



ADMA

Associazione di Maria Ausiliatrice

Families

“Now that we are preparing for marriage, Father, is there anything for us?”

Let us introduce ourselves: we are Tullio and Simonetta and we are part of the Association of Mary Help of Christians founded by Don Bosco in 1869. We live in Torino and we feel very fortunate – no, blessed – because the Basilica of Mary Help of Christians is there – the center from which all the activities of the Salesian Family began: from Mary's home to our homes.

For about 24 years now – a number which makes us very happy – we have been making a journey with other families. We can truly thank the Lord, Mary, and Don Bosco because they have guided us up until now and continue to guide us along an experience which has as its precise goal to teach families to become “a school of life and love”. Our experience grew out of desire which moved us to ask a Salesian Priest who had accompanied us as young people: “But now that we are preparing for marriage, Father, is there anything – any initiative or proposal – for us?” Our journey began with this question and this desire, which other friends shared, and now providentially exists in the Association of Mary Help of Christians (ADMA).

It moves us to realize how, in a long-ago 1869, when Don Bosco felt the call from Mary to found the Association Mary Help of Christians for the defense of the faith of the people, he thought about so many people – and among these was our family, as well as many others.

The dream of a journey which welcomes and gathers in

In truth, the first desire that we felt was not to isolate ourselves: with matrimony, family commitments multiply themselves and the temptation is always there to be absorbed by them and to isolate from others. Instead, we felt called to live the promise heard during our journey as young people – the one where Jesus says: “I have come so that they might have life and have it in abundance.” We understood that this promise of joy was almost our right and, in the final analysis, is the meaning of our call to live as spouses.

When trying to identify the essential traits of the dream which we felt, we could say that, before all else, we wanted to find a welcoming environment (“a home which welcomes,” as we Salesians say) and a journey on which everyone would feel welcomed – at whatever point they might be in their life. We wanted a path that we could walk together, in mutual accompaniment: today I support and sustain you; tomorrow you will do so for me. Beyond this, we dreamed of a journey so beautiful that it would attract and would be simple: in a word, we wanted a journey that was fit for a family.

A project as beautiful as this had to be founded on the rock of the Love of the Lord. Because of this realization, we immediately grasped the importance of fidelity to personal and group prayer, even little ones, and of taking on commitments little by little - each one according to where he or she is on the journey. These, then would help us create something most important: a network of families who trust in the fact that, "If the Lord does not build a house, in vain do the builders labor."

The characteristics of this journey

And so, here, in a few words and after many years, is what seems to us to have given form and substance to our "family of families."

To live a life of entrustment because Two Columns sustain us: the Holy Eucharist and Mary. Our entire life as spouses unfolds in everyday life. Because of this, we feel it is important to learn to put prayer at the center so as to keep Jesus and Mary present in all the different situations that arise.

Each person lives this to his own degree and according to his or her possibilities: there is no set standard or pre-defined method to follow. What is suggested is that one begin simply, even if that means only with the Sign of the Cross in the morning, entrusting one's entire day [to the Lord and Mary] and, in the evening, to thank God and to ask for His forgiveness. After this, it is prayer itself which makes its own space in our life so that one eventually reaches the point of reciting the rosary and reading daily Scripture and even participating in Holy Mass during the week. In our experience, we find that the rosary is often said at various moments throughout the day: when we're in the car, when we're doing housework, while we're waiting for our child to come out from school, or while we're in line at the supermarket. This attitude, which we call entrustment, is one way of being simple, but gives our hearts tremendous peace. We can assure you that in the frenetic rhythm of our daily life, it is a prodigious weapon. We have learned to entrust ourselves, that is, literally, to handover to Mary and Jesus so many little and big difficulties and situations that we cannot reach to, either due to tiredness or because they are bigger than we are, and we have seen that... *it works!*

Self-formation to learn how to be spouses and parents

Life continually makes us question ourselves; therefore, we feel strongly that we must take responsibility to care for our own personal formation in order to be Christian spouses and parents. Thus, just as it is for babies who need to learn how to walk and to speak, so it is for spouses: we, too, need to learn. We need to learn what it means to live as spouses and as parents. Also, we must get to know each other, to share experiences, not to isolate ourselves, and not to lose hope.

