

Salesian Family Spirituality Days

16 - 19 January 2014

Address by Paolo and Marina Surrentino

Our names are Marina and Paolo, husband and wife since 2002, Salesian Cooperators from Latina. We work with a volunteer association in the area where we live, involved with youth problems especially minors in difficulty, by running an after-school programme, leadership in a family house.

We feel that our married life, amidst all our personal limitations and daily grind, is always being accompanied by the Lord's blessings.

Missionary vocation: God's plan?

As a couple we took on a Salesian missionary experience in Syria in 2005 and in Haiti for 4 months in 2010, immediately after the earthquake.

When we returned from the mission in Haiti we were convinced that the Lord was asking us to start a new life. So we began looking for concrete ways we could start out again and in a definitive way, as a missionary family. But the situation was rather complicated.

Shortly afterwards Marina had to stop completely, and literally, due to a hernia. In this STOP we saw God's will and again we asked ourselves what his plan for us might be. Convinced that our way forward was international mission, but suffering from the fact that we had had no children, we did not want to try the path of adoption.

It had to be the Lord who would decide on that, so in July 2011 we did make a request to National Adoption. Knowing the circumstances of National Adoption in Italy, we were certain that our request would be buried under a mountain of other requests and that we could be at peace and start out again.

Poor and Abandoned Youth: from Facebook to our home

But in November 2011, continuing with our voluntary work in a family house, we were deeply touched by an unforeseen experience. One of the boys, nearly 18 years of age, ran away and nothing more was heard of him. He was a Gypsy boy, but born in Italy, and when he was 7 he saw his father die a violent death. He was placed in a family house away from all his cultural and social traditions. He saw his younger brothers taken from him, adopted, and saw that his mother took less and less interest in him.

We had the "fortune" of finding him through the much-feared FACEBOOK and with authorisation from Social Services and help from our association, PONTIRETI onlus, we suggested to him that he come to our place and set himself up there where we could be with him and help him be self-sufficient in all respects.

When we took him in he was actually an illegal resident before the Italian State: a foreigner, a minor, reported for running away, and all he had was a birth certificate and with nobody else ready to help him gain legal certification!

Since then Roberto is still with us at home, has completed his high school certificate and contrary to what social services predicted, has fitted in perfectly to the social life of the city.

“God’s plans never coincide with human ones”: Mum and Dada

Meanwhile the adoption request had not been buried and had gone as far as the final discussion with an honorary judge. As we had imagined, in this discussion it was already clearly stated that, having Roberto at home was already a difficult and complicating factor, and it would be difficult for the Court to make a decision in favour of our family and disturb the precarious balance by giving us yet another minor at risk.

When we came away from this meeting we were further convinced that our mission had become one of dedicating ourselves unconditionally to Roberto.

When we called our spiritual director, his words stuck in our memory: “God’s plans never coincide with human ones”.

It happened that a week later the Court called us and made an offer! So on 8 June 2012, our tenth wedding anniversary, Angelo arrived by name and in fact. He was 12.

Even this event was not a painless ‘birth’; the various people and specialists we had met before going ahead with Angelo had strongly advised us not to go ahead, but in our hearts as Salesian Cooperators Salesian Fr Attilio Strà’s words rang loudly: “If we Salesians don’t concern ourselves with these kids, who will?”. Despite our limitations, lack of certainty and financial difficulties, for our part we were aware and certain that if Angelo was a gift from the Lord we needed to count on his infallible help and take him into our home unreservedly!

And so, for a year and a half now, Angelo has been with us, fits in nicely at school, has friends, takes part in all the activities and, in the next few days in fact, will become an official part of our family! This is the reality where God has called us to live - as Mum and Dad.

Question for the Rector Major:

As Salesian Cooperator spouses, we have experienced that our family has been called to live the dimension of the Domestic Church as a Domestic Oratory: acceptance, openness to life, education to faith, encounter in love. But just like in the playground at the Oratory, we also have to face up to daily challenges: work, personal and shared needs, arguments. These are challenges that bring deep joy but also real, deep discouragement, sadness and feelings of being useless. They are challenges that risk robbing time and opportunity from spiritual direction, formation and spirituality as a married couple. We are aware that without this latter it becomes difficult for our faith to mature and for us to love unconditionally and freely as did Don Bosco and Mama Margaret. Without this it is always difficult, despite all the love in our hearts, to help these children live, wounded as they are in body and soul by adults incapable of love; it is difficult to make them aware they are loved by us but even more so by their heavenly Father.

In concrete terms how can we find balance and harmonise the various dimensions of growing up for these youngsters, as spouses, parents, Salesian Cooperators, educators, in a society which has pushed the transcendent dimension even further away, the dimension of true human maturity?