

Reflections of a parish priest

# Ministering to Families

## Giampietro Baldo

*Father Giampietro Baldo is a diocesan priest in Trent (Italy), and served also at Loppiano in the diocese of Fiesole, where the Bishop entrusted him with pastoral care of families. Fr. Baldo is also involved in a New Families Movement project, Paths of Light<sup>1</sup>, dedicated to accompanying couples in crisis. Here, he opens a door for readers onto his work with couples, in the context of his own pastoral commitment.*

I have been committed to journeying with families since the 1980's. It is a path that has been of great help for me in entering into our own humanity, as a part of the reality of daily life. These experiences have served to broaden my heart and mind.

### The Dreams of Youth today

What kind of family do young adults dream of today? It is no longer the family of the past. They desire more space, more dialogue, and more inclusion in society now. They dream big, but yet encounter many more difficulties than in the past. There are mortgages to pay, few or poorly paid employment opportunities, and communication difficulties.

The task of the Christian community today is to listen first and foremost to their sufferings and their questions. It is a calling to participate closely in their experience and accompany them in moments of crisis with a patient presence and a magnanimous heart.

Years ago, a young woman in the parish regretted that her fiancé wanted to get married only in the town hall because he did not believe in the Church or in priests. But I promised her my presence at a toast to the couples, at the town hall. The fiancé was so amazed by the celebratory toast that I offered for them, that they were married in the church a year later.

### Listening to Stories

Today we encounter many stories of couples, and we cannot judge them simply according to ecclesiastical principles or laws. It is a question of welcoming people who are on a journey, one where there might be great difficulties. Even for Jesus, people were more important than the Sabbath. It is easy to meet with families who are asking for help and seeking a new balance, with families in new unions or those exasperated by silence and emptiness, and those disappointed by a love once dreamed of and then lost. They are diverse stories to listen and enter into, and to reconstruct.

Lately I celebrated two marriages of people whose first marriage was declared null and void. They carry stories of suffering, but also of new discoveries. They are personal stories

and realizations made together. They speak of true conversions, which must be valued in themselves, and for the growth of the whole community.

Another couple instead asked me for a blessing, because they cannot be married in the church due to a previous divorce. But it is a story, too, that reveals God's strong intervention, bringing them together through a life-changing ecclesial journey.

### **Help to understand one another**

There are couples who reach the point of no longer feeling love for one another. It is up to us to help them rediscover what they first experienced when they fell in love, and the strength to start over and go against the current. Two spouses may have originally understood one another despite coming from different cultures, but then difficulties entered forcefully and upset everything. Our task is to share their pain and accompany them in envisioning their future. Sometimes we see it is necessary to accompany these young people through a period of separation, one done with respect for the other, and especially for their children.

After a conversation with one couple, they wrote: "We are very grateful for our meeting yesterday. We felt welcomed, supported, and cared for, and this, despite some moments of awkward silence in sharing everything, it gave us comfort and courage. Thank you."

I also happened to bless two couples according to the indications of the Vatican decree of last year. It is not easy to understand and make people understand that it is not a marriage, but a blessing. But the fruits are greater than expected, because for these couples it is a new encounter with God.

### **It is the community that welcomes**

I follow a group of about twenty young couples, and thirty children. Sometimes we use babysitters during our meetings. Other times, there is instead a beautiful confusion, which then allows the children themselves to integrate with one another as well.

The course for engaged couples in the vicariate is sustained in this moment by eight families, working with thirteen couples. Could that be considered a waste? No, because it is the community that welcomes and becomes a treasure for these young couples. Thus, they do not see and feel only a priest or only one couple, but rather a community that supports and accompanies them. We need communities that are alive, welcoming, and merciful. There is a need for communities that know how to walk with them in their needs, and that become beacons in times of crises.

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<sup>1</sup> See «Ekklesia» 7 (2024/1) n. 22, pp. 37-39.