

Conference of
Alberto and Constanza ALVARADO

Wednesday 20th of September



Xth International Gathering
of the Teams Of Our Lady

THE TEAMS OF OUR LADY, A LIVING COMMUNITY OF COUPLES

Introduction:

Thirty three years ago, Constanza and I, were living in France as I was studying for my doctorate at the University of Paris. One day in September 1973, we were visiting this shrine of Our Lady of Lourdes for no other reasons than to please Constanza's mother, Isabella. Our faith at that time had considerably cooled, partly because of the very nature of my studies in sociology carried out according to an empirical methodology, and partly because of the influence of the non-believing university environment. We had no interest in visiting the grotto but, out of simple consideration for my mother in law, I decided to accompany her in the long queue waiting to go in the grotto. Suddenly, I found myself in front of the statue of the Virgin Mary... What could I say? What could I plead for? "Our Lady, if all this is true... give us faith again!"

A few months later, back home on a Sunday, walking past our parish church dedicated to Our Lady of Lourdes, we felt an irresistible urge to enter. The Eucharist was being celebrated and the priest was preaching on the parable of the "Prodigal Son". There was not a shadow of doubt that it was aimed at us... A few days later we were called for the second time to join the Teams of Our Lady.

Today, thirty three years later, thanks to our faithful journey in the Movement, here we are again together in front of the grotto of Our Lady of Lourdes bearing witness to our rediscovered faith in Mary's Son. What could we say? What could we plead for... at this time? Our Lady, all this is true... Give us the grace to be able to pass on our faith and to rediscover the role of Teams in today's world.

These wonderful years of life, spent in the Movement, have been for us a school of life and of progressive formation in faith as well as a way to grow closer to God as a couple. Rather than being a matter of "knowledge", faith has been for us an exciting adventure of "giving ourselves" to God. Rather than an inaccessible being, we have seen Him as an incarnate God, as Son of Mary, like us in our human condition. He brought a unique message to the world: his "new commandment of love", a message that we have understood and accepted and to which we have committed ourselves so as to spread it wherever we may be. Nevertheless, we have not realised this process of knowing God on our own, but within living communities of couples in the Teams of Our Lady, thanks to which our faith has been strengthened day by day. And it is about this that we want to speak to you today.

We will try in particular to define the meaning of the word "community", firstly from a sociological point of view and then from the point of view of the Gospel. Thereafter, we will consider various types of communities of faith, beginning with the couple, then the family, the team and the movement, leading up to the Church as a community of communities. Finally, we will try to answer the question: how can the Teams of Our Lady, a living community of couples, provide a convincing and shining response to the needs of today's world?

1. The sociological meaning of community

From a sociological point of view, the concept of community has very special connotations that distinguish it from other social models such as a certain category of people, a conglomerate of unrelated people or a particular social grouping.

A *social category* is a convenient way of classifying people by something they have in common; for example: Europeans, Americans, Africans, Asians, etc. This does not mean to say that all Europeans, Americans, Africans or Asians are in one location together; nor are we saying that people within a given category have permanent and stable relationships.

A *social conglomerate*, for its part, implies the physical gathering of people together, even if their relationships are slight and transient. Such is the case, for example, of football supporters in a

stadium encouraging their team. When the match is over, everyone goes home and the conglomerate no longer exists.

On the other hand, a *social group* is a meeting of people with closer and more stable relationships who pursue a common goal. Its duration depends on the duration of the objective. A football team, a company, a professional association, a club, a trades union etc. belong to this type of social grouping. In most cases, relationships are governed by contracts.

Finally, a *community* is a voluntary and permanent association of people united by strong bonds of affinity. The members share common ideals and values that give rise within the community to a strong sense of unity, of sharing and of solidarity that facilitates the pursuit of common aims.

It was a German sociologist, Ferdinand Tönnies who, in his book *Community and Society (Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft)*, published in 1887, was first to define social groupings. His fundamental ideas can be summarised as follows: "All social relationships are created by human will. There are of two types:

1. The first is the *community (Gemeinschaft)*, created by the natural and instinctive tendency of individuals to associate spontaneously.
2. The second is *society (Gesellschaft)*, which is the result of arbitrary or formal decision with a deliberate end in view, determining future human activities."

Tönnies states that the first, *community*, creates close relationships of affinity that ensures the duration of the group since mutual sympathy between members makes them feel that the relationship is good in itself; a family and neighbourliness have these characteristics. The second, *society*, on the other hand, concerns business people, scientists and people in authority - in a word: *modern society*.

