

# Experience & Commitment in the light of *Amoris laetitia*

## Dialogue with Maria and Gianni Salerno New Families International Center of the Focolare Movement

### Interview by Barbara and Paolo Rovea

*Maria and Gianni Salerno offer guidance and assistance together with an international team of couples for multiple activities among families. We spoke with them about the lives of families inspired by the spirituality of unity and who are drawing encouragement, inspiration and guidance from Amoris laetitia.*

*The New Families Movement<sup>1</sup> is worldwide. In what ways do the principles reflected and presented in Amoris Laetitia resonate with families?*

There is a great deal of harmony with what appear to be the common threads in *Amoris Laetitia* (AL). The "art of loving" proposed by Chiara Lubich and inspired by the Gospel, brings that "joy of love" so well expressed in chapter four of the exhortation when it is lived in the family. We also find ourselves with the same major challenges outlined in *Amoris laetitia* and we are trying to move along a number of paths to respond to those. Put simply, this signifies a welcoming, respect and openness to every family situation, even the most delicate or engaging without fear of "getting our hands dirty". Yet at the same time, it also signifies faithfulness to the Church and to God's fascinating design on marriage and upon each one of us. It also signifies never ceasing to offer a 'respectful proclamation' of marriage while striving to place ourselves without judgment next to couples and families wherever they are at, clear in our goals but respectful of the time that each person needs.

### Jesus looked at the crowds

*What was the spark that brought about the birth of New Families?*

It was a speech in 1967 by the Focolare foundress, Chiara Lubich, to a group of married focolarini<sup>2</sup>. Chiara spoke of her hopes for the birth of "a vast Movement of married people which would care for the family and all those who in some way are reflected in the great sacrament of marriage". Referring to the Movement's soul and motivating force, she said: "Jesus, who looks at the world, sees the difficulties and has mercy on them. Among all those who constitute this reality (of the family) in our world", she said to the couples present, "I place upon your shoulders those most shattered, those most like Him (Jesus) abandoned ...".

Chiara outlined a program in the light of the many challenges families face. She outlined different ways to engage such as accompanying engaged and newly married couples, couples in crisis, those who were separated, widows, and orphans. She encouraged the formation of families through conferences, congresses, and publications.

## **Fostering public opinion**

*By virtue of the sacrament, Amoris laetitia affirms that families are the main protagonists in the pastoral care of families. What is your experience in this regard?*

The backbone of New Families are couples that are part of the Focolare Movement. More than 10,000 people worldwide meet periodically to help and train (usually through small groups or occasional international congresses or "schools") to then dedicate themselves to various family-related initiatives.

One such initiative is the diverse "family groups" where couples serve as facilitators and "leaven". There are 'spaces' in which experiences and projects can be shared. Here, the living of the Gospel in the family is deepened in the light of the spirituality of unity and the whole human person is helped to grow and develop. Mutual help is given in a spirit of fraternity by sharing one another's needs and difficulties as our own. These groups are not *cliques*, rather, they are places which are open to all those who want to know and share this spirituality in the life of the family.

There are a variety of activities: Celebrations and gatherings for families, social initiatives and projects of solidarity . . . and efforts geared towards offering the media experiences of family life that create new "currents of thought" inspired by universal fraternity and, as Pope Francis said, by a culture of encounter.

The New Families Movement also strives to give its own contribution to pastoral activities in the Church through participation in organizations and activities fostering unity and collaborating with members of other Movements at the local level.

## **A planetary network of families**

*How do you support families in these initiatives?*

Apart from working at the regional level, there are international meetings (usually in Castelgandolfo, Italy or online during the pandemic) with leaders of the New Families Movement and their collaborators: They are beautiful, useful moments to move forward together in this communion of life together by facing and finding solutions to the challenges faced by families. In 2020, after three days online with 800 of these "closest" animators, almost 6,000 people from 65 countries connected on Day 4, and were people who are involved in various ways of serving other families.

## **Engaged and newly married couples**

*In Amoris Laetitia the Pope calls for special attention to be given to marriage preparation . . .*

We feel a particular urgency to dedicate ourselves to young couples in their growth as a couple and in the discernment process about their possible future together. Here, too, there are a number of initiatives: periodic day or half-day gatherings (for dialogue, deepening the understanding of key issues and sharing experiences); personal invitations by other couples

experienced in marriage preparation; international congresses. These are opportunities to step away from the routine of daily life in order to pause and reflect on some of the fundamental issues for a couple's future. There is help from more mature couples, experts, and clergy. For many it also becomes a moment for a deeper personal encounter with God.

