

I would like to present ourselves to you: Eugenio (48 years old) and Elisabeth (40), Secular Franciscans, married since 13 years and the parents of Teresa (12), Sara (11), John Paul (8), Peter (6) and Mary (3). We live in Bollate in the Diocese of Milan. Elisabeth and I married in 2004 and after a little less than two years of marriage we left as missionaries for Venezuela. In 2006 we were sent by the OFS of Italy and the Diocese of Milan as a *fidei donum* missionary family to the Diocese of Guanare (Venezuela) for a socio-pastoral project in collaboration with the Friars Minor Conventual of the Custody of Our Lady of Coromoto. The project was designed to give pastoral leadership to a community without a resident priest (due to a lack of clergy) and the undertaking of some social projects. We lived in the "La Importancia" barrio, a very poor neighborhood -- among the people, sharing their joys and travails. The bishop of Guanare, the friars, the OFS community of Venezuela were all very happy with the years we spent together and our ministry with them.

AN ACCOUNT OF OUR EXPERIENCE

Following our return to Italy and following a thorough discernment we expressed our availability to the Church of Milan to offer our own Diocese an experience of pastoral ministry as a family in collaboration with the local clergy (an ever smaller number) as we lived in the mission and, accepting the invitation of our diocese. Since 4 October 2015 we have been living in the parish house of the Church of St. Joseph the Worker within the larger parish of St. Martin, among the largest in the Diocese of Milan (with 22,460 faithful). In addition to the Church building, the Church of St. Joseph the Worker has some outside sports areas that have not been used for several years and their degraded condition has been attracting groups of young people who are not always engaged in lawful activities.

In April 2015 the elderly priest residing in the parish house at St. Joseph's moved to a home for the elderly and the Diocese was unable to replace him. The parish's Pastoral Council then proposed to the St. Joseph community a pastoral experiment that would provide for our family's involvement in the leadership of this territory following a "missionary model" that the *fidei donum* missionaries (priests and laity) have been using for years in Latin America and Africa. The solutions based on a presence other than that of a priest are often prompted as a response to the lack of priests. The community, however, believes that this situation is not a fallback measure but a conscious choice, with the conviction that the new evangelization also presupposes new methods and new experiments.

In the spirit of poverty that we try to characterize our life-style choices, we do not receive any payment for this ministry' Eugenio continues in his chosen profession. We are committed to instilling our life-style and apostolic activities with evangelical simplicity, supporting ourselves by working, and paying all our own expenses for the running of the parish house. We are giving this service for five years and, with the mutual agreement of the parties, it can be renewed. We have a retired priest (76-years old) who collaborates with us for the celebration of the sacraments.

Just what do we do? We live in space owned by the Church and the Oratory; we have formed a team of volunteers who have helped us make the places usable to the community. Thanks to a contribution from the OFS of Lombardy we have built a playground for the children. Elisabeth is dedicated to listening to the many persons who come knocking on the door looking for a conversation, or for comfort. We have begun a Araldini process, we take care of some of the liturgies and during the Christmas holidays we bless the family homes of the neighborhood. The neighborhood has had a rebirth and the church is once again filled and is a good point of reference for the people of the neighborhood.

One of our objectives is also that of encouraging the faithful to assume a share of the responsibility, helping them to transition from laity to collaborators and sharing responsibility. A strong point of this experience is an awareness that the family lives in the community: from day-care to the market and the workplaces and has the same problems as other families, creating bonds that respond to the necessity that is common to every parish and church today—reestablish contact with humanity in its daily life.

For us it has been a return to the missionary style that we learned in Venezuela where our living in close proximity with our brothers and sisters, especially those in need, became a circle of evangelization in which, in seeking to proclaim Christ, we too were evangelized. The marginal areas of large cities like Milan, for example, places in which the borders between those who are living well and poverty are no longer clear. In the many “existential peripheries” it seems that God is not present. However, to tell the truth, there are many questions about God, and how! However, more often than not, they are not expressed because the priests or religious are no longer considered those special persons who can be asked the “important questions”. There is the risk that those questions are not asked or, worse yet, the answers to those questions come from television or the internet. We are known as being “a traveling church” as living among the people whom we meet in our daily lives. And the people we meet recognize us as a “church” (we hear them refer to us as “*those who went out on mission*”, “*the ones with five children*”, “*the ones they entrusted with a priestless community*”, “*the ones who are Franciscans but not friars or sisters*”). At the same time, however, we are perceived as being their “equals” because like them, we are husband and wife, mother and father, we experience the same joys and the same labors and this creates a sense of proximity which lays a foundation of trust which allows the people to approach us, to try to ask us about God in their daily problems, in the concrete situation of their life.