Tönnies showed himself clearly in favour of the values associated with a *community*. We too think along the same lines as he does in that today, it is not only possible but necessary, to build the social fabric on the basis of this type of *community* relationships.¹

From an exclusively sociological point of view and in terms of Tönnies' classification, the Teams of Our Lady are among the *community* type of social grouping (*Gemeinschaft*). They are characterised by the sharing of common values, namely evangelical values; they create bonds of affinity between their members, free of competitiveness, but aiming at a form of collaboration that we call *mutual help*; and they pursue a well-defined common objective: to foster the *married spirituality* of their members by practical means.

The rapidly increasing number of teams in the world (more than ten thousand) shows that this type of relationship is possible in today's world and that these relationships can be lasting, fruitful and effective.

2. The Christian meaning of community

When we look at Jesus' life, and especially his apostolic life, we cannot be surprised that he began by creating a small group of the *community* type. In this connection, Father Caffarel wrote: "*Our Lord Jesus Christ's great concern at the beginning and throughout his apostolic life has been to gather people together in a group. [...] It was Christ's will therefore to gather young men around him. As he walked passed one of them he would call [...] and they followed the Lord*"²

It is not by chance that Jesus gathered a community around himself: it is because one must live out the Gospel first and foremost as a faith community. It is by living in close relationship with other people that we learn the practice of a self-giving love. From our experience, we can say that the first faith community is the couple, then the family, then all the communities united with the universal Church in which we try to live out the Gospel.

How can we define a faith community?

It is made up of baptised people who seek the will of God and who, in their personal relationships, are guided by the love that Christ has taught us, are attentive to the Word of God, are

¹ Cf. Nicholas S. TIMASHEFF. *La Teoría Sociológica*. Fondo de cultura Económica. Décimo octava reimpresión. México, 1997, pp. 129 y ss.

² CAFFAREL Henri. "L'Ecclesia" Conference of Father Henri Caffarel, given at São Paulo in July 1957, to leading couples of the Teams of Our Lady, p. 2.

fortified by the Holy Spirit and are willing to serve others.

Jean Vanier, a specialist in faith communities, explains that: *“What distinguishes a community from an ordinary group of friends is that, in a community, we give expression to our bonds and shared membership. We make known our aims and the spirit that unites us. We acknowledge together that we are responsible for one another and that the bond between us comes from God and is a gift from God. It is He who chose us and has brought us together in an alliance of love and of mutual care...One must not look for the ideal community. It is a matter of loving those God has placed at our side today. They are signs for us of God’s presence”*³

In this context, the fundamental characteristic of a faith community is a life of love. Nevertheless, we must look for its origin in the very nature of God, as was so well explained six years ago by Xavier LACROIX during the International Gathering at St James of Compostella: *“The Christian God is not an individual, a static reality; he is himself a relationship, a communion. To the Trinitarian God corresponds the human community”*⁴

A community of faith has its characteristic life cycle:

1. *It comes into existence* – not by spontaneous generation but in response to the call of Christ: *“ ‘Follow me!’ And he got up and followed him”* (Mt 9: 9). Its members hear about it, try it, live it out and grow if they persevere in it. There are no precise rules for growth, but there are pointers: the common good over the individual’s good; the ongoing search for the will of God; and above all Christian charity.
2. *Its members grow*, by nourishing themselves with the Word of God, quiet prayer and the Eucharist. They practise love in imitation of Christ. They practise acceptance and forgiveness. The community fosters mutual growth of its members.
3. *It reproduces itself* by creating new communities of faith.
4. *Its members die* in the evangelical sense of self-denial. Every time that they forgive a brother in accordance with the ‘new commandment’ of love, they die a little to themselves; it is then that they experience a deep feeling of true happiness.

It is Christ himself who gathers believers together in order that love shall be the true symbol of Christians gathered in the great Church assembly. Thus, a faith community is not an ordinary human community, because it is founded on Christ for the purpose of living out the Gospel and proclaiming it to all corners of the world.

The Lord’s obsession – if we may dare to use this expression – is UNITY. *“May they all be one, just as, Father, you are in me and I am in you, so that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe it was you who sent me”* (Jn 17: 21). The most truly unifying social structure is the community. What is most opposite to Jesus is the breaking up of unity. For this reason, we have to say that we cannot be a Christian outside of the community.

Pope John Paul II said: *“Only a small number is necessary for the Church to exist, multiply and spread, arising from the decision of two or three to gather in the name of Christ and be united by Him in the prayer of the Father...”*⁵

3. The Christian couple: first faith community

The first faith community is the Christian couple who live out their faith in their sacrament of marriage. Christ commits himself to the spouses at the very moment that they commit themselves to each other. It then becomes a community of three: the two spouses and Christ.

