

**Catholic Peacemaking:
the experience of the Community of Sant'Egidio**

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presented at a US Institute of Peace workshop
February 5, 2001
Washington, DC

Thank you to David Smock who welcomed Sant'Egidio's experience early on, and me personally when I came to the United States. Through him, thank you to USIP for generously supporting the peacemaking initiatives of the Community of Sant'Egidio.

What is Sant'Egidio?

The Community of Sant'Egidio is an International Catholic organization, recognized by the Holy See as a Lay Public Association. It was founded in 1968 by an 18-year-old man in a high school in Rome. Presently there are communities of Sant'Egidio in more than 40 countries in all continents. The membership is roughly 30,000 people. (For more information see www.santegidio.org.) Community members are lay people who do not take any vows and are requested to work professionally in a secular environment. However, Sant'Egidio has many elements of a religious organization, more than simply through the recognition of its status by the Holy See. The community's main goals are related to its religious identity and take the character of prayer, service to the poor, and friendship. Members all over the world are asked to pray, serve, and be friendly everyday. This highly religious configuration distinguished Sant'Egidio from any other conflict resolution agency, even in the non-governmental world. The Community has been instrumental in the peaceful resolution of the conflict in Mozambique and was able to facilitate dialogue among relevant actors in conflicted countries such as Albania, Algeria, Burundi, Guatemala and Kosovo allowing parties to sign agreements. It was also briefly called to facilitate the Debat National in the Democratic Republic of the Congo but the project never saw full light. While its peacemaking activities never reached the climax of the peace process in Mozambique, the Community of Sant'Egidio has continued to dedicate its self to peace work. So we ask ourselves tonight: how Catholic is Sant'Egidio's peacemaking? And what can we learn from Sant'Egidio about Catholic peacemaking in general?

The Community of Sant'Egidio is Catholic and expresses this in many ways. It is my hope that deepening the understanding of the peculiar way of Sant'Egidio's intervention in peacemaking, we may contribute to an appreciation of the Catholic service in the world. I will structure my presentation around four Latin words to stress this point. The words are: *Communio*, *Traditio*, *Romanitas*, and *Pietas*.

Communio

The Community of Sant'Egidio is a recent fruit of a long history of the people of God, striving to live the Gospel of Jesus of Nazareth. Born after the end of the II Vatican Council, the community was made possible by a Church that found a new understanding of its role in the world in light of a living tradition. Many, who knew the Catholic Church before the council, can hardly keep their amazement at the change that occurred in such a short period of time. The "*aggiornamento*" of the Church has been profound and irreversible. The Community of Sant'Egidio is one of the gifts, or charismas, of this new season of the Church. Born out of a simple and direct contact with the Gospel, welcomed by the members as a living word able to transform life in saving it, the community immediately grew around the three disciplines of prayer (both personal and together), service to the poor (a requirement for all members even if old, sick or very poor themselves) and friendship. The peacemaking of the community is a direct expression of these three disciplines. Significantly, the Community of Sant'Egidio always stressed its Catholic identity by recognizing that the Gospel was received in this tradition not given in discontinuity. Therefore, *communio* is also the recognition of your own limitations and responsibilities to live that Gospel which was handed over fully, integrally, creatively. In this *communio* to be Catholic is to be part of a large, very large family, that stretches its presence all over the world and call the Community to respond promptly to the most diverse requests.

In very practical terms the skills and qualities, related to *communio*, that the life of the community nourished for its members are a careful listening, a promptness in response, a commitment to relationships, an availability to stop and change pace, hospitality.

Traditio

As mentioned before, Sant'Egidio is an evangelical community that recognizes its debt towards the mother church that gave us the Gospel. Therefore the first *traditio* that we recognize as foundational is the reference to the Scriptures. One of the most important documents of the II Vatican Council, the *Dogmatic Constitution Dei Verbum*, says:

In His goodness and wisdom God chose to reveal Himself and to make known to us the hidden purpose of His will (see Eph. 1:9) by which through Christ, the Word made flesh, man might in the Holy Spirit have access to the Father and come to share in the divine nature (see Eph. 2:18; 2 Peter 1:4). Through this revelation, therefore, the invisible God (see Col. 1:15; 1 Tim. 1:17) out of the abundance of His love speaks to men as friends (see Ex. 33:11; John 15:14-15) and lives among them (see Bar. 3:38), so that He may invite and take them into fellowship with Himself.

Sant'Egidio needs to be understood in this profound relation with the revelation, with Scriptures, with prayer as silent listening to the Word of God. Before

peacemaking there is an intense appreciation of the search for "the hidden purpose", a deep gratitude for the possibility of friendship that comes out of the acceptance of the Gospel in a *traditio*. The Catholic Church reveres tradition deeply. Sant'Egidio does as well (as it may be seen in Sant'Egidio's prayer, liturgy and care for the sacred spaces). Yet, it is remarkable that to revere tradition does not imply avoid innovation: to the contrary! No other human institution seems to be doing as well as the Catholic Church in handling change over time and places. Certainly there are several moments in which change should have come and did not or occurred in ways that are horrifying for us. However, it is evident -- at least for us in Rome in the aftermath of II Vatican Council -- that *traditio* is certainly not narrow-minded conservatism. Wasn't the change of the II Vatican Council possible exactly because of the peculiar structure of the Catholic Church? Change occurred from the center to the periphery as well as the other way around. John XXIII was able to call upon the entire Church to reform it and Paul VI was able to implement those changes because they were perceived as consistent with the tradition of an "*ecclesia semper reformanda*". Those who did not accept the change found themselves distant from the Catholic *communio*. The Council rejuvenated the church, reinterpreting the *traditio* and transforming not only the role of laity but also the role of bishops and the role of the Holy See.

