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THE FAMILY AND THE NEED FOR SPIRITUALITY. PEOPLE AND EXPERIENCES.

I would like to say thank you for the opportunity of taking part in this meeting. I represent the *"Centro Familiare Casa della Tenerezza"*, based in Perugia-Città della Pieve. The Centre was created ten years ago as "a family of families and individuals", structured as **a community of life** and **of service**, with its own "Life Book" (bylaws) approved by the diocesan Archbishop, which contains the guidelines of its vocation and mission.

As **a life community**, the Centre is currently made up of nine couples (with 29 children), two consecrated laypersons and a presbyter. Each couple and each individual have made a vow, the *vow of tenderness*, as consecration to God-Infinite Tenderness and sign of being part of a community. The components of the community donate 10% of their salaries to the maintenance of the House and the many services provided to hundreds and hundreds of couples that go come to us. Being part of the life community requires devoting time to the community: daily, weekly, monthly, yearly, and the members live in their own homes and are economically independent. The pursuit of a harmonized balance between the autonomy of each family/individual and their dedication to a sharing community represents a challenge to which we intend to answer with testimonies of our lives.

As **a service community**, the Centre is based on four *diakoniae*:

The first *diakonia* is that of *hospitality* and *support* to couples in difficulty and sole spouses. The community welcomes over 150 couples every year for personal and/or small group counselling. Each couple is given at least 10-15 sittings by the community counsellors with suitable advisory methods for rediscovering the marital experience.

The second *diakonia* is the *training* of pastoral operators, engaged couples, married couples and parents. Every year we schedule retreats, weekends, study seminars, with an average of 70-80 couples with children for each event.

The third *diakonia* is that of *theological investigation* through meetings and study seminars on the "great mystery" of marriage and the family. The community also arranges a series of studies on the spirituality of tenderness for engaged couples, married couples, and separated spouses, with information available on the Internet site www.casadellatenerezza.it).

The fourth *diakonia* is that of *communion*, forming a meeting place for those who want to deepen their knowledge of spirituality of tenderness. Today, there are about thirty spiritual groups in different regions of Italy: groups of married couples who live a life of

prayer and training in the service of local churches, using aid from the community and with its support.

The *"Casa della Tenerezza"* tends to become a "school of tenderness": this is the *specific charism*, the objective, the content and the root of its life programme, both for those who are part of the permanent community organisation (the nine couples, two laypersons and the presbyter), or those who support the community such as friends and collaborators, and those who come to the community for help, to take part in the initiatives, or to join us via their "local groups".

As *"Casa di Tenerezza"*, the community researches:

- *Spirituality in praise of the Holy Trinity*, source and homeland of all tenderness: the Father, the donating tenderness; the Son, the receiving tenderness; the Holy Spirit, the sharing tenderness.
- *Sober evangelical tenderness* that resists "the selfish temptations which constantly beset us and provoke competition, careerism, distrust and jealousy". (Nuovo Millennio Ineunte, 43)
- *Positive spirituality*, aiming to enhance every vocation and the seeds of goodness hidden in each one of us as talents to be multiplied in the service of the Church and the world.
- *Spirituality of communion*, considering every brother and sister as "someone who is a part of me" in order to "make us able to share their joys and sufferings, to sense their desires and attend to their needs, to offer them deep and genuine friendship". (NMI 43)

As *"Scuola di Tenerezza"*, the community pledges to make God-Trinity tenderness the *anima mundi*, the core of the real culture of life and love:

- *By teaching the ways to the selection of tenderness as a life plan*, to be implemented in every relationship.
- By *organising training programmes on tenderness* for engaged couples and married couples, for separated spouses and other individual states of life.
- By co-operating with the ecclesiastical community to establish the *rights of children to tenderness*.
- By promoting a *culture of tenderness* as a culture of conviviality and working to integrate the *pathos* of evangelical charity into the families and society.

Becoming samaritans for the family today. A large number of married couples reach the point of separation, without ever having really wanted it, and only because they had not found anyone who would offer them the hope of a possible rebirth. Even though they may appear sudden, such critical situations, in fact, hide problems of affection, resentment and rejections. The marital experience, although *reconciled, confirmed and sanctified* by the sacrament of marriage, remains a fragile experience, as too are fragile the

nature of man and woman, their joining together and their marital pact. *The possibility of a crisis is true for all couples, including believers, nobody can escape this*. At a certain part of their lives, a good 70% of spouses find themselves in a highly delicate phase of their marriage, where they are faced with a crucial question: *should we stay together or should we separate?*

Faced with such a dramatic choice, the problem of these couples is to find a samaritan that will "be touched by this", stop by them and pour some oil of tenderness and wine of hope on their wounds, taking charge of their situation and leading them to the inn of salvation. Now, this is the evangelical horizon to which the *Casa della Tenerezza* aspires; a horizon that has two central requisites: 1) *that of tenderness* as a road of growth towards an authentic, mature affectivity, with the rediscovery of the grace of the sacrament of marriage, concentrating on combining, in unison, work and celebration. 2) the law of the three "C"s: **Compassion / Competence / Community**. *Compassion against all technicality*, making people feel loved and welcomed, and never judged. *Competence against all Buonismo (priggishness)*, avoiding improvisations or dilettantism. *Community against all individualism*, becoming an active expression of a Church that places itself in the service of an injured family, without ever forgetting that it is saving us.

The experience of these ten years has made us become more aware, if there was need to do so, of the urgency of evangelising marriage and the family in light of God's Infinite Tenderness. That natural tenderness that led an engaged couple to celebrate a Christian marriage is *further heightened by the grace of the sacrament and transfigured into a theological tenderness*. A transfiguration that is not a "change to something else" but a rekindling of marital love in the splendour of God's original design and Paschal redemption. The personal tender affection of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit is a gift of the *Kyrios* that assumes the love of the spouses and makes it become a "sacrament" of Trinitarian charity, until it becomes "marital mysticism". This is the path we intend to give to our married couples, calling them to elevated aspirations and to "re-fall" in love every day. This path between "already" and "not yet" implicates having the courage of faith, the steadfastness of charity and the patience of hope, moving towards the full accomplishment of the eschatological marriage. In the meantime, we are all called to make St. Augustine's invitation our own:

Sing like the traveller,
Sing and walk,
Without straying,
Without turning back,
Without looking back.
Here sing in hope,
Up above in the dominion.
This is the alleluia of the road,
Up above is the alleluia of the homeland