These and other aspects help us to realize that at this moment in history it is the responsibility of the “seculars” to proclaim the salvation that would otherwise remain closed up within the walls of the churches into which fewer numbers are entering. The church as the place of the Sunday gathering still has its centrality, but today it is not enough to draw people in by “ringing the bells” but by touching their hearts and that form of proclamation also has to be performed by people like all of us, who are living daily life side by side with every man and every woman, sharing to paraphrase the beginning of *Gaudium ed Spes*, the joys and hopes, the sorrows and anguish, especially of the poor and suffering. We are aware that life is more beautiful if it is spent for others and that our children, living in the parish, can already have an experience of an open, solid and positive life. There is the ambition of having a Church that is increasingly fraternal, missionary and ministerial, that “thinks” in a fraternal mode, that in a time of great divisiveness fosters and stimulates the growth of bonds in the neighborhood, among different generations, among families, and among ordained ministers and families.

THE CHARACTERISTICS OF THE EXPERIENCE IN THE DIOCESE OF MILAN

Since 2014 the Diocese of Milan has accepted the challenge of giving “accompaniment” to a group of families from various associations or movements (Secular Franciscan Order, the Mato Grosso Operation, Scouts, the Pope John XXIII Association, Communion and Liberation, the Lay Missionaries of Our Lady of Consolation, *fidei* donum missionary families) and support them in their journey. They have all had a meaningfully lived ecclesial experience and are filled with gratitude for what the Church has given them in their experience, with a desire to “repay” what they have received. We could say that it is the couple has a “vocation” within their vocation to marriage. It is truly wonderful to share this experience with couples who belong to various ecclesial groups, an incredible wealth, which gives us a perception of “being Church” The former Bishop of Milan,

Cardinal Angelo Scola, spoke of “pluriformity in unity.” They are families who chose to live in different parishes throughout the Diocese of Milan to have an experience that might last several years of hospitality, sharing pastoral responsibility with the clergy, of fraternity. To help give a familiar and diverse shape to the parish and the Church. A Church in which vocations – vocations to marriage, to the ordained ministry and religious vocations – nourish and strengthen one another, where together they place themselves at the service of the proclamation of the Gospel.

The family “remains a family” with its own times, rhythm, place. The spouses keep their jobs, not only as a source of income and personal fulfillment, but also as an opportunity to bear witness and proclaim the Good News. They do not rely on the parish for finances. The children live life in the neighborhood, often attending neighborhood schools. It is in this context that we have the most important contacts with those who are removed from parish life. The experience in the parish is for a certain amount of time, with the willingness to continue to live in the parish even when the parish priest is changed.

The family’s first task is to be present “on the ground” in a style of acceptance and openness to those who knock, especially those who are “distant”. Then, based on the needs of the community, they eventually take on some of the tasks of pastoral leadership, not to substitute the laity already in the parish, but to support an increasingly significant lay presence. The priest will find in the family an opportunity to find a family climate: they share some meals each week, times of listening to the Word or prayer, little acts of attention, good neighborliness, fraternal exchange and pastoral cooperation. Each reality *per sé* has the same spirit, but not an identical model. It is different if the priest and the families live “on the same floor” or if, in the case of a pastoral teams, the priests and families live in different parish houses.

Time is slowly yielding some successes: living in the neighborhood, the family has opportunities to proclaim the Gospel and have various perspectives of the territory where the priest doesn’t go: the schools, the sports arenas, playgrounds; and the parish community has an experience of the wealth of this new pastoral technique which helps present an image of a Church that is increasingly ministerial; it helps promote the role and participation of the laity and families in parish life; it invites the people to make the parish a place of relationship rather than one of performing services; the presence of the family helps the priest to imagine a family-friendly parish that takes into consideration real rhythms and the demands it makes. Especially in the more marginalized urban contexts, they can share pastoral activities and the difficulties in meeting an indifferent, suffering, at times degraded, humanity; the resident family allows them to have a living presence and makes the Church present even in parishes without priests.

