

The work of Peace and Reconciliation

I am a Claretian missionary, a priest for 57 years. I have been working with the community of Via Gaggio in Lecco for 48 years. This is the experience I have had along with many companions: being involved in the stories of marginalised youth and adults. Here, I present some fragments of our artful work of peace and reconciliation.

I start with two aspects: the place and the people involved. I begin with the stories of young conscientious objectors to military service who involved us in their choice and with whom we embarked on a serious, responsible, and fruitful journey of caring for the most fragile and sowing the seed of self-determination in the region.

It was a different and decisive way of rejecting the various logics of the “System” and promoting responsible choices. It was a way of experiencing patriotism: listening and taking on a part so that it could slowly and decisively change the whole, or at least the greater part of the whole.

The motto was “Peacebuilding”. To build is a personal and collective founding act. It is born of a dream that goes beyond the individual, it is not only defensive but disarming and liberating.

The community of Gaggio becomes aware of this privileged moment that it has to live in and chooses to live it with all its energy. The method is: step by step, day by day, involving the people in vital decision making.

It is a time, we are in the 1980s, of a barrage of proposals, experiences, initiatives throughout Italy. Objections are made and alternative projects are conceived: in living, in politics, in economics, in thoughts, in projects. And we summarise it all - method and way of life - with the word “sharing”.

This peace project finds strength and visibility in the proposal: “imagine your life is shared”. The suggestion of imagining comes from the ambiance of the reality of the youth at the time. They do not subject themselves to mass production, rather networking among citizens, organized groups and institutions are promoted.

In the Gaggio Community, three words shape the imagination: Peace, Tenderness, Participation. These are mottos, projects, experimentation proposed to the youth for their lives, to religious institutions through research workshops, and to regions through youth projects.

For five years now, the Community of Gaggio experiments with welcoming people in a place called Cialvrina, 1700 meters above sea level, facing Monterosa in the town of Gressoney St. Jean.

I present the revolutionary method: young people who have had violent relationships with themselves (drugs and prison) are invited to welcome and be caring to “normal” adolescents and young people. What is the aim? Learning to care for the other.

The three words (peace, tenderness, participation) are the backbone, and based on them we develop a conference attended by several hundred young people from many parts of Italy.

Here again the method is reversed: the young take the floor; experts listen and solicit insights. Two contemplative nuns live with us. Again, what does this journey mean? To educate us in listening to one another which is the basis for the development of peace. The nuns will accompany us for a few years to heal the wounds that all violence carries within itself.

In these years we have walked with thousands of other citizens in marches for peace; in our region, in the Perugia/Assisi; in Genoa, in Rome. To go to demonstrations is to seek the truth, the opposite of lies; not to accept information from the media subservient to interests; it is to commit ourselves to promoting justice and building a civilization of coexistences. The life of the other is more important than mine, the interests of the other must be protected, and I stand guard, I make myself available to redefine the fundamental rights of the person, recognizing their inviolable dignity.

Over the past years we have built and are living in a house we have called “On the Well”; a space in which we do not isolate ourselves from the outside world, but are open for prayer, to welcome and accompany the young and all those in need. A place, not a monument, that serves to initiate processes and not to possess spaces as Pope Francis teaches us.

To have symbolically expanded the spaces of the house and the mosque, and to eat together on the street of the neighbourhood is a seed that sets in motion the longing for the common table and the beauty of being attentive to one another.

Each inhabitant of the house, even for just a few hours, broadens the space of the world and forces us to be open to all. A broad hospitality that characterizes our way of thinking and our life choices. The fact that Jesus lived in Nazareth is not accidental because he took on the style and way of living of the place, but he did not allow himself

to be imprisoned by the cultural logic of the country; he translated and expanded them into a passion for every man.

Don't lose your memory!

I remember what the theologian Bruno Forte says: "Memory without project is only regret. Without a consciousness that is abreast of times, memory and project would be evasion."

I hope that this path in memory will enable us to be creative and responsible for our time.