

A Centre of formation for families “ SCUOLA LORETO”.

Alberto Zurlo.*

1. The aim.

The aim of this brief communication regards “Scuola Loreto”, an information Centre for the families of the Focolare Movement.

In this school, periodic residential courses are held. This makes it possible to observe the activities promoted and the relationships that develop, internally as well as externally. By reading the contents and dynamics of this small “social laboratory”, so original when one considers the great diversity of the families that participate therein, we will try to eventually find the factors and conditions of micro-social innovation. Particular attention will also be given to the possibility of creating a permanent system of research and experience related to the social function of the family. The analysis of the different cases and situations that the Scuola Loreto presents, may lead to the identification of elements useful for the growth and development of the natural functions of a “social mediator” of the family.

The Scuola Loreto was founded to put into action adequate strategies for a marked sensibilisation of the family in its role as protagonist and propagator of a culture of responsibility and interdependence. There were two specific aspects of this experience: the internationality that favors the opening up and osmosis among different cultures; the “full time” immersion in an environment the search for dialogue is a daily commitment.

It is difficult, in a few lines, to give an exhaustive description of such a complex gathering even from a psychological point of view.

The scientific material available for a more profound analysis is still partially being gathered. Moreover, there is no specific bibliography on the subject.

Notwithstanding, some summing up and some partial considerations can be formulated on the basis of:

- some observations made on the place,
- interviews of the protagonists of the School;
- a questionnaire proposed to the families of last year's studies;
- conversations with experts up to date with the progress of the School.

This brief study on some aspects of the universe-family, is carried out according to a multidisciplinary methodology aimed at the “we” of the family group, at its subjective dimension as a couple. These assumptions require naturally, more complex selections that go beyond “the individual-psychologist”. Consequently the work is directed at the understanding of the persons in the couple and of the actions of the persons as a couple. It takes care to interpret the actions and the

* Instructor and expert in legal and economic formation.

interactions as expressive manifestations, representative not so much of “individuals”, but of “couples” as a single subject, and amongst couples, as groups, that act and interact as couples.

2. THE STORY.

Born in 1943, the Focolare Movement and, with it, The New Family Movement which is its most developed branch, has seen in these past years quite a widespread and capillary diffusion.

A little more than twenty years, in 1982, the Scuola Loreto was launched. It answered the pressing need, felt by many families all over the world, for an adequate place for the formation and co-habitation of families from the most varied nations and cultures.

With little resources, supported by international solidarity amongst the families of the Movement, they restored and rebuilt some ruined farmhouses on a hill in the region of Loppiano – a locality administered by Incisa Val d’Arno, a step away from Florence.

The locality of Loppiano had already been chosen since 1964 to become the first international Cittadella – or small city - of the Focolare Movement. The presence of the new School represented a later development.

It gave rise to an original laboratory of interpersonal relationships, of new models of living together within the families, innovative relations between families, and other sectors of the Cittadella. Consequently educational models and behavioral patterns arose, able to face the multi-faceted problems that assail the fundamental cell of society in every part of the world.

Families experience a visit varying from a few weeks to months, creating an influx of arrivals and departures of interest to all nations. Above all, its diversities makes the school of Loreto, a unique laboratory of its kind.

The family, in itself, is already an entity which is characterized by the cohabitation of subjects of constitutively different types - in gender, in age, who, in a certain sense, find in their reciprocal diversity, the basic aim of their union. In the Loreto school one finds an extraordinary concentration of diversity amongst the families: different cultures, different languages, different religions, different social and political grouping, different levels of education, different ages, different habits whether linked to climate or nutrition.

News of the richness of these experiences, thanks, also, to theses families protagonists of the School, has reached different countries. They were the reason for the progressive increase in the demand for participation, so much so,

that it has led the persons responsible in the Movement to restore other buildings adjacent to the first ones.