It seems to us that it is important to share with you some of the more significant things that have been given to us and which we consider to be pearls guiding us along our journey:

- before all else, matrimony is a gift, a grace, which is certainly not exhausted on the honeymoon but which is active 24/7, on "4-wheel drive". which Matrimony has placed in our poor life the ability to love as God loves – first and foremost where our spouse is concerned;
- for this reason, we can't have any reservations in our family relationships: we don't give *something*; we give ourselves. I feel very much that it is my responsibility to make Simonetta happy, to help her grow to fullness as her own person, and to bring her to live Paradise already here on earth - but above all in heaven;

- to be husband and wife is to make a “WE” come into being, springing from the union of two diversities and also two fragilities; therefore, to love oneself is to pardon oneself. The idea of "always being right" doesn't work because it is together that couples win: the “WE” brings about the victory;
- arguments are part and parcel of the dynamics of a couple, but dialogue – above all about the feelings that we experience - and the ability to be the first to ask pardon are essential keys for growth. In our experience, we have always sought to respect and put into practice the teaching of the Psalm which says "Let not the sun go down on your wrath" by making peace every evening;
- As parents, we have understood and we continue to experience that our children are given to us but are not our possession. We have also learned a number of things: We need to be authoritative and not authoritarian. Our children see themselves as we see them. To educate a son or a daughter is to form a man or woman. More than words, the witness of our lives is what counts. Both sweetness and firmness are necessary. Conflicts cannot be avoided but can be dealt with.

A family of families

Perhaps what we like the most about our journey is that it involves the entire family – no one is excluded. For both our monthly retreat and our week-long spiritual exercises during the summer, everything is organized keeping the whole family in mind. On one side, there are the parents and, on the other, there are the children, divided into groups according to age. To the former, a journey founded on praying with the Word of God, interwoven with formation for living the dynamics of a couple and the challenges of education in our daily lives is proposed. For the children of kindergarten and elementary school ages, some type of animation is organized [in the form of a summer camp so the parents can be free to be with each other and with the Lord in prayer and intimacy]. For middle school, junior high, and college-age children, a spiritual journey is proposed. We ask the older children, beginning with those in high school, to collaborate in animating the younger ones.

It is beautiful to see the older children caring for the smaller ones as if these were their younger brothers and sisters. We know that the older ones do this thinking about giving back what they received [their parents' time]. In addition to this, every 24th of the month at 9 PM, the young people animate the rosary that we gather to say in Valdocco, in St. Francis de Sales Church, next to the Basilica. We also have the possibility of receiving the Sacrament of Confession.

Together with the Salesian Priests, Brothers, and Sisters: Complementarity

One of the most wondrous things that we want to share with you is the beauty of the presence of the consecrated Salesian Religious. We have experienced how much richness there is in working on projects and in being together, discovering and sharing the characteristics of each of our vocations as we pray together and have our consecrated Salesians as points of reference for our children. This collaboration is not only fruitful for us families and for the consecrated Religious but is also a true gift for we make the marvelous discovery that we are all on this journey together and bring to it our own personal riches. Among other things, this has also taught us to make our families much more responsible in the area of service, thus helping us value the specific charisms of each of the different vocations. We call this “the beauty of the complementarity of our different lifestyles”.

The fruits: joy and love

After having indicated some of the traits of our journey, we can tell you that we have seen its fruit - to our great wonder and awe. The first of these is joy. There is joy in seeing:

- families living in the midst of difficulties entrusting themselves and giving reciprocal aid;
- children creating profound bonds among themselves and learning to pray and to entrust themselves because they see this being done by their parents and the friends of their parents;
- family networks helping each other confront economic, educational, and relational problems; and
- our seeking advice from the consecrated Religious, which enriches and creates mutual growth.

Then there is the love of families that, after becoming aware of the gifts they have received, begin to give service to others: in their parishes or by opening their homes to give hospitality to and accompany other families. One of the greatest gifts has been Perpetual Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament on every 24th of the month in the Basilica of Mary Help of Christians. There has been a constant increase in the participation of families in these moments, so that today we have reached 250 participants on every retreat. We have also seen the creation of a course for young families, "Primi passi in famiglia" ["First Steps as a Family"], open to the entire province in collaboration with the Salesian Youth Pastoral team.

