: "Where is Abel, your brother?". This is the question the men and the women of our age continue to be asked: "Where is Abel, your brother?", where is your brother who is suffering? Where is your ill brother? Where is your brother who speaks a language different from your own? Where is your poor brother?

It is a question which is a provoking men and women who have forgotten the others, concentrated and worried as they are for themselves. It is a question which entire societies are asked, wealthy peoples, placed in front of those of the third world: "Where is Abel, your brother?".

And the most normal and sadly wide-spread answer is still Cain's. Cain is not the evilest of men, he is simply the one "naturally" concerned with his own interests – and in someone concerned exclusively with his own interests there is always the beginning of a murder – and Cain's is: "Am I my brother's guardian?". What do I have to do with him? Why should I be concerned with him? I have to think about my problems first of all.

On the other side the relationship with one's brother seems a concern of the whole book of the Genesis. Any man's attempt to care only for his own interests always makes one's brother a stranger, even an enemy to be afraid of. The Scripture is very clear in this: to recognise the others as one's brothers is not something that comes natural; only after having met the Lord can there be a full reconciliation with one's brother. To meet the Lord through his Word is the first step to recognise the others as one's own brothers and sisters. It is the first way to answer the Lord's question: "Where is Abel, your brother?". The Gospel will broaden this question even more asking to see one's own brother in an enemy as well.

This solidarity becomes real through the personal meeting with many poor men and women.

Who are the poor? Initially it was the slum children on the outskirts of Rome. These days, it is the elderly, the "new poor" of the Western city. It is also the immigrants, the homeless, the disabled, the prisoners, the mentally ill, the HIV-infected, the children with learning disabilities and the gypsies— anyone, in short, who lives at the neglected margin of the city and who appears, to the eyes of the world, to have nothing to offer it. But the Community knows otherwise: to them the poor are the *anawim*, the favoured of God. They are where they meet Christ. Their friendship with the poor is what nourishes them and protects them from the urban sin of self-assertion.

In the eighties we began to explore the world out of our city. We never planned to create an international movement. We thought we would do something inside Rome. But then the world came to look for us and other communities were born. In Italy, Spain, Belgium and then, afterwards, Russia and Ukraine. Later came Central America, Africa, Indonesia. But how were these communities born? To day there are more than 70 communities, big and small, with approximately 60.000 members. They were born from local people which wanted to live our experience and so they kept alive a bond of communion with us as they tried to live this experience. And so this network of communities was born, this fraternity of communities, extremely different, but united by the same spirit and the same communion.

The world came looking for us. Friends from other parts of the world came looking for us. But the world's problems came looking for us as well. Rome is like a large square for the Christian world, a large meeting place. Christians from all over the world come to Rome. And often they pass by our house. And they leave questions here, problems. This is how we began to be connected to many countries.

In the eighties we got closer and closer to a country, Mozambique. It is a country which was experimenting a difficult dictatorship. But we understood that co-operation meant very little, because there was a war going on in that country. And here there was a discovery which was important for us: that Christians can work for peace. We discovered an energy of peace in this small community of ours. Christians speak a lot about peace, they make appeals for peace, but working for peace is something slightly dirtier, because one has to speak with the ones who wage war. And so, from the beginning of the nineties until 1992 we brought the two delegations to Sant'Egidio, the Mozambican government and the guerrilla which had fought the one against another for 15 years. This war had already cost a million human lives. Negotiations took place for two years at Sant'Egidio and during this time our Community was the official mediator. We discovered we were diplomats and mediators. On October 4<sup>th</sup>, 1992 the peace agreement was signed, in Rome, opening the way to the democratic development of the country. On October 4<sup>th</sup>, 2002 we celebrate the first decade of peace....

This experience was hard work, but interesting for the discovery of a weak strength: the weak strength of Christians. Weak because we had no money, we had no means to make pressure. But strong because we had an energy of peace. For this reason our experience in Mozambique was important. Other similar experiences followed this one: in Guatemala...