3. Some Quantitative Data.

It all began, in 1982/83 with 5 families from 4 nations.

In 2003/04, there were 6 families living there permanently, and 11 that stayed there for the whole scholastic period, about 10 months from September to June. During the holiday months, July and August, the apartments were occupied by 15 other families for short periods, to rest, study, work and formation.

Each year the families present at the school, occupy all the houses available; nowadays, the demand for participation is always above the number of persons that the School can take. At the moment there are 17 apartments, with a total of 80 beds. The residential area of the Scuola Loreto is made up of 4 groups of buildings:

- the first complex houses 4 apartments, of which one is now used as a kindergarten, a nursery and a play-room for the children and it is mainly used while parents are having lessons. Next to the school, besides the apartments, is a hall with about 120 places (a church of the year 1200 which is no longer in use).
 - The second group of buildings is made up of 5 apartments used as lodgings for the families.
 - The third group of buildings is made up of the school premises (secretary's office, congress hall, booths for translation, small halls, service premises and restaurant), and of three different apartments for the families.
 - The fourth group is composed of 5 different apartments and a play-room.
- There are 10 cars available for the *family/students* of the school, making it possible for a family, to move from one place to the other, when necessary.

4. THE ORGANIZATION.

The ten/twelve families, guests of the School are helped in different ways by four families living permanently near the Scuola Loreto.

These "permanent" families, voluntarily, in cooperation with other families, external to the School, live in the 4 residential groups of buildings of the School. During the year they are there to help, with an intense, careful attitude, the families that gradually arrive. The preparatory work begins months before the arrivals, above all for the families that come from different States and Continents. These are some examples of the work done by the permanent families for the School families:

- the teaching of Italian, translations during lessons and other meetings;

- technical bureaucratic assistance, for documents, permits, visas, passports;
- medical-sanitary assistance, especially for children;
- assistance for the scholastic admittance of the children in relevant public schools;
- help in the management of the house, clothes, food, transport etc.;
- help in finding simple working activity for parents so that each family can support itself;
- helping the parents fit in the school , and participate in the lessons;
- help in other activities, religious, social, recreational, cultural, free time.

5. DIDACTICS.

The management of the didactic activity of the schools merits to be mentioned: it consists of: 14 study themes; 180 hours for lessons; a teaching body of 16 teachers coming from various European cities, who stay at the school temporarily, for one or more days, depending on the duration of the lessons. Even the teaching body works gratuitously.

During the year, the School families, participate in the local congresses, at the international cittadella, or at a regional or national level, giving their contribution of ideas and culture. Through the narration of their experiences, they are elaborate models of the family and amongst families.

After twenty years of activity the necessity was felt to multiply and facilitate the entrance of more families to this rich social and cultural richness that has been formed in time.

In 2004 the "Family Point" was born in the Scuola Loreto - a formative course of 5 years, made up of annual modules of 40 hours, carried out during the weekend, open to persons and families wishing to become competent in helping with relations in the world of the family.

The project, based on the direct involvement of the participants, is supported by the contribution of the university teachers, of expert teachers of the Scuola Loreto and of the families of the residential course.

6. THE CHARACTERISTICS OF THE SCHOOL FAMILIES.

It is calculated, that from the foundation of the Scuola Loreto to this day, 1300 families have participated , for varying periods.

In 2004, the 9 families who stayed for the whole year had between them 24 children. Two came from South America, two from North America, two from Africa, one from Asia, one from East Europe and one from Italy.

- In 2003, 12 families came: 5 from 5 different European countries, 4 from 4 different states of South America, one from Oceania, one from Asia, one from Africa. And they had 12 children.
- In 2002 10 families came: 5 from South America, 2 from Asia, 2 from Europe, one from Oceania. And they had 26 children.