Then, too, new groups have arisen: most wonderful is what is happening in Aosta, where some couples who desired to make known the gift they had received decided to run a retreat in their parish. [In 2015, a total of about 400 people – 90 families – attended the three retreats offered.] The response was so great that now an Aosta group of about 80 members is beginning to form.

The more we discover the gifts that God places at our disposition, the more we feel the need to share them with others. In particular, in these last years, we have felt strongly the challenges to make the Sacrament of Matrimony loved and to uphold it, to support the family, and to make it understood that: "The great values of marriage and the Christian family correspond to a yearning that is part and parcel of human existence". (*Amoris Laetitia*, no. 57)

"Mary had brought us back home"

We are Chiara and Davide and, like Simonetta and Tullio, for a number of years we have been involved in this journey. We often find ourselves living, in practice, what is called an "educational alliance" while on our path of a "family of families".

Our journey along this "family of families" path began at a time when we were coming out of a very trying time in our lives as husband and wife. Our experience with an educational alliance came about when we met some families from the Association of Devotees of Mary Help of Christians (ADMA), a branch of the Salesian Family begun by Don Bosco in 1869. From the members of this ADMA community, we learned that fostering our marriage as husband and wife requires alliances and a common objective: family.

Struggle in Married Life

From the time we were young, each of us grew up in a Salesian House - we carried out all types of service; we were even "hyper-active" in our parishes. We amassed a great amount of experience as "super animators": the oratory, catechism, choir, formation groups, past pupils, and welcoming immigrant minors.

We married well – with the blessing of very many friends and Priests – and we even held our reception at the oratory: it was truly a beautiful Salesian marriage, but within just a few years, we found ourselves completely prostrate on the ground. All the energy we thought we had was exhausted, had disappeared, and we even began to vacillate in our convictions.

As spouses, we had to reckon with our hours at work (which left us very little time) and with all the difficulties of living under the same roof with two very different characters and with family habits that were very different. People are very quick to say, "Spouses put everything in common." Indeed, it is easy to put the bank accounts and the bills to be paid in common – but to put together two different ways of feeling, of thinking, of deciding, and of loving... *That is very difficult!*

Even more difficult is to mesh two faiths. Men and women live their spiritual dimension in different ways, but we didn't know that. If your spiritual life becomes watered down on all sides because you dedicate "less time than the minimum wage" to it, then it is certain that you're going to be in trouble. At a certain point, our first daughter was born – a delight of a baby who didn't sleep for 2 1/2 years. Then it went from bad to worse: any and every excuse was good enough for us to skip prayer and celebrations: "we're too tired", "we'll go another time", and "the Lord will understand". Let's not even mention Confession! For goodness sake! With so many things on our minds, we certainly couldn't lose time by "telling all the little details of our life" to a Priest.

Were we happy? Not very: we were tired, stressed, and becoming progressively emptier and emptier.

I kept having the same recurring dream: I dreamt I was entering into a huge church, wishing to go to confession, and then not doing so. At that time, I was working in a school in the mountains and in the morning, before going to class, I picked up the habit of going into the church and sitting in the back near the statue of the Blessed Mother but I wasn't able to pray. I just stayed there and that was it.

In fact, it turned out to be enough: the Blessed Mother did the rest.

Pathway to Renewal in Marriage

By dint of dreaming of going to confession, I wrote to my spiritual director, whom I had not seen for two years, hoping that he wouldn't send me packing. He didn't; in fact, he welcomed me with love – the love that only a father can give. I had found my first ally. In just a short time, he helped me put my life back in order, but now I was no longer alone: I had a husband and a daughter. We needed other allies. Therefore, he sent us, without explanation and in a rather peremptory manner, to the family groups that he had been following for some time. We still didn't know what ADMA had to do with or who those people were – we just obeyed and "basta". He told us: telephone Tullio and register immediately for the week of Spiritual Exercises. I did so and Tullio, to whom we were unknown as much as he was to us, prudently told us that perhaps it would be better to participate first on a one-day retreat, to see how we felt. Again, we obeyed.