### **'Loreto Schools'**

*Do you have other pastoral initiatives that address the emphasis which Amoris laetitia places on 'proclaiming the Gospel of the family today'?*

In some of the Movement's small international little towns – born to bear witness to the possibility of a society based on mutual love – there are also what we call "Loreto Schools"<sup>3</sup>. These 'schools' offer interesting learning opportunities for families, including for those with children. For different periods (a few days to 8-9 months), they come to these "schools" where families can be accommodated so that they can live an experience – usually international – of fraternity and communion together with other families. There, too, it is possible to grow in the spirituality of unity that is at the basis of the New Families Movement.

The first Loreto School was at Loppiano (Florence), Italy in 1982. Since then, 436 families from every continent have participated, including families from other Christian churches and even different faith traditions. Accompaniment is sustained by a group of 4-5 couples residing permanently in Loppiano. Similar Loreto School experiences continue to develop elsewhere in the world such as in Argentina, Brazil and Mexico.

### **Care for the new generations**

*In Amoris laetitia the Holy Father speaks of "communities of families who support one another in their difficulties, their social commitments . . .". Can you also speak about New Families' concrete social initiatives?*

Social initiatives are a "constitutive" part of the work of New Families. We have several associations that put this commitment into practice through international targeted projects of training and solidarity. There is the global non-profit, AFN<sup>4</sup> (Azione Famiglie Nuove) working to provide aid to disadvantaged children by offering 'support at a distance' for more than 90 projects with roughly 9000 children receiving assistance. Through such international projects, AFN is a concrete instrument for fostering good and arriving to "existential peripheries". It also opens possibilities for collaboration with other organizations working in the service of families.

### **Families that are hurting**

*Amoris laetitia speaks to the clear need to "cast light on crises, worries and difficulties" and "accompany people after breakdown and divorce". Do you also have activities in these areas?*

The deep need to embrace the pain of families today urges us to go towards couples in crisis. "Paths of Light" was born in 2009 to assist spouses encountering difficulties and those trying to strengthen their unity. One-week courses were held initially in Loppiano and then later in other European locations.

The tools at the heart of the program include looking at the foundations of the Focolare's spirituality of unity; elements in marital counseling and psychology; the witness of couples who have worked to overcome crises; the dynamics related to rebuilding relations between spouses (time spent in sharing and moments of relaxation/recreation). Topics also include looking at the various phases in the life of couples, man-woman differences, interpersonal communication, tenderness and sexuality, signs of crises, conflicts, and forgiveness. The week-long programs are then reinforced through weekend 'follow-ups' and online adapted programs which were used during the pandemic.

We also welcome and accompany separated persons through specific avenues. Wounded families are particularly in need of love and a space to share their lives, as they are so often weighed down by a great deal of suffering. We have prepared conferences for those dealing with separation and an online course was recently held to train people/couples desiring to accompany separated individuals and couples in difficulty. There were close to 600 people from 47 nations.

### **"No one alone": A vital avenue**

*Are there new horizons that the NF movement feels especially called to dedicate time to?*

In light of the challenges experienced by more and more families, we are giving priority to accompanying families in the Movement from various parts of the world who have children who are homosexual. A new light was developed in this regard, one which helps to ensure that every person feels they are a child who also belongs to an immense family and can experience the Church as a mother embracing everyone. It is just in its initial stages and we are calling the project, "No one alone". It has begun to take shape in Brazil and it will gradually be possible to expand to other countries. It is a sensitive topic, but important for families either directly or indirectly. Humility is also needed as we try to be there for every brother and sister, so they, too, can experience God's love and respond to it (Cfr. AL 250).

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<sup>1</sup> [www.famiglienuove.org](http://www.famiglienuove.org)

<sup>2</sup> Married people who, faithful to their state in life, are members of focolares with a radical choice of the Gospel. <https://www.focolare.org/en/movimento-dei-focolari/scelte-e-impegno/focolarini/>.

<sup>3</sup> The name is inspired by the Shrine of Loreto where the Holy House is venerated, and therefore by the life of the Family of Nazareth.

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.afnonlus.org>