7. THE MOTIVATION QUESTION.

One knows that, normally, social phenomena are asserted, are maintained in time, develop etc. only, if there exists, as a base of the phenomena, valid aims that urge the subjects - in our case the families – to be consistent in their behaviour

Therefore a question spontaneously comes to the fore:

What attracts families, so different amongst themselves, to take part in the life of the School and what urges them to leave behind their own routine, their own security to face problems, even big ones, including heavy economic risks?

In trying to give the first answer to this query one can consider the following :

1. Motives of an “extrinsic” type, that have to do with an economic type of satisfaction, cultural, or simply the urge to gratify the wish for novelty or adventure, are to be immediately excluded, since the stakes are high, even from the economic point of view. The difficulties when transferring a family for a whole year, will not be compensated not even by the good things one learns on the cultural level. Even the wish for novelty vanishes at the thought that, with the family, with children, to go from one place to the other, is no joke.
2. Therefore to try to understand the reason why the families of the School do so, one must look at the “intrinsic” type of motives, that is, those which do not aim at a reward of the “extrinsic” type. As Vittorio Pelligra affirms, in his recent writing: “In fact, we can think of many other types of activity, where “doing” the activity itself is at least more important, to motivate the subject, than the extrinsic results it produces”¹.
3. What seems to be the specific characteristic in the behaviour of the families is, that they normally have “intrinsic” motivations. In fact, these motivations are responsible for the majority of the actions that are taken in the internal family nucleus.
4. The “intrinsic” motive, (e.g. one goes for a walk, not to go from one place to the other or to go along a road, but, because the simple fact of walking up and down, is in itself, useful) is probably even a type of motivation that keeps the “permanent” families at the Scuola Loreto there, notwithstanding the grinding, extra “care-work” generated by the presence of the guest families.
5. It is probably, an “intrinsic” motive that brings the teachers from all over Europe to teach; in fact it seems that it is a satisfaction to participate in the work of the School, the reward that gratifies them.

¹ V. Pelligra, *Quando il denaro impoverisce*, in “Economia di Comunione”, 1 (2004), p. 19.

8. “INTRINSIC’ MOTIVES OF THE FAMILIES.

From the answers of a questionnaire, given to a specimen of the families, it results, that the motives that have urged the families to leave their proper homes and come to the Scuola Loreto, are all the result of self-consciousness as a family. Some of the expressions used in the questionnaire are:

- the willingness to know oneself;
- the willingness to be conscious of one’s proper role in the family;
- the willingness to grow as a family;
- the willingness to be conscious in the field of family life;
- the willingness to improve interpersonal relationships in the family;
- to grow as a couple and with the children.

A second aspect, that comes to the fore, from the answers given, is that this better living, as a family, is not pursued for itself, narcissistically, but it is aimed to become a better person, so that one can help other families in the fields:

- of education;
- of communication;
- of education of the world
- of inculturation and dialogue.

All these fields are linked in their inter-independent dimensions, for a useful searching of ways, that can result in universal reciprocity.

9. THE PROBLEMS BEFORE ARRIVING AT THE SCHOOL.

The problems encountered by the families when moving from their original countries to the School, as resulting from the questionnaire, in order of frequency and importance are:

- The economic aspect of work is surely the first and most common;
- the language (obviously, for all non-Italians), a problem that has generated difficulties of different degrees, depending on the family and on the languages spoken;
- the difficulties linked with the transfer of children;
- for some families, it’s passports, not to mention, the long and tiring voyages (some have to fly for days).

10. PROBLEMS DURING SCHOOL ATTENDANCE.

The problems encountered during the ten months of school are:

- of communicating with others because of the language; this applies to both parents and children;
- the different cultures, time tables, different methods of education and the care of children;

- initial difficulty in the scholastic placing of the children;
- tiredness, above all in the first period because of acclimatization;
- discomfort, because of the building structures and of the services: e.g. excavated streets, shops and schools far away, etc.