³ VANIER Jean. « *La Communauté: Lieu du Pardon et de La Fête* ». FLEURUS – BELARMIN, Paris, 1989, p. 26 and 52.

⁴ LACROIX Xavier. “*Le lien à trois fils*”. Conference given at Saint James of Compostella on the 22nd of September 2000, N° 3.

⁵ JEAN-PAUL II: Allocution on the Church. Osservatore Romano N° 356 dated the 15th of July 1979.

We must first of all remember that, in the beginning, God willed to create the couple: “*God created man in the image of himself, in the image of God he created them, male and female he created them*” (Gn 1: 27-31). Sadly, for several centuries, the Church has disfigured, or at any rate obscured, this reality of God’s plan. Indeed, the ideal of holiness has been considered as something personal, even private, between husband or wife and their Creator. It is not our intention to discredit such a spiritual way of life and of growth, but simply to observe that married life has been considered as second best by those seeking to grow closer to God through holiness. It is interesting to observe that some have been raised to the altars “in spite” of their marriage or “thanks to the cross” that marriage entailed or, at best, thanks to the opportunity provided by widowhood.

Fortunately, the official position of the Church in this connection has evolved since the Second Vatican Council and the most recent Encyclical of Pope Benedict XVI: “*GOD IS LOVE*” refers to marriage as a way to perfection of the highest order: “*Marriage, based on an exclusive and definitive love, becomes the icon of the relationship between God and his people and, conversely, the way that God loves becomes the model of human love*” (n. 11)⁶. This is precisely what Father Caffarel, a prophet for our times, envisaged when he offered marriage as a model of holiness to members of the Teams of Our Lady:

*“One must not seek holiness outside of marriage.
There is no holiness in spite of marriage.
Holiness is achieved within marriage,
and, especially, through marriage”⁷*

It is for this reason that Mgr Fleishmann said that: *It seems to me that Father Caffarel is one of those people who have popularised anew the traditional concept of the consecrated couple as a cell of the Church, “in the sense of a small visible Christian community within the greater community of the parish; but - even more deeply - in the sense of a living element of the great spiritual society of the Church. ... Where a Christian couple lives, there the Church already begins to live.”⁸*

But, why “community”? Precisely because God created us in his image and likeness. This means nothing other than the ability to love that cannot be realised in isolation but in community. It is, in community, that we can practise the new commandment: “*Love one another, as I have loved you*” (Jn 15: 12). This commandment requires mutual giving, the total gift of self to the other, the will to live for you and not for me. It is in the Christian couple, first basic community, that one experiences and practises this mutual giving. It is for this reason that we affirm that the couple, united by the sacrament of marriage, is the first faith community.

A sacrament is a physical reality that is a sign of something supernatural. The sacrament of marriage is a physical reality (the believing couple) that is a sign to the world of the love of God for his people. But, as we have just said, because Christian marriage is a sacrament, it has an additional and fundamental element that differentiates it from any other union between a man and a woman, namely the presence of Christ in the couple that reinforces the notion of a faith community. Furthermore, God who alone is Holy, is involved in the couple as guarantor that the holiness of its members is possible and realisable despite human limitations.

From our own experience of love, lived out in the little community of our marriage, we have discovered a fundamental point, namely, God’s commitment to us through his infinite love, his faithfulness, his desire for our good, his immense tenderness, his goodness and his compassion for us both.

⁶ BENEDICT XVI, Encyclical Letter : « *Deus Caritas Est* ». Rome, 25th January 2006.

⁷ Letter of Marie-Jeanne VERCRUYSSÉ to Father THOMAZEAU – July 1997.

⁸ FLEISCHMANN, François. *Father Henri Caffarel’s legacy*. Conference given in Rome, during the meeting of Regional Couples of Teams, on the 22nd January 2003, p. 5.

4. The Christian family, a faith community

Most sociologists are agreed that the family is the basic unit of society, since the family is first to transmit culture. D Cooper who wrote a book in 1971 on “The death of the family”, had to change his opinion and affirm that the family does not die, but is transformed. Although, for numerous reasons, the traditional model of the family is facing a crisis in this third century, it is evident nevertheless that other types of families are appearing that preserve the same functions as the traditional family⁹. These functions have no other aims than to encourage “socialisation”, that is to say the process by which people, through interaction, develop ways of thinking, feeling and acting that are essential for taking part in society.

As a ‘home’ Church, the Christian family is a centre of love and knowledge of God