If we look at the Catholic Church from a sociological point of view, we immediately recognize that it is present in all countries of the world and has an incredibly longevity. Geographically its presence is incredibly widespread; historically its continuity is remarkable. It is therefore highly decentralized and yet, for many standards, highly centralized. Its hierarchical structure allows a connection between center and periphery that is extraordinary. No other human institution has comparable organizational characteristics. Sant'Egidio is one of the latest expressions of this Catholic plasticity, this Catholic quality to adapt, respond, and incorporate change.

It must be mentioned that, very practically; all bishops come to the Holy See in *visita ad limina apostolorum* at least once every 5 years. This means that thousands of bishops every year are in Rome. Also Rome attracts pilgrims for all over the world. For Sant'Egidio this has been the sign of a special call to grow in respect for a *traditio* that gave us the Gospel and allow us to learn and share the insight of many people who are seeking to act on those words now. This exchange trained Sant'Egidio's people in the respect of form, in the care for sacraments, in the search for ways to communicate fully with people coming from different background, who are witnesses of long histories and journeys. Rome was not made in one day and Sant'Egidio has learned that in Rome and elsewhere in the world you need to be committed long-term.

Romanitas

Rome is not only the location where the community of Sant'Egidio first started. Rome is the place of Peter's martyrdom and Paul's preaching. It is the site of the

Holy See. It is the center of the Catholic Church. Since apostolic times, the Church of Rome has played a very special role in Christianity. The communities that lived there were formed out of cosmopolitan crowd that brought together people from all over the world. This continued in different ways throughout history. Rome has never been identified with one race, one nation, and one people. Through a creative use of symbols and languages, Rome became a very special place indeed, for Christianity and beyond. It is a point of reference. The apostolic succession, which finds in Rome an astonishing continuity interrupted only briefly in almost 2000 years, links the city with the world through the communion of the Catholic Church. It is not a bureaucratic alliance of bishops: it is a spiritual communion of believers. Many of them are devout, faithful Christians who gave up their lives for the Gospel in a "roman way" in Rome and elsewhere in the world. All Catholic reformations found in Rome their communion and their representation: the monastic tradition, the Franciscans, the Dominicans, the Jesuits up to the most recent post Vatican II ecclesial movements.

The Community of Sant'Egidio relates profoundly to this tradition and has been sensitive to both sacred history and sacred geography always wondering why it was meant to be "in Rome". Pope John Paul II captured this quality of the community of Sant'Egidio, very evident to anyone who had the chance to visit its headquarters in Trastevere, saying "You are always with the poor. You live fully the preferential option for the poor. You live *"alla romana"* (untranslatable expression that means "the way of Rome", or "as Rome would do"). For Sant'Egidio to "roman" has always been a responsibility. The Community profoundly felt the need to share the lively spiritual and human ties that links the Catholic Church all over the world. In prayer, service and friendship the community have offered its self as a small, recent -- for some years young -- point of reference.

Romanitas in the end is also an appreciation of a place, of a given locality. In a world that goes global, Sant'Egidio insist on local dimensions. Each of us has a history and a geography; we are limited in time and space. Rome is a way to look at the world avoiding the dizziness that comes when you move to much, you do not know your surroundings, your traditions, your neighbor. To be universal we need to be rooted; to be rooted is a way to relate to others without the fears of the uncertain. *Romanitas* taught us to be welcome openly and joyfully other Christians as well as other religious people and non-believers.

Pietas

This love for the poor mentioned by the Pope in one of his encounter with the community is actually the very reason for its peacemaking efforts. We like to say that war is the mother of all sufferings and that the poor are the victims of it. Rich can live well in time of war. Often rich people can prosper and benefit from it. This is not true for the poor. The poor with their lack of power, lack of resources, lack of connections, have their bodies to move fleeing often on foot. For the poor there is rarely an escape from violence. They cannot defend themselves and

rarely have someone caring for them enough to defend them. Sant'Egidio -- or Saint Giles as we would say in English -- has nothing to do with the community that uses its name. It was a serendipitous encounter of a community of young people without a church and an abandoned convent in the heart of Rome. That church was dedicated to Sant'Egidio and the community took its name from it. Later we discovered that Egidio was a noble man from Greece who left his family to live secluded as a monk in southern France. There he became a father of monks, abbot and defended the poor. It is often painted with an arrow in hand in the act of defending a deer. *Traditio* wants that the deer were the poor and that the man shouting the arrow was a local king. Egidio put his hand to stop the arrow and pay his price to defend the poor. We did not know the story but we liked it. For us to become peacemakers was a function of the pietas, of the love for the poor, of the duty to defend the defend-less.

Conclusion

In conclusion Sant'Egidio's Catholic peacemaking is very evident to me. If it were not for the Catholic Church the Community of Sant'Egidio would simply not have existed. It exists this way because it is a recent fruit of the Catholic tradition; it comes out of a large network and is rooted in a place. However, I would like to argue in the end that at the very core of Sant'Egidio's peacemaking there is nothing more and nothing less than a deep desire to "act on words", to say yes for yes and no for no, to serve the poor in friendship. We did not want to become peacemakers. We tried to become Christians and in the making we help the peace to reveal itself. We contemplate these moments with reverence happy that none of us was paid because money would have probably taken away something from this very real discovery that truly indeed enemies can become friends.