11. SOLUTIONS TO THE PROBLEMS ENCOUNTERED BY THE FAMILIES.

- **To solve the working problem**, normally, after having established a good relationship of faith and trust with their bosses at their place of work, the families have applied for a year's leave without pay; some families, in order to leave, have left their place of work, and when they returned had to look for another job.
- **Regarding the economic problem**, some families have budgeted their income and expenditure, in the years preceding their departure so that they could save money for the School period. Others had to have two jobs to save money; others, actually came to the point of selling important items, like the car or even the house; others even borrowed the money. In many cases, what was important was the solidarity of the families in the city of origin.
- **To tackle the language problem**, foreign families attended with great commitment the specific courses and they studied, in all the free moments even during the night, learning Italian, quickly and well, depending on the language of the place of origin and on their personal ability (many showed gratitude for the help received and satisfaction at the obtained results). The effort to listen and understand the others, even if the language and the culture is different, has considerably increased self respect and the possibility of dialogue.
- **The problem of detachment from their places of origin**, has been resolved by communication in the family itself, and with the other families and, by letters, e-mail, and telephone, with the persons of the country of origin (relatives, friends, the children's teachers, work colleagues). This problem of detachment has been compensated by the many new and profound friendships made and by the great self enrichment received by getting to know families a lot different from themselves.
- **The question of different cultures**, that during the School months have been the cause of a lot of difficulties, especially for some families who had to adapt themselves to a different lifestyle and to new ways of caring for their children, has been solved by a type of a continuous training, *a school in the School*, as revealed by the questionnaire, by:
 - understanding the other family's culture, giving them space;
 - to reconsider one's one concept in relation to others';
 - to compare openly one's position;
 - to dialogue in a frank way;
 - to know how to suppress one's desire to immediately affirm one's idea.
- **The general problems in housing shortage** and in the supporting services in the houses, for the many children and so for the need of baby sitting since

they are often sick; have been taken care, from time to time with a reciprocal and increasingly intensive help amongst the families

- **The problem of emarginalization of some of the children**, especially of foreign families, in the local public schools, has been faced by the parents, who talk to the teachers and the parents of the other children, and even by the children themselves, who when they are offended, try to be nice and friendly to their companions. This quickly changed the relationship among the children. It is worth knowing, that concerning this problem, while in the first years of the Scuola Loreto the population and the local authority looked upon the School families indifferently, now the children and the families invite each other reciprocally for feasts. Beside that, the public school teachers appreciate a lot the presence of the foreign children because of the contribution that they bring, and the public authority are sensible and attentive to the problems of the Scuola Loreto.

12. RESULTS: SOME TYPES.

To some “permanent” families of the Scuola Loreto an apparently provocative or perhaps a naïve question has been put:

During the school months of this experimental laboratory of social innovative relations, do concrete facts exist, that makes one think of solutions capable of facing some of the problems that characterize the family of today?

These were noteworthy:

- stories that tell of families with serious conjugal crisis, that were restored;
- stories of families faced with apparently irreconcilable social diversity, politics and religions who succeeded in building a profound, friendly relationship between them;
- families with diametrically opposed educational patterns, who at first tolerated each other, then respected and understood each other, and at the end, esteemed each other;
- when a family from Colombia returned to Bogota, they founded a Centre to help the progress of the families of a big district, and later became a consultant to the Bolivian University;
- a Swiss family discovered the Scuola Loreto through internet as a model of their own social aspirations and they came for a whole year;
- many others, just as significant.

13. CONCLUSION.

A family formed with such interaction with other families, has its own resources to become a social leader, creating solutions that can even be a model for society in each place of origin.

All this can contribute to the development of a significant “network” of families, operating all over the world; subjects of a new solidarity and social practices so much needed in this historical moment. This will result in a “society of families”, intended as a net of a concrete realization, constructors of sociality and peace. A possible realization of this, at world level, can be seen in the Familyfest 2005, in which the Scuola Loreto will act as a very important reference regarding both methodology and content.