

THE COMMUNITY OF SANT'EGIDIO

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On the 10th anniversary of the Second Vatican Council, the great theologian Yves Congar described his vision of the future of the Church:

... the future of the Church, in my view, rests greatly on the existence of spiritual communities animated by a great devotion to the Gospel and to evangelical practice, to the practice of love and charity with the greatest liberty and "sympathetic" openness to what is happening in the world. This is the future of the Church. A future which every community realizes, on its part, and therefore in a partial way, certainly: we are all parts, no one in the Church is everything. But the fact that these communities exist and that they are made up of people who are not out of the world, but live within the current of life, seems to me a quite important fact for the future of the Church.¹

Congar felt strongly that communities in the world, "in the current of life," were a vital way for the Church to live out the call of the Council to be in solidarity with the world. One of the communities which he believed was responding to this call was the young lay Community of Sant'Egidio. In fact, it was for Sant'Egidio's magazine "La Nostra Assemblea" that Congar wrote the article which I have quoted above.

Congar was one of the many friends the Community of Sant'Egidio has made since its founding in Rome in 1968 by Andrea Riccardi,

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¹"L'apertura 'simpatICA' della Chiesa al mondo." *La Nostra Assemblea*, II, no. 1 (February 1976), published by the Community of Sant'Egidio, Rome.

who was 18 at the time. But the vast majority of those friends have not been elderly theologians, but rather the poor – gypsies, immigrants, children, the abandoned elderly. From the earliest days of the Community, Riccardi and the first young members that gathered around him found that their quest to live out the Gospel propelled them beyond their zones of comfort into a wider world, especially the world of the poor living in shantytowns on the outskirts of Rome. Riccardi, like many young people at that time, felt a strong call to change the world. But unlike many of his peers, he chose to respond not through political means, but by listening to the Gospel and devoting himself to a life of prayer and service to the poor.

1. The Community of Sant'Egidio

The Community he began now numbers approximately 50,000 members in 70 countries, including communities in Pakistan and Indonesia. Recognized by the Vatican as an international lay public association, Sant'Egidio has become internationally known for its peace work. It was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize for its mediation of a peace accord in 1992 that ended the civil war in Mozambique, and has negotiated many smaller scale peace agreements since then. Sant'Egidio has also been involved in many conflicts in Africa, as well as in Kosovo, the Middle East, and Guatemala; it is sometimes referred as the "UN of Trastevere," after the neighborhood in Rome where it is headquartered.

Yet its self-understanding has relatively little to do with this diplomatic work. Rather, Sant'Egidio is primarily a community of lay people who try to live the gospel through a life of prayer and service to the poor. Members do not live together and have their own jobs and homes and are members of their local parishes, but are committed to communal prayer and to the spiritual discipline of friendship. They take no vows and there is no formal membership process; the charism is shared simply through friendship with other members. Members carry out their work of service on a strictly volunteer basis and there is virtually no paid staff. Yet the community has been able to make a substantial difference in the cities where it is active, by running soup kitchens and small group homes for the elderly and AIDS patients, and providing many services to immigrants and refugees. On a broader scale, it is involved with advocacy on a number of issues such as the rights of elderly and immigrants, and has mounted an international campaign against the death penalty, a cause for which it has collected many millions of signatures. The community also responds to humanitarian

emergencies; after the 2004 tsunami, Sant'Egidio has reconstructed 4 schools and many villages in Tamil Nadu, and continues to sponsor over 500 children through its "long-distance adoption" program. Sant'Egidio also runs DREAM, an award-winning AIDS treatment program in 10 countries in Africa that has benefited more than a million people. Sant'Egidio is recognized by the Vatican as an international lay public association, and its current president (who is elected by a council of representatives from Communities of Sant'Egidio around the world) is Marco Impagliazzo, a professor of history at the University of Perugia.

2. A Lay Vocation in the Church

How did all of this emerge from a group of Italian teenagers who first started meeting in 1968? Riccardi has described the relentless search which he and other members of the community embarked upon to form a community and way of life which would enable them to live the gospel in a way that was relevant to the contemporary world. Conceiving of themselves as "monks in the world," they wanted to remain laypeople. But they wanted to move beyond the rather limited notion of lay vocation they had inherited:

