

Personal testimonies: *Sexuality lived out according to God's design*

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I began by walking the streets at night in the risky areas of Rome, moved by a strong desire to share the greatest discovery of my life with those young people whom I had seen in situations of distress and desperation. I had – like everyone else I suppose – a need to find the way to the fullness of joy. One particular passage in the Gospel came to me in a sudden flash: “*Abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete. This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you*” (Jn 15: 9-12). When I thought about these words, I said to myself: My God, the Lord of creation came to live among us and gave his life for each one of us. He has given us the secret of the fullness of joy!

Then I tried to live according to this secret and to accept Jesus' commandment. I was very aware of the precious gift of joy in the Resurrection. I had already experienced that this joy can resist the hardest trials in life. At one stage I was stricken by a terrible illness that could have left me blind. The pain was unbearable and no medication could reduce it. I remembered the words: “*I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete*” (Jn 15: 11). I was suffering excruciating physical pain, yet I felt incredible joy in my heart and experienced the words: “*Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives*” (Jn 14: 27).

At that stage in my illness I received new encouragement from the words “*You received without payment; give without payment*” (Mt 10: 8) to walk through the wastelands of the big cities to tell those in despair that there is a way to the fullness of joy. I wanted to tell them about the joy that coloured my nights with a divine light.

I must admit that, back in 1991 when I began to go out to the streets at night, especially around Termini Station in Rome, I really had no idea that there was such a huge number of night people, nor that the cry of so many hurt young people could be so piercing, desperate and unheard.

I began to meet so many young people every night who had problems of drug addiction, alcoholism, imprisonment, AIDS, prostitution, homosexuality, corruption, immigration, etc. Their stories, tears and cries touched my heart. The night people became my new family and the street was my new home. I soon realised that these youngsters who sometimes lived on crime in the streets at night, were not really wicked people, even though everyone regards them as dangerous. They were mostly kids who were unloved. Their hearts were hardened by so much violence in life, but, incredibly, they were longing for light, life, Love and God. The yearning for God that I found in the hellholes of Rome really surprised me. I could see how sexuality separated from love and experienced in such a promiscuous way could have such devastating effects on future

generations.

Most of the young people I met had been deeply hurt because of their profligate use of sexuality and emotions. Most of those I encountered on the street concluded their conversation with the request: "Please, Chiara, help us to get out of this hell. We also want to get to know this Jesus who asks you to risk your life for our sake". Although I knew all the hostels, soup kitchens and welcome centres in Rome, I did not know where to take these young people. The ones I met did not only need a bed for the night, a warm meal or a hostel. They needed someone to help them through a long process of healing. I soon realised that, although I was in Rome at the heart of Christianity, I could not actually find a place to bring these youngsters who had such a desperate need to be accepted and to meet Jesus. There were plenty of soup kitchens, hostels and psychotherapeutic rehabilitation communities, but I could not find even one place that could immediately take in these youngsters and give them human and spiritual help based on the Gospel as they strove to find inner healing.

I was soon convinced that these young people did not only suffer from drug-addiction, alcoholism, poverty, deviant behaviour, prostitution, AIDS and violence, but that the real evil that this huge number of night people had in common was the death of their souls. Scripture clearly says that "*the wages of sin is death*" (Rm 6: 23). I could see the drama of this truth lived out every night that I spent out on the streets. I could see people in the fullness of their youth who were dead within because, when they had tried to find answers to their need for love, freedom, joy and fulfilment in their hearts, they looked for it by following the seductive attractions of the world. They had met the new "false prophets" that seduced them with their absurd artificial paradises which had mostly become freezing hells. They had not yet met anyone who could tell them that God is love, that Christ is the way, truth and life, that the One who created us became a human being in order to show us the way to the fullness of joy.

So many of my first encounters with these people struck my heart to the quick.

