

“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.

