

An Evangelii Gaudium Center project

# Formation for Pastoral Staff

By the editors

There was a joy-filled atmosphere at the "Vinea Mea" Spirituality Center in Loppiano, Italy during the first week of July: It was the first *School for Pastoral Staff* organized by the *Evangelii Gaudium Center* and the Focolare Movement in Italy. Participants came from many Italian regions and represented a beautiful, cross-section of God's People: youth, priests and deacons, married persons, catechists, pastoral administrators, and persons with a 'passion' for the life of the Church community. Right from the beginning, there was a climate of mutual acceptance and openness, and a shared desire to enter more deeply into communion in order to experience authentic relationships. Program participants were urged to live an experience of creating 'space' by which to experience the Spirit's action, expressed in passion and commitment for fostering community, and in the freedom and openness of building relationships through each one's contribution. All were encouraged to recognize with wonderment the actions springing forth from the life of the Gospel.

The program opened with a lesson by Gérard Rossé, *Sophia University* Institute professor and scriptural scholar. Entitled '*I - the other - God*', it laid the scriptural foundation for the rediscovery that *loving one's neighbor, one loves God*, and that *the one who loves God, loves their neighbor*. This is because, Rossé explained, "union with God and fraternal communion are inseparable in the crucified and risen Jesus".

Giuseppe Cardinal Petrocchi, archbishop of L'Aquila (Italy), followed with a talk entitled, '*Becoming Protagonists in Parish and Diocesan Life*'. His words and wisdom were emblematic of the need to "activate synodal sites" whereby concrete practices of synodality can occur, because our ecclesial communities need this communal 'physical therapy'. Cardinal Petrocchi brought participants to a renewed contemplation of the dynamics of Trinitarian life as a model for generating pathways of communion in local communities. Cardinal Petrocchi affirmed: "Just as the Holy Spirit springs forth in the reciprocity between the Father and the Son, Christians, too, need to experience love as a giving of oneself, a welcoming (the other), and a giving of oneself again. In this 'us' there is contained 'something more' that goes beyond the simple sum of all the parts."

A variety of afternoon workshops using different modalities allowed participants to experience team building methods and ways to foster collaborative decision-making. The plurality of pastoral experiences and ecclesial groups present was a source of enrichment in this regard. It was a rediscovery that the 'content' is also the 'method': Listening to one another; going towards the other; finding understandings and answers in the "us". Here, too, Rev. Alessandro Clemenzia clarified that the passage from the "I" to the "us" implies a rupture of our own 'internal' unity and therefore an opening ourselves up in order to find Christ where he is . . . outside ourselves, beyond the walls, in that place where he was crucified. *This gives rise to the Church's missionary dimension and gives meaning to her existence.*

Other issues were also discussed in sessions given by professor Vincenzo Di Pilato entitled, *Life and proclamation of the Gospel*, and Archbishop Vincenzo Zani on, *The Christian Community: Education*. The life of the Word changes in mentalities and actions. But not only: It creates community and continually 'generates' women and men renewed by the Gospel, persons who understand the Word of God must first be lived. As Archbishop Zani repeated, we need a paradigm shift in transmission of the Word and education in general. It's necessary to pass from teaching to learning; to giving not only concepts but needed tools, so others may learn and understand. To avoid becoming too technical -- even if today's world requires being well prepared in order to be effective -- we need to learn *to do*, to live together, and learn *'to be'*. Here, the Archbishop explained that the Focolare Movement, the Work of Mary, can give a contribution because it is an educational project in itself. It contains a charism which helps open us onto new horizons in order to enter the complexities of today's world. It is Mary herself, through her own life, who shows us how to adapt pastoral care to our present times.

A visit to Sophia University Institute also shed light on ways of creating a lifestyle based on the "mysticism of the we" and a "culture of dialogue" so close to Pope Francis' heart. And at the same time, it served as the locale for further conversation around many components of the Focolare Movement's educational projects.

Rooted in these concepts, participants enthusiastically began anew to build living communities in their own local regions. One participant said: "This was not a 'school' but rather a life journey opening before us!" And another: "It was a gymnasium of communion on so many levels, one that continually grew in joy, profundity, and the experience of reciprocity between persons of different ages and vocations." Joint projects also developed, with the scope of finding ways to multiply these pastoral courses for many others, as well as initiating more specific training in pastoral care, or possibly youth ministry. The beautiful, lived reality of those days offered participants opportunities to experience what it means to be living cells of the Church, capable of renewing relationships, so that the Risen Lord's presence may shine forth in every community.