I met Viria who had been sold by her brother to a cruel prostitution slavery ring. She had been locked up in freezing cells, often raped, and threatened with blows and cigarette burns so that she would not escape. I met Malia who at 17 years of age had been forced to drink the blood of animals, and to take part in black masses and orgies in which terrible violence was inflicted on children. I met Mauro, a very handsome young man two metres in height who was reduced to a skeleton and consumed by AIDS. He told me that he had lived on the streets for 20 years and that I was the first person to stop and ask him how he was who did not have an ulterior motive. I met Claudia, a young girl of 16 who had simply helped a friend to escape from a prostitution slavery ring, and for that had to see her friend cut up in pieces and thrown into a pigsty.

The more I went to the streets at night, the more my heart was convinced of the fact that only a meeting with the One who came to bind up the wounds of broken hearts, to proclaim freedom to prisoners, to give us the joy of the resurrection and to break open the chains of bondage (so many of these young people had addictions), could give life back to these brothers and sisters.

The idea came to me to start a community that would welcome these new friends and show them how the Gospel could be a rule of life. Of course, the idea terrified me. I recognised the fact that a 27 year-old woman without financial or professional resources

(I graduated in political science) was mad to think of finding a house to share with young street people who were generally considered to be dangerous. I was sure of one thing though: everything is possible for God. God's love for us was also a bit crazy, we must admit. God became a human being. God gave himself up for us.

Everything is possible for God. The first *Nuovi Orizzonti* community started in March 1994 in total abandon to providence. Since then I have seen thousands of young people pass from deadness of soul to fullness of joy in the resurrection, and this was because they opened their hearts to God's love and met the risen Christ. When I opened the first welcome community, I thought that it was enough to find a girl an honest job in order to help her leave prostitution. I soon realised that this was not the case. The abyss of the wounds left in their hearts is so deep that they require a long process of healing. They need to build up their inner selves. This is not only true of those who fell victim to the terrible prostitution slavery trade, but unfortunately is also true of most of the young people I met, youth who had experienced promiscuous sexuality. I could see how it had profound consequences on their heart, spirit and mind. We found it necessary to provide these young people with courses in self-awareness and healing based on the word of God and prayer, convinced that only the healing God could cure certain wounds. With the conviction that to love and to be loved is the most basic demand of our existence, we in the *Nuovi Orizzonti* community make it our task to learn the art of loving in the school of the One who is Love.

I must say that, in the past few years, we have truly experienced that the Word of God, if earnestly lived out, will not only disclose marvellous new horizons, but that it is a two-edged sword that cures wounded hearts, something that cannot be done with even twenty years of psychoanalysis. Of course I do not wish to take anything from psychotherapy which has its own importance and effectiveness. In the self-discovery programme we have at *Nuovi Orizzonti*, we try mostly to identify the unhealthy attitudes we have in our way of loving and relating with ourselves, others and God. We try especially to appreciate the potential and gifts that are not being expressed, and to develop self-discipline, authenticity, inner freedom, availability and attention to dialogue, and to develop growing respect for self and for others by finding a correct scale of values. We try to identify the various aspects of the dissatisfaction that arises from the "traps" that have taken root over the years. We focus particular attention on the commitments needed to interiorise some positive attitudes and habits that help develop the ability to transcend oneself, to love others and to look at others. We give space to working in groups and to education in order to support young people in the process of growth in acquiring healthy self-esteem and increasing awareness of the dynamics of sensations, emotions and feelings. We emphasise reconciliation with oneself and one's past with all of one's limitations and the gap between the ideal and the real self; the ability to be really oneself, and to be free from conditioning and the fear of being judged; to help to reach a state of maturity, to strive to live coherently, and to transcend oneself in order to go out to meet others. All of this is done with the conviction that there is no growth without love nor is there harmonious development of one's personality. The God who created us has shown us that love is the way to the fullness of joy.

