

WORKSHEET 9 - SUPPLEMENTARY TEXTS

9. Imitating God: we desire to be like Him

*“The experience of forgiveness, of mercy, that changes the features of our life, makes us want to do good” (Worksheet 9). The testimony of Carlo Castagna, recounted in *Tracce* a few years ago, helps us to understand how forgiveness is not the outcome of a heroic effort, but arises in the context of experiences of good that you have received in your life.*

In this way I discovered the power of forgiveness*

One evening in 2006, CARLO CASTAGNA lost his wife Paola, daughter Raffaella and grandson Youssef, victims of the homicidal madness of their neighbors. We asked him what has changed in the four years since then, and he spoke of faith, work, prayer, and an unexpected joy, stronger than desperation. “Because where pain abounds, grace overflows. I’ve seen it...”

On December 11, 2006, in an apartment of a renovated court in the center of Erba, Italy, Paola, Raffaella and two-year-old Youssef were stabbed to death by their neighbors, the husband and wife Olindo Romano and Rosa Bazzi, who then burned their corpses. As the couple fled down the building stairwell they came upon two neighbors. Valeria Cherubini was killed with a knife wound to the throat, while her husband, Mario Frigerio, survived because they believed him dead. When he woke from a coma, he revealed the names of the assassins. The trial that took place over next three years demonstrated that the premeditated massacre was committed for paltry reasons of envy and stored up resentment, perhaps an element of psychosis. The couple was condemned to life in prison. That December evening, in the face of the slaughter, Carlo Castagna chose the road of forgiveness, and four years later he is still travelling it.

You didn’t know the names of the murderers; you were under the glare of the television news reporters, the press, the investigators, and you said, “I forgive them.” Why?

I didn’t decide to forgive. I’m a poor wretch. What kind of forgiveness could I ever grant? Carlo Castagna, the man I am, would have grabbed his rifle that day to settle the score. Instead, it was a grace that things did not happen that way. Paola’s mother Lidia helped me. As soon as it happened, I ran to her. She already knew everything because her grandchildren had told her. She embraced me and told me, “Carlo, Carlo... We have to ask the Lord for the courage to stretch ourselves out on the Cross, like Him.” That is the source of forgiveness. I could’ve harbored hatred for the rest of my life, and sought revenge. And yet I am a wretch too, and I, too, make mistakes. But as Mamma Lidia says, how could I ever pray the *Our Father* again without having forgiven the murderers?

Your forgiveness immediately scandalized people. It wasn’t understood, and many labelled it as a sentimental reaction of the moment. What do you say, four years later?

What reaction of the moment? I’ve already said it: Carlo Castagna would’ve reacted differently. In any case, forgiveness remains every day in the little things. We are a simple family, Christians, with the sense of good and evil. Certainly, my faith matured in my marriage with Paola, reciting Morning Prayer together every day, going to Mass, receiving the sacrament of Confession. They’re all things that were not lacking and do not lack in our life. I grew up in the shadow of the church steeple. My grandmother Eufemia knew all the Latin prayers by heart. Maybe she didn’t know what they meant, but she had great faith, very solid. And then there were the priests and nuns who always accompanied me. I think of Fr. Giovanni, who’s a stupendous person, and the other friends I talk with daily. We often go out to eat something together and at table we have deep and very beautiful conversations. Two days after the massacre I resumed going to daily Mass. I told my two daughters: starting tomorrow I’m coming to work at nine, because first I’m going to Mass. And I still do so today. But the true support of my life was Paola, little Paola. »

* Carlo Castagna “Così ho scoperto la forza del perdono,” interview by M.A. Simi, *Tracce*, n. 7/2010, pp. 52-55.

» You spoke of a faith that matured through your marriage...

In our years together we went through a lot. But even when she was deeply troubled, she never crumbled. When Raffaella decided to be with Azouz, this Tunisian young man who showed up from who knows where, it was painful for us. We knew that he wasn't quite right, and you desire the best for your daughter, right? But Paola always reminded me about the role of Providence. "Carlo, Providence will take care of it, calm down," she would tell me. I was boiling inside, you know, as a father. But women keep everything inside, in their heart, and suffer much more than we do. Once, during Morning Prayers, Paola started crying. Raffaella had just told her that she was going to marry Azouz. We tried to reason with our daughter, but to no avail. So after we were with her her, and she remained so intransigent, we went to kneel in church for evening adoration. That's the way Paola was. Then the newspapers wrote all sorts of things, that my wife and I had distanced ourselves from Raffaella because of her choices, and many other mean things, none of which were true. We prayed every day for her and entrusted her to Our Lady.

A month after the massacre, the names of those responsible were revealed. They were your neighbors. On November 26, 2008 the Senior Criminal Court of Como condemned them to life in prison. The sentence was reconfirmed on April 20, 1010 by the Milan Appellate Court. The images of the couple chuckling in the defendant's box were seen all over Italy. What were you thinking as you looked at them?

It was difficult to look them in the face. As a father, husband and grandfather of the victims I had to look at the crime scene photographs and listen to the reconstruction of the facts by the Parma investigators. However, every day Mamma Lidia and I pray for the conversion of their hearts. Certainly, there is justice. They have to pay for what they did. But we should never forget that there is human justice, and it is right that they should be sentenced to life in prison, but there is also divine justice. We pray for their repentance, for their change of heart. I am convinced that where pain abounds, grace overflows. In my life I have seen this. This is how I can say – and don't think I'm crazy – that pain becomes joy. Not desperation, but joy.

Recently the Pope spoke about the pedofilia scandal in the Church. Another great example of forgiveness given and received...

Our Pope... I think both are terrible crimes, I mean, what Rosy and Olindo did and also what certain priests did. But the Pope was truly a father. He forgave and embraced everyone, the victims, but also the sinners, because there, as it was for Olindo and Rosy, there was the action of the devil, and so the good has to be reaffirmed forcefully, every day.

What do your sons Pietro and Beppe say about this position?

Let's put it this way: they're thirty years younger than I am. They haven't forgiven, but they've assured me that they don't bear hatred or desire revenge. It's difficult for them. For me and for Mamma Lidia it's different, because death has touched our lives many times. I lost my mother when I was five months old, under friendly fire of the English. But my father rolled up his sleeves and got on with life. He re-married and built this beautiful business, and I've grown up well nourished, can't you see? (*laughing*)

You show that forgiveness is always possible for oneself and for others, and that even after experiencing such great pain, it's possible to continue living "with joy," as you said before...

Many people were amazed in the course of these years. They would say, "But that fellow there should've wanted to get revenge, but instead he forgives..." But I'm not alone here. There are my sons and grandchildren. I have a very beautiful job and many friends. Yesterday I was at the priestly ordination of one of them, an adult vocation. I'm surrounded by wonderful people. And the truth is that for me, Paola, Raffaella and Youssef are present like they were before, not physically, of course, but in the Communion of Saints that I had heard spoken of so often before. The pain is there, and often my eyes get misty. But I didn't want to keep, I don't know, the little shoes of the boy or Raffaella's objects. I don't need a pair of shoes to cry over, understand? Even when Azouz asked to have them buried in Tunisia, I didn't feel like objecting. There's no use arguing, and I'm sure that in any case they're in the home of our Good Father in Paradise. We walk together toward the goal. In the meantime I'm here, and I'm not sitting around twiddling my thumbs. Do you know what Paola's favorite Psalm was? Number 84. "They are happy, whose strength is in you, in whose hearts are the roads to Zion."