For us, it was hard to believe that you could limit yourself to the family, or that in living in your family, you would be justified in your search for holiness, or in doing your job right, that was enough – when everybody was dying, so many were not able to read and write, where there were those who were abandoned in the hospital, and so on. For us, the idea was ok, many of us will have families, will have jobs, that's not an issue, but that's the beginning of something, and the something was the Community. And the idea that you could have laypeople singing vespers, laypeople doing the prayer every morning before going to school, or laypeople preaching the gospel, was ... a huge departure from the very conception of what constitutes a spiritual life, a religious life, and an experience of the gospel... Congar helped us to say no, the vocation is one, the vocation is living the gospel, is to be holy, to live your life in front of God, the vocation is to be the Church! This was phenomenal, but for us, was a beginning.²

Congar also helped Andrea Riccardi to understand that throughout history, "the Church, in fidelity to a single message, had lived a plurality of historical forms."³ This meant, then, that Sant'Egidio was also free to invent new forms, and so Riccardi and his companions drew upon many traditions to shape their new community – from the

²Interview with Andrea Bartoli, New York, September 25, 2006.

³Montonati, Angelo. *Il sapore dell'utopia: La Comunità di Sant'Egidio*. Saronno: Monti, 1999, p. 14.

Rule of St. Benedict to Franciscan spirituality to an evening prayer based on the liturgy of the hours, and then even to traditions from the wider Church such as Byzantine chant and icons. The Community's sense of history, while freeing, was also humbling, though, because it reminded the members that they were not doing something truly unique. While many of their contemporaries had an almost apocalyptic sense that they were creating religious and political utopias never before seen in the world, Sant'Egidio maintained and continues to maintain that they are merely one avenue for living the gospel in a Church which has offered and will offer many possibilities. Riccardi explains:

I think that the great risk run by community experiences is sectarianism, which leads people to live closed up in themselves and to mistake themselves for the Messiah or to believe that they've been officially draped in the mantle of the Gospel... To avoid that, you have to get to know a wide gamut of experiences and enrich yourself with them. This is one more reason why the Church is beautiful. Father Yves Congar, who came many times to Sant'Egidio and with whom a mutual bond of spiritual brotherhood sprang up, taught us that.⁴

3. Reaching beyond Borders

In describing the Community of Sant'Egidio, one observer has noted its "border-crossing charism." In many ways this is quite accurate, as a key mark of Sant'Egidio has been its openness to friendship and dialogue with a wide variety of people. Austen Ivereigh has explained it in this way:

when John Paul II addressed the Community some years ago, he singled out two of its vital characteristics: on the one hand, its *filoxenia*—its love of the outsider—and on the other its openness to the universal. The Community tries to live 'without walls', conscious of the tendency in both society and in the Church to build a fortress around itself and to create scapegoats. To the temptation of the Church as refuge and the nation as fortress, the Community responds with a counter-logic of concern for the one who is outside and far away.⁵

⁴Andrea Riccardi (interviewed by J. Dominic Durand). *Sant'Egidio, Rome and the World*, London and Maynooth: St. Paul's, 1999, 30.

⁵Austen Ivereigh, "Changing the World Via the Crucified: The Community of Sant'Egidio." Dec. 22, 2005 <http://www.godspy.com/reviews/Changing-the-World-Via-the-Crucified-The-Community-of-Sant-Egidio-by-Austen-Ivereigh.cfm>. Accessed 7/10/2007.

Sant'Egidio has followed the logic of dialogue and of its border-crossing charism into a range of activities far beyond direct service to poor people in Rome. The community members see a close link between their service to the poor nearby, and a contribution to making peace in the world. In the minds of the members, reaching out in dialogue to the "other" who is nearby is the way one begins to reach out across the many barriers in the broader society and even the world. One of the members of the community, Mario Giro, states this in a clear way as he writes about the Community's work in mediating the peace accord in Mozambique in 1992:

An old woman barricades herself in a dilapidated building in the slums of an Italian city. She refuses to open her door. Her neighbours are convinced she's becoming a derelict. A member of the Sant'Egidio community knocks at her door and starts to speak to her. She replies in monosyllables. He leaves but comes back later to continue a dialogue that may go on for months, even a year, until she agrees to open the door and let him in and finally start getting some help. Using these skills in patient communication based on friendship, the community later made contact with a guerrilla chieftain hidden away for years in the heart of Africa, brought him out of his isolation and persuaded him to negotiate instead of fight...