But the Community of Sant'Egidio did not become an organisation only concerned with international diplomacy. We never stopped working with the poor of our cities. In his or her everyday life each member of Sant'Egidio does his service to the poor. Even those who broker the peace negotiations. We feel as if the work for peace were in the same line as the work with the poor. Jesus sent us to heal the sick. And aren't the men and women afflicted by war sick people? And the same for the old-aged who have been abandoned. Maybe we Christians still believe too little in true healings.

The Community of Sant'Egidio has become a complex reality, but at the same time it is extremely simple. The only resources are the poor human energies each of us has, made fruitful by meeting the Gospel. We believe it is possible to serve dreams greater than ourselves even with poor or small means. The poverty of the disciple, invited to his or her mission without "gold or silver, not even with coppers for their purses, with no haversack for the journey or spare tunic..." is an invitation to be trustful and ready. "You received without charge, give without charge". In all these years we heard the call to confront ourselves with new challenges without trying to be guaranteed or protected by some organisation or institution.

And so at the beginning of the twentieth century it becomes necessary for a Christian to answer the Lord's question: "Where is your Abel, your brother?". It is necessary to answer through a new culture of solidarity and new relations with the others. In a time when one's ego is deified it is necessary to joyfully reaffirm a theology of the other: "There is more joy in giving than in receiving". This theology of the other becomes a new culture which opposes the violent self-assertion so widely-spread in our contemporary societies, which opposes the "competitiveness" as every action's guiding value.

Christians can begin to develop this theology through the service and the attention to the poor. But the service to the weak does not only have to be "organised" in the best of ways, rather it should be thought of as a sign, as an answer to the Lord's question. The friendly presence beside a man, a woman that suffers, a presence ready to be close to

the sufferance, ready to accompany, heal, comfort. It is not a social activity, it is something more profound. It means to begin to answer to the Lord: "Yes, I am my brother's guardian!". The service to the poor is not a simple social work, it is much more: it is an evangelisation of our age, an evangelisation made of gestures and words.

No institution or welfare state, no matter how well organised they are, can offer friendship and personal relationship to the poor. We have not to let other take care of the people we personally meet. The first step, as we have learnt at Sant'Egidio is to stop and talk to a poor person.

The real challenge for us is to build a personal life in which there is room for gratuitousness, which means giving without a reward. A life in which there is time for others. Voluntary work not only means to work without a salary, it means also to serve willingly, with joy. Nobody can be paid for being a friend!

Anyone of us could say: I am too young, I am too old, I have too many problems to solve. But in our experience no one is so poor with resources, faith and friendship not to be able to help another person. This is living with joy. Getting out of our small world is a great liberation from sadness and the sense of powerlessness. "It is in giving that you receive" becomes real in our life.

We live with our families, in our homes, we work like anybody else, but we try to help.

We are lay, ordinary people who try to live freely their generosity with the poor. Without a rule, like Zaccheus. The rule of Zaccheus is the rule of those who discover they are sinners and freely decide how to repay what they have taken.

If I had to say what the Community of Sant'Egidio is I would say: Sant'Egidio is a small Community that accepts no borders, it does not accept borders between Christians, between religions, it does not accept borders between the rich and the poor and it tries, wherever it can, to build bridges between two separate worlds. Which is our strength? Our strength is the prayer held every evening in our church of Sant'Egidio. We often ask ourselves how to pray. And often we do not know. Confusion, noise, and hurrying prevent us from finding time for prayer and reflection. Sometimes we can hardly find the right words to address to the Lord, as if we were afraid to stop and reflect.

Prayer is the believer's first work. Praying gives us a great strength which could appear useless or weak to human eyes. But prayer is strong indeed: it breaks down walls, fills the valleys, uproots violence, increases mercy. Prayer changes the world, when it is done with faith.

It is almost forty years that we are faithful to this prayer and to listening to the Word of God. This is where our strength comes from and, maybe, our imagination as well. But, above all, this is where the forgiveness for our fears and our limits comes from.