Every day we try to discover the various characteristics of love revealed by the Word of God. In particular, we try to follow the advice of Saint Paul in his marvellous hymn to

love in the first letter to the Corinthians, chapter 13, where he says: “*If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal*”. This passage of the Word of God tells us that love is patient, takes no account of wrongs received, is not boastful or irritable or arrogant; it is kind and never envious; it rejoices in truth and justice and never seeks its own interests; it bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things. We try to grow in this art of loving: to leave impulsiveness behind and acquire self control, so that, instead of choosing what we feel like, we choose what is good for us; instead of saying “I cannot do it, I am just not able” we say “I can do all things in the One who gives me strength”; instead of being victimised in relationships we accept the responsibility of loving. We also try to grow in our attitude of not locking people into our prejudices, of going beyond appearances, of learning the difficult art of listening, of awareness and of acceptance, to move on from the poverty of loneliness to the wealth found in communion by freeing ourselves from a “use and dispose” way of relating – we could say that consumerism has infected all of our relationships to a certain extent – and, in a special way, to discover the sacred aspect of sexuality as a language of love.

This process that we try to undertake is based on prayer and the commitment to live according to the Word of God with great earnestness. I must say that we are amazed every day when we see the miracles that the Lord works in the lives of those who open their hearts to God’s love. So many young people, thousands of them so far, who have been welcomed into our various communities, have responded to this proposal to live strictly according to the Gospel and to learn the art of loving from the One who is Love. This enthusiastic response has been far beyond our expectations. Many of the young people who have come to us, and who have gone through this experience of passing from death to life through an encounter with the Risen Lord, have felt the urge to evangelise and to go out to the schools, beaches, town squares and places where young people gather, to go back to the places where they used to spread violence in order to give witness of an experience of resurrection to other young people trapped in the hell of drugs, prostitution, drug-pushing, crime and sex-addiction. Over these past few years we have also seen a miraculous increase in the number of prevention centres and street evangelisation initiatives. Over 100,000 young people have taken a commitment as *Knights of the Light* to live out the Gospel faithfully and to take out to the whole world the revolution of Love that Jesus came to teach us. About 500 young people have decided to commit themselves, with promises of poverty, chastity, obedience and joy, to witness to the Joy of the Resurrection to those who have never known God’s Love. We started out with a community in Trigatoria caring for 24 young people, and now we have 141 centres of welcome, evangelisation, training and spirituality that are extended families with open arms ready to receive. There are also four *Cittadelle Cielo* (heavenly citadels) being planned. These will train people for international volunteering. There are also 92 centres that work on projects in developing countries, in prisons, in hospitals, in the performing arts, communications and mass media, publishing and education, spirituality, economics and employment, prevention and awareness. This makes it possible for us to reach out to an average of one million young people every year with various evangelisation initiatives. In the light of this experience, I think that I can say that it has given us the opportunity to contemplate the miracles of Grace. It has also shown us that the number of cries for help

from young people is far more alarming than official statistics tend to show.

We go to a great number of schools and places where young people gather, including the trendy areas of Rome, and we have seen that about eighty per cent (80%) of the adolescents we meet show at least one of the worrying symptoms that broadly identify the youth of the street: alcohol abuse and narcotic drug use and abuse, especially marijuana, cocaine and ecstasy; disruption and crime at various levels, and confusion and abuse in the area of sexuality; anorexia and bulimia, depression of various types, and personality disorders; joining sects of different kinds; above all, they are deeply hurt in the area of emotions. They often have a great fear in their hearts of loving and being loved for fear of being betrayed. They close themselves off from love. We find that there is an almost total lack of help received. When I started to walk the streets, I thought that drugs were the main scourge leading to the death of so many young people, but now I am sure that the cause is sex addiction, the separation of sexuality from love. It is often underestimated, but it is an even more serious scourge than drug addiction. It has devastating consequences and is the greatest cause of harm to young people today.

Some very alarming statistics confirm the devastating proportion of deaths brought about through sex addiction. If we take into account the fact that official figures always fall short, we realise that they do not give the full picture.