It was joyful chaos: there were many adults with very many children and it seemed that everyone had known each other for their whole lifetime (later we discovered that this was not so). Everybody took care of everyone. A baby crying was picked up and cuddled by the first mother available; another little one who wanted to play ball found an available dad; older children played with the little ones. Here, one woman who was going to have a baby was seeking counsel from another who was pushing a carriage and, there, another one was chasing after her seven children (seven!!!!), trying to gather them for lunch. In one corner, dads were chatting among themselves and Father managed to stop and chat a little with all of them. During the catechesis, there was silence and attention, then time in the desert, Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament,

the rosary, sharing, and Holy Mass. At the end of the day, we were dazed but happy: we had managed to make a true retreat without worrying about our daughter because the animators – the older young people – had taken care of her. We were able to enjoy a little silence, to share with other couples about the same difficulties, and to find comfort from those who had already passed through them. And we prayed: suddenly, time expanded all by itself. It seemed that we were able to breathe again. We had come to know happy families – and, on top of that, happy Catholic families – and we were in the house of Don Bosco.

Mary had brought us back home.

An Alliance for Family Love and Life

A family left on its own dies. A family needs allies and we have found them: in the Priest who follows us on our personal journeys, on our journey as a couple and that as parents, and in the other families.

The amazing thing, the extra gift that the Blessed Mother had in store for us was that beyond finding allies for ourselves, we became allies to others. We discovered how the consecrated Religious flourish again in sharing with the families and how our reciprocal Vocations become clearer and stronger. The Consecrated need to live alongside families who are seeking to become holy as much as families need to find sure guides in the consecrated Religious.

We experience this alliance daily through educating our children by comparing with other families. A dear friend always tells us "friendships which grow in Jesus are those in which one finds greater joy and greater strength". This is true at every age, for the parents as much as for the children. Moreover, now we know that we are not the only ones who want our children to grow not only in learning, culture, their profession, and their leisure, but also in their souls.

Thus, even our young people are no longer alone. They, too, have found allies of their same age, as well as in the young people older than themselves, and in the other couples so that, in those moments of crisis which growing up brings with it, they are accompanied and receive coherent messages because we run together to the same goal: sanctity.

This is the educational alliance put into practice.

ADMA Families within the Salesian Family

Don Bosco had understood everything: he had brought Mamma Margaret to the Oratory to make of it a family where his sons, consecrated and lay, could be happy "in time and in eternity". "In time" means that they would be happy while not only playing ball on the playground, while studying, or while learning a trade, but also when they got married and became parents. He had put everything and everyone under Mary Help of Christians' Mantle and had taught all of them to immerse themselves in Jesus.

ADMA does not have an "exclusive claim" to the Two Columns, but certainly, it has the responsibility to remind itself and the rest of the Salesian Family that Jesus and Mary are the two secure Columns to which we must anchor our life.

How? By putting into practice and witnessing to what Mary Help of Christians has led us to understand along the journey of these years: In order to put back together the shards of a shattered society and to help the young as Don Bosco wished, we need to care for our spiritual life by putting it at the center, beginning in the family. Caring for our spiritual life in Don Bosco's manner means to live with our feet firmly planted on the ground and our hearts in heaven! We must constantly remind ourselves that we have dazzling luck

- no, perhaps it is better to say that we have a special blessing: that of being families in the Salesian Family, which means... in the world!

The immensity, the variety, and the marvel that the Salesian Family is must be contemplated with gratitude: we are not alone in our neighborhoods and cities and not even in our own countries or even in the world. Has the "throwaway culture" globalized the world? Do not fear: Don Bosco was wiser, globalized the Family, and made Mary Help of Christians its guide and sure protection; therefore, have no fear: we are not alone.

“Entrust Yourself, Have Faith, Smile”

Greetings to all. We are Elena and Elisabetta, University students, who began a journey a number of years ago with other young people of ADMA in Torino. Today we hope to share with you our experience in a very concrete way, beginning with "entrust yourself, have faith, and smile" - the motto that we seek to live every day with Mary's help.

Entrusting oneself is this: TO ENTRUST is to place into the Lord's Hands all our difficulties and uncertainties. It is precisely *entrusting ourselves* that starts us on our journey – the one traced out by the Rosary we pray every 24th of the month, during the day, or at times of Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament. In fact, it might sound strange and - permit us to say - absolutely counter-cultural that a young person should draw near to a prayer that is so traditional and slow in a world in which everything is "right away" and where so much depends upon how many "likes" we get on a post. And yet, it is precisely this putting ourselves into the Lord's Hands that is a true and proper training ground for life, helping us overcome difficulties and uncertainties in a concrete way.