Without wanting to digress into dreams far from reality, we are convinced that we are in a pastoral “laboratory” that allows our Christian communities to live more the challenge we face in today’s reality in a more serene fashion. (That challenge is) how to manage to remain Christians among the people? How can we continue to incorporate Christian life and faith into daily life? The social changes that have been occurring even faster in recent years, cultural and religious pluralism, the new frontiers open to science and technology – all of these necessitate the Christian communities’ questioning themselves about the ways they are present in society, in order to remain faithful to their commitment to be Church in the places where people love. This experience is helping the Diocese of Milan see how it can be a special place for asking these and other questions. And when an experience raises more questions than answers, it is a sign of the presence of the Holy Spirit. We want to emphasize strongly that this form of ecclesial life not only requires preparation for the laity who choose it, but also priests and bishops who are “new” in their style and mentality.

WHAT THIS EXPERIENCE IS SAYING TO THE OFS

For us Secular Franciscans doors are also being opened for experiencing in our own territories a pastoral involvement as an attractive and prophetic type of service. At the vocational level, we have to become that “missionary disciple” so dear to Pope Francis and so clearly developed in *Evangelii Gaudium*.

In all these situations in which we place ourselves at the service of the local Church, collaboration with the First Order can be fundamental. Today’s social and ecclesial reality is rapidly changing. So too the “geography” of the First Order’s presence with, for example, the closing of many convents (at least in Europe and North America) is in a rapid evolution, often leaving the OFS as the only presence of the Franciscan charism in small towns or big cities. In all these cases, the shared responsibility of the OFS can be a solution to continue offering, in a new and original manner, Gospel-inspired pastoral and social initiatives that “speak” to the hearts of people today. The challenge of these years is that of demonstrating that it is possible to propose an “integrated” pastoral activity in our territories, the fulcrum of which (the common thread of the choice of the Gospel following the example of St. Francis of Assisi) can primarily be the problem of the difficulty of “relationships between the religious and secular life.

Here are some “bites” from our Rule and Constitutions where it seems evident that this experience is in total conformity with what our profession asks of us:

Buried and risen with Christ in Baptism which makes us living members of the Church, and more strongly bonded to her by our profession, we make ourselves witnesses and instruments of the Church’s mission among men, proclaiming Christ by our life and words. Inspired by St. Francis and with him called to rebuild the Church, we commit to living in full communion with the Pope, the Bishops and the priests in a confident and open dialogue of apostolic creativity. (Rule N. 6)

Aware that God wants to make all of us a single people and has made His Church the universal sacrament of salvation, the brothers and sisters commit themselves to a reflection of faith on the Church, her mission in the world today and the role of the lay Franciscans in the Church, accepting the challenges and assuming the responsibilities that this reflection will help them discover. (Art. 14 CC. GG. OFS)

The vocation to “rebuild” the Church must move the brothers and sisters to live sincerely in communion with the particular Church in which they fulfill their own vocation and carry out their apostolic commitment, conscious that it is the Church of Christ at work in the diocese. (Art. 100.1 CC. GG. OFS)

The Secular Franciscans fulfill with dedication the tasks that they are given within the particular Church; they offer help in apostolic activities. (Art. 100.2 CC. GG. OFS)

Those who are called to fulfill the mission of catechists, preside over ecclesial communities or other ministries, as well as sacred ministries, make their own Francis’ love of the Word of God, his faith in those who proclaim it and the great fervor with which he received from the Pope the mission to preach penance. (Art. 17.3 CC. GG. OFS).

We want to conclude with a citation from the French philosopher, Maurice Blondel: “*I want to be like the one who stands outside the sanctuary, pointing out the way to the one who has never entered it.*” In Franciscan terms, we like to think that being outside the sanctuary is an act of minority and pointing out the way an act of humility, knowing quite well that each and every conversion or return to the Lord is God’s work. As Christians and Franciscans who have made a

conscious choice to live on the margins, both the geographical and existential ones, all too often feel that the charism of the Seraphic Father is closed up in defensive ecclesial experiences, a “siege mentality.” On the contrary, the Holy Spirit seems to be suggesting that we have to go out of our certainties and our fruitless habits in order to experience new ways. As Pope Francis puts it, “Tradition means keeping the fire burning, not adoring the ashes.”