It is estimated that around one hundred and fifty million (150,000,000) girls and seventy five million (75,000,000) boys have suffered from sexual abuse in recent years, and we know that sexual abuse leaves terrible marks on the heart, soul, mind and life of anyone who has been subjected to this treatment. Seventy thousand (70,000) pornographic websites have been identified. In the United States today, it is estimated that seventy per cent (70%) of couples will separate. Many of the young people who come to us are the children of separated couples, and we can feel how traumatic it has been for the family and the young person. We must also bear in mind that there is an exponential increase in diseases brought about by promiscuous sex.

Drug use is often connected to these painful experiences. Every day we see that there is a growing number of young people using drugs and alcohol in an effort to dull their heartache. This choice is often linked to painful sexual experiences. Frequent consequences of these painful experiences are anorexia, bulimia and depression which are increasingly prevalent among young people, and homosexuality. Then, of course, there is the tragedy of the prostitution slave trade and sex tourism that involve so many children. This atrocious trade continues to ensnare a growing number of innocent victims. I have just returned from Brazil, and my heart is still bleeding after embracing so many street children. They are constrained to sell their bodies to large numbers of Italians who go there to boost their egos through sexual experiences with innocent victims.

It is estimated that an average of fifty four million (54,000,000) abortions take place every year. If we make a comparison with the Second World War, the largest armed conflict in history, in which forty five million (45,000,000) people died, and to the fifty four million (54,000,000) innocent babies killed each year to which we need to add the death felt in the hearts of the mothers who have abortions, we realise that the magnitude of the tragedies resulting from the current increase in promiscuous sex is really staggering. The shocking impact of these data gives us cause for serious thought about the devastating consequences of the unscrupulous laws of the insane sex trade.

It is more necessary than ever, as Pope Benedict XVI has repeatedly said, to make greater efforts to provide instruction for the spiritual and human renewal of sexuality. It is imperative that we Christians should have the determination to live to the full the greatness of the vocation to which we have been called. *“Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God, and that you are not your own? For you were bought with a price; therefore glorify God in your body”* (1 Cor 6: 19-20). *“Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God”* (Mt 5: 8).

If we wish to give a full response to our wonderful vocation as Christians, we should be determined to achieve holiness! The Word of God tells us: *“Be holy, because I am holy”* (Lev 11: 45, 19 :2; 1 Pet 1: 16); *“For this is the will of God, your sanctification”* (1 Thess 4: 3).

Young people are so often seeking the will of God. We want to know what the Lord is saying to us. We want to know what God’s plans are for our lives. The Word of God gives us the answer: God wants you to be holy. Are you searching for God’s will? You know one thing for sure: God wants you to be holy. This is great news, because if it is God’s will, then it is possible. Remember the words: *“Be holy, because I am holy”*.

There is an urgent need for saints who can witness to the beauty of love in the world. The Holy Family in Nazareth is their model to help them radiate the quality, greatness, depth and sacredness of the vocation to sexuality and marriage as a way to holiness. Love is stronger than death, and only the One who is Love can bring back life to many hearts that are broken, crushed and numbed because they have been hurt so often.

It is really urgent that we make every effort to follow the *New Commandment* of Jesus: *“I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another”* (Jn 13: 34), in order to build a civilisation of love. Far too many people today feel death in their hearts. The world is dying for lack of love. Only love can save the world. There is a need for saints who can lose themselves in the One who is Love so that they can witness to the Joy of the Resurrection. Let us accept the invitation given by John Paul II at WYD 2000: *“If you are what you should be, you will set the whole world ablaze!”* (Tor Vergata, 20 August 2000).

Let us bring the fire of God’s love to all the world. Let us warm the nights of many hearts with the fire of God’s love! It is really urgent that we should listen to the terrible silent cry that is raised up daily towards heaven by night people. Too many of our brothers and sisters are in despair and they continue to die in the wastelands of our big cities. One person alone can do little, but together with the One who is Love we can find ways to colour the hellholes of this earth with the colours of heaven. One thing is certain: Love works miracles. Let us learn the art of loving from the One who is Love so that we can give light and warmth to the hearts of our suffering brothers and sisters with the fire of God’s Love.