An image comes to mind, which we saw a while ago, of Baby Jesus who, like all other babies in a moment of need, calls insistently to his Mom, grabbing onto her dress. We recognized ourselves in this very familiar scene in the moment in which we tangibly felt the power of such an entrustment, when praying insistently for various difficult situations in our life. Moreover, when we saw hundreds of persons, among whom were many children, on their knees praying the rosary, we were certain that we would see miracles: not only extraordinary or "over the top" ones, but also hidden ones, the most precious and concrete, among which is also our conversion.

Time after time, the Rosary became the soundtrack of our life, even in the smallest difficulties. It is like the time when a Priest came to tell us how he had remained struck by two young middle school girls in our group, who, while climbing a mountain that never seemed to end, told him to say a rosary so that – in their own words – Mary would give them a kick so they could climb faster. And don't think that we're talking about some modern-day Dominic Savios, either; we are not!

Or when we recited the rosary on the bus in Italian and Arabic with the young people from the Middle East this summer during the Salesian Youth Movement Days while traveling to Campus Misericordiae with members of the Salesian Youth Movement. It came spontaneously to us to pray the rosary when our bus driver was having a hard time finding the right road. Praying together, with reciprocal support and in thanksgiving, we found and shared the different stories of our faith: the one that you live with difficulty among bombs and tears because of the war, and the one that limps along in the midst of a spreading western atheism.

In this way, we learn to *have faith* and to build our house on rock. It is through contact with the ADMA families that we experience extraordinary witness in a concrete way. In a time such as ours in which one cannot speak of trust, chastity, fidelity, and, above all, of vocation, to experience in a tangible way that these ideals do not fall if they are founded on Christ, is the most beautiful hope that we young people can nourish. Thanks to this launching of the family and youth pastoral, our security is reinforced. Who could still be afraid if he or she places his or her future in God's hands? It is this which we learn when we see Priests, Sisters, and couples living their Call with fecundity. Growing up with these families, fear and uncertainty diminish and our future looms bright and rich in significance. At the same time, we recognize in the Priests a gift from God and we thank them with our prayer.

Finally, with a *smile* on our lips, we seek to be witnesses to the Gospel of Joy, on the invitation of Pope Francis. It is a joy which goes beyond any of the pre-fabricated game plans of this world and brings us to live a holy and healthy friendship in profundity. This is not a friendship which is "dorky" or "sanctimonious", but full of enthusiasm and simplicity, which makes us enjoy life and grow to be "true friends in the matters of the soul," as Dominic Savio underlined in the Rule for the Sodality of Mary Immaculate. Who better than he knows how to indicate to us the road to youthful sanctity, which consists in staying very happy?

It is God who is the guarantor of our friendship and who enables us to extend our initiatives to other friends who are even outside of ADMA. Indeed, we have no fear when proposing experiences which someone might define as being too high and unattainable. We know that, in truth, there lives inside each young person the desire to be looked upon with a loving gaze, one that opens him or her up to be able to receive and accept the Love of Jesus.

In giving service we seek to give witness to the fact that reason, religion, and loving-kindness are still today a healthy and holy trinomial for every child. Pope Francis this summer was peremptory when he said: "If you do not serve others, you are good for nothing." For this reason, also, being inserted into the reality of the ADMA families, we offer the children the experience that we have made of God during our retreats and in our friendship.

Beyond living our journey of formation in the annual retreats for ADMA Youth, we are also very much involved in the various initiatives of the Salesian Youth Movement – whether bringing our young people there or whether just in making ourselves available. Even if they knew us already, still at the beginning of our involvement with them, their first reaction was unreal: "ADMA what?" "But are you a wandering oratory?" But now, they are starting to grasp the attractiveness of this experience and the reality that it is - in its simplicity and in its accessibility to all. In these last months, other young people in other Salesian parishes have begun prayer gatherings and times for sharing on the 24th of the month to help the journey of the oratory along.

Thus, we proceed one step at a time along this journey with Mary and, thanks to Her, at every step, we *entrust ourselves, we have faith, and we smile.*
