

Sant'Egidio. Fifty years of friendship with the poor and commitment to dialogue and Peace

My experience with Sant'Egidio at the international level

A conference at the KULeuven, 6 November 2018

My first personal experience with Sant'Egidio's commitments for peace, dialogue and the poor started just over 20 years ago when I began my diplomatic mission in Algeria in 1996. It was towards the end of the civil conflict in that North African country in which the radical terrorist group the "Islamic Salvation Front" (FIS: Front Islamique de Salut) dominated the scene escalating in kidnappings and assassinations of innocent civilians like the 7 Trappist monks of Tibhirine (les hommes de Dieu) and the Bishop of Oran, H.E. Mgr Pierre Claverie. These are among the 19 martyrs of Christian faith whom Pope Francis decided to be beatified on 8th December 2018 in the Basilica of the Holy Cross in Oran, Algeria.

By that time, the echoes of Sant'Egidio's initiatives of mediation for peace and reconciliation during the Algerian internal conflict were still alive. I happened to reside in the very house where one of their first contact-meetings had taken place a couple of years earlier, before the negotiations moved to the headquarters of Sant'Egidio in Rome. Though that initiative did not achieve at that time the expected end of the bloody civil war, it seems, however, that it served later on as an inspiration for an Algerian politician who had been out of politics for about 20 years, now President Abdelaziz Bouteflika. During the electoral campaign in 1999, that candidate promised reconciliation with the main terrorist group FIS as part of his political programme, and attracted more Algerian voters, contributing to the end of that armed conflict for power that had last about 9 years.

When I made my first journey back to Rome, one of the major actors in that Algerian mediation, Prof. Marco Impagliazzo (who is now the President of Sant'Egidio since 2003), invited me to visit for the first time the headquarters of Sant'Egidio, in Trastevere. I first of all participated in a well animated evening prayer of the Vespers with many professors, University students, and other members and sympathizers who gather daily in the beautiful Basilica of Santa Maria in Trastevere from different corners of Rome. I learnt from that visit that the failure of the Algerian mediation was partly due to the fact that Sant'Egidio had not yet taken root in Algeria but depended only on sporadic visits to the country. Mediation demands a deep knowledge of the situation on the ground and the real aspirations of the conflicting parties.

However, that fragile Algerian peace agreement did not mar the successful peace agreement signed earlier by representatives of RENAMO guerrillas and the Mozambican President Joaquim Chissano which ended the civil war in Mozambique, thanks to the mediation of Sant'Egidio. The involvement of this community in peace-making talks in Trastevere raised questions if Sant'Egidio were part of the Vatican Secretariat for the Public Affairs of the Church? a United Nations agent of Trastevere? or an agent of the Italian government for peace negotiations in developing countries? Sant'Egidio is not that; it is just a community of committed men and women founded by a layman, Andrea Riccardi, inspired by the Christian faith and principles. To what I have witnessed, the field of activities of this community is not restricted to peace-negotiations and mediation between terrorist groups and political authorities. It has a very wide range of humanitarian concern for the poor, the sick, migrants, refugees, prisoners, etc... In short, this community is a voice of the voiceless!

My encounter with members of Sant'Egidio community in Madagascar (2004 – 2010) and in Nigeria (2010- 2016) revealed to me another image of this movement based in Trastevere: the humanitarian assistance to improve living conditions of prisoners in jails especially in the extreme South of that big Island of Madagascar, in Tulear. Christmas celebrations and better Christmas meals were on their annual program; and these were very much appreciated by both the inmates and the prison security officers and personnel. In Antananarive, I also visited a centre run by Sant'Egidio volunteers looking after children of single mothers who were undergoing prison punishments or orphans.

My contacts with Sant'Egidio during my mission later on in Nigeria began when a representative of the Belgian Brunch, Prof. Jan de Volder, paid me a courtesy visit during one of his regular visits to the young group of the community being formed in that West African country. In a country marked by a very strong presence of both Muslims and Christians – (even radical groups) -, the group of young men and women, mostly University students from all over Nigeria, were initiated particularly in peace making through interreligious dialogue, mutual tolerance and humanitarian assistance. Besides the moments of prayer to which I was sometimes invited, the community motivated donors and friends to contribute to a Christmas meal and celebration which they used to organize for the poor and internal refugees of Boko Haram in Abuja and some other cities.

In Belgium, I was particularly impressed when I visited Sant'Egidio's headquarters in Antwerp. Migrants are taken care of, refugees approved by

the government are welcome and integrated, the poor without fixed residence are catalogued and assured of a breakfast and a midday meal; and their health needs and challenges are assumed gratis by volunteering doctors and nurses on fixed days of the week. In our age of growing individualism and indifference, the activities of Sant'Egidio can really remind us of the famous classic questions: *"Where is your brother?" "Am I my brother's keeper?"* and *"Who is my neighbour?"* (Gen. 4: 9; Lk 10: 29").

I noticed also in Antwerp what I think is the secret behind the activities of the communities of Sant'Egidio. They work for peace and help to resolve conflicts, bringing peoples together through mediation and dialogue; they are concerned with the humanitarian solution of refugee-problems; they have at heart the sufferings of the poor and giving hope to AIDS/HIV patients and prisoners. It is not just the professional expertise of each member and volunteer that counts. The motivation of their activities lies elsewhere. It is sure that Sant'Egidio members do not attend courses at the Vatican diplomatic Academy or necessarily frequent specialized institutes for conflict resolution. The community of Sant'Egidio counts much on love, faith and prayer; and especially prayer. Prof. Andrea Riccardi who founded this community when he was a young University student aged only 18 during the famous period of change and rise of new ideologies that brought about the rise of many youth protestations in Europe in 1968, saw that prayer for peace, for the sick and for the poor, reflecting on the Gospels was the way. He proposed a type of prayer life that suites public professionals in society and families, a prayer that is based on daily meditation on the Word of God especially the Gospels and Psalms. In the Antwerp centre of Sant'Egidio, I saw that the members and volunteers of Sant'Egidio have a private chapel upstairs, but for practical reasons, they invite the public that desires to join them in the Church of St. Charles Borromeo, just as it is done for the daily evening prayer in the Basilica of Santa Maria in Trastevere in Rome.

I can truly think that the canonization of Pope Paul VI which took place in Rome last October 14th is also a great sign for Sant'Egidio community founded during his Pontificate. It is Paul VI who said in December 1975, seven years after the foundation of Sant'Egidio (Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Nuntiandi*) : *"Modern man listens more willingly to witnesses than to teachers, and if he does listen to teachers, it is because they are witnesses"* Perhaps, he was mysteriously referring to your charism, your way of testimony, your love of Our Lord who is suffering, ignored and often in danger all over the world.

Let me end my address with the words of the founder of the community of Sant'Egidio, in a book published this year 2018, with the title "*Tutto può Cambiare*" (Everything can change): He says: "If you say that you want to know the community (of Sant'Egidio), I suggest to you: come to the evening prayer." (*Andrea Riccardi & Massimo Naro, Tutto può cambiare, Ed. San Paolo 2018, p. 31*).

Congratulations for your golden jubilee and for your wonderful humanitarian efforts!

+Archbishop Augustine Kasujja
Apostolic Nuncio