



## Accompaniment in marital separation

# Tiptoeing

### Fiorella and Giovanni Gravina

*Accompanying those dealing with painful marital separation requires widening one's heart in a boundless acceptance of the other. It means learning to listen, establishing deep and personal relationships and continually relying on God's mercy: Fiorella and Giovanni Gravina, a couple from Rome, speak below about their experience spanning more than ten years.*

"Separation is like a bomb exploding in a house. It upsets everything you have built over years through sacrifice, patience and love. Everything collapses, everything breaks, nothing remains in its place and you no longer know where to start."<sup>1</sup> These are the words of someone who has gone through a separation. His pain impacted us so deeply that it brought us to undertake a path of accompaniment with those who are actually living this reality.

### Beginnings of a journey

Close to nine years ago, we had dinner with a friend who had separated from her husband. She opened her heart to speak about the pain of failure in building a family and the guilt of not being able to save her marriage. Her husband had moved on to another long term relationship and she had not resigned herself to believing that there was nothing more to do.

We stayed with her until late in the evening and the following day was Sunday. At Mass, we both individually prayed for our friend. And, before Jesus in the Eucharist, we felt the desire to begin in some way an outreach to those who are separated.

After sharing our willingness and availability a few months later, the diocese of Rome put on a formation course and that is how we became involved.

It was very helpful to meet the Jesuit, Father Paolo Bachelet. He is now over 80 years old and was one of the founders of the Christian Separated Families Movement in Rome. During our meetings he supported and advised us with his own reflections. He helped us understand that we could be capable of having an attitude of total welcome and openness towards all those who are separated, even those who had undertaken new unions or relationships. We learned to consider each person as if he or she were the only one in the world, destined to be loved in a personal way.

### The inadequacy...

From the very beginning, we were fortunately always aware of our inexperience and sense of inadequacy in the face of the suffering that happens when couples separate. We will never forget the first meeting in our home with a small group of separated people whom we had known only through previous contacts over the phone. Before we even began, one person asked us point-blank: "How do you think you can understand and accompany us if you have never experienced what it is like to be separated?".

It was a more than legitimate question and the reality of separation is very complex to understand. We replied that we were there to love, welcome and listen without judging, to be next to them, to try and somehow lend a hand in building a sense of family with them. Rooted in this love, we proposed journeying together along this path. In some ways we felt as if we were tiptoeing on eggshells and had to be very delicate.

We still remember the ensuing silence that followed.

From that moment on, a relationship of mutual trust grew, allowing each one to open up. We also felt the need for us to try to grasp and understand the many aspects what they were living through. Over time this helped us to become more sensitive and better able to understand their situation.

### **... the embrace of Jesus who cries out**

In beginning this journey we wanted to not leave these brothers and sisters feeling isolated. Over time, deep relationships were established and we have experienced powerful moments of being a family. We, too, have received so much from this experience both humanly and spiritually.

One of the most surprising gifts for us was a better understanding of the profound value and mystical reality of the sacrament of marriage. To witness the fidelity some of them had shown to this covenant with God and to see how true it is that spouses "are one flesh". This was a powerful witness from people whose flesh has been torn apart by separation.

We have also understood how Jesus on the cross is present in this painful reality. Faced with a broken family, one realizes that the only way forward is to embrace him on the cross, the One who remained nailed there ... until death. Sometimes we see Jesus forsaken in that person who does not respond, who fails despite our efforts to love. We cannot bring another person down from their cross. We can only be there like Mary, with her silence and love.

### **Trusting in Mercy**

Being with those who are separated and encountering difficulties is a continual exercise of trusting in God's mercy. We often experience a sense of helplessness in the face of situations that cannot change or in the big problems which frequently affect the children of separated parents.

In these extremely difficult situations, one wants to be able to count on a network of others who are specialists who have a vocation to "give" in this work. We say "giving" because most of the time those who are being accompanied cannot pay for lawyers, psychologists, etc... In giving of ourselves out of love for them and with God's help, little by little, we were able to find a psychologist, a lawyer, a priest, etc.

Spesso si prova anche un senso di solitudine: si vorrebbe che altri condividessero con noi la portata emotiva e il carico oggettivo della costruzione di rapporti personali che non si

possono curare tramite WhatsApp, ma richiedono essenzialmente l'incontro, la condivisione, l'impegno a lunghi ed improvvisi colloqui, come pure ad aiuti concreti di vario genere.

We, too, often experienced a certain loneliness: we wanted others to support us in dealing with the emotional weight of building these personal relationships. This cannot be properly communicated via WhatsApp. Instead we need sharing, long conversations and various forms of concrete help.

It is through the experience of being truly brothers and sisters with one another in moments of profound sharing that God is able to give us the ongoing support to continue.

### **Accompaniment: Not solutions but walking together**

At a recent meeting for separated people, one couple who were helpers said: "We did not imagine such profound suffering in the lives of those living through a separation, with wounds which are still fresh even after ten or more years." As the meeting concluded, this same couple eloquently expressed their experience of accompaniment with these profound, heartfelt words:

"Accompanying others is like being a person who, after arriving to the edge of a sacred place born out of the pain and suffering of one's neighbor, feels an inner urge to stop and take off one's shoes.

The person accompanying is like the backdrop of a scene where the (separated) person is the lead actor. With discretion, they can help in the creation of a sense of home, of family, of a silent participation which brings about trust and a communion of souls.

He or she does not offer solutions but walks side by side with the one in pain so that he or she can perceive within themselves the whispering of the Holy Spirit.

The powerful presence of the face of the Forsaken Jesus in those participants affected by separation made the meeting extraordinarily intense and profound. We experienced the valuable contribution that separated people give to the life of the Church through their living experiences."

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<sup>1</sup>Cit. in P. Bachelet S.J., *From tears to pearls. A conference for separated spouses*, in "Unity and Charisms", no. 2, March-April 2006.