Eventually, the community reluctantly saw it had no choice but to act as a mediator. Lacking experience, it had to learn what to do as it went along. It invented a "language of reconciliation" whose syntax it picked up as a humanitarian organization working for the poor. Sant'Egidio had discovered how to talk to all kinds of people from its work in a wide variety of constantly changing situations in which its members related to the poor, shared their lives, spoke their language, went to the same places they did and regarded them not as welfare cases but as full members of society.⁶

Sant'Egidio's focus on reaching out in dialogue with others includes dialogue with other religions. Deeply moved by the experience of the interreligious prayer for peace held at Assisi in 1989 by Pope John Paul II, the members of the Community have continued to organize a Prayer for Peace in a different city each year (including Barcelona in October 2010). These international meetings are an opportunity for the leaders of many of the world's religions to meet and share their hopes and concerns in the midst of a rapidly globalizing world. Members of each religion pray at separate locations and then all of the leaders in attendance join together in a final ceremony at which they sign a pledge of peace. Sant'Egidio believes that these meetings

⁶Mario Giro, "Sant'Egidio's diplomacy of friendship." *UNESCO Courier*, Jan 2000, 33.

are a testimony to the possibility of peaceful coexistence of religions. Together, they believe that men and women of faith can create a more human world.

4. The Gospel Changes People and Changes the World

As more and more Communities of Sant'Egidio are started in different cities around the world – usually because a few local people express the desire to begin one – they are each marked by these same key characteristics: a commitment to prayer and to communicating the Gospel; a direct involvement in service to the poor (because no one is so poor that they cannot help another); and a life of dialogue with others in the quest for peace among peoples and religions. The original Community in Rome, which remains the largest community in the world, serves as a point of contact and unity for the communities spread all over the world, both large and small. And in every context, members of the Community share the belief that a few friends, devoted to the Gospel, can make a difference in the lives of the poor and help reweave the social fabric of our cities. The story of a woman from Malawi, Jane Gondwe, shows how simple initiatives begun in friendship can accomplish dramatic things. Having been very sick with HIV and after watching her husband die from AIDS, Ms. Gondwe was extremely grateful for the antiretroviral treatment she received from Sant'Egidio's DREAM program, and describes well the spirit in which the program is carried out:

This is why I decided to volunteer to be one of the [DREAM] activists in Malawi. I discovered the importance of being involved with the patients and that it helps achieve good results from the treatment and it gives hope to those who think AIDS is a death sentence. I have found my dignity and now understand the value of life. I have regained my energy and have started looking after my family again. The most important part of my experience has been the friendship with my fellow patients; the medicines alone are not enough. Every patient who comes to the centre finds a friend, I might even say that the patients feel as if they have relatives at our centre. And this is the strength we must never lose, we always have to hold on to friendship and although it certainly cannot substitute for the medicines, it is essential for successful therapy. The patient needs to talk and words are important but he also needs to be listened to. A relationship of respect, availability and friendship is established with the patient. And thanks to both the professional service and the warmth they have received, many patients have overcome their resignation and adhered to the therapy.

Who am I today? First, I have to give my gratitude to the Community of Sant'Egidio for implementing the DREAM program in some parts

of Africa. I am proud to be the first activist in Malawi where this disease goes together with stigma and discrimination and to be able to make my contribution to all the HIV-positive people of the Malawi DREAM Centre. Together with my fellow activists we have founded the movement 'I DREAM' which is made up of people who are seropositive and seronegative. We help the people who come to the DREAM centre for treatment. Together with the other activists of the association, we have created a network which serves many people, and many children through home care visits.

Our work is certainly not restricted to the DREAM centre: we have become the social fabric of our neighborhoods and villages. We are the people who know about the treatment opportunities available to counter the epidemic... We offer the human and psychological support necessary for adherence to drug prescriptions... Many women who had been wounded by exclusion and stigma have discovered that the movement "I DREAM" is a fundamental path towards re-immersion into life, as well as means to recover economically and to restore culture and dignity. They return to work with new meaning and strength and are able to help others. They become active in the transmission of awareness and of good practices, and of a revolution in mentality.⁷

This woman's realization that despite being HIV+, she is called to be active in her community and in helping the poor around her is one which many of us need to hear. For me, as a member of the Community of Sant'Egidio in Boston, my friends in the Community help me to live out the Gospel through my own vocation to prayer and service, in the midst of my life as a professor of theology and a mother of three young children. As I take part in our community's evening prayer (sometimes as the homilist), or visit some of the needy elderly people our community has befriended, or collect signatures on a petition against the death penalty, or invite my students to learn more about the DREAM project, I am often reminded that what Jane calls this "revolution in mentality" is something to which the Gospel calls us all.

⁷Speech of Jane Gondwe, activist of the DREAM Program in Blantyre, Malawi, at the conference "Africa without AIDS - Just a dream?" held in Bonn, Germany, May 20, 2009. http://dream.santegidio.org/public/News/x__newsreadpubNS.asp?IdNews=761&offset=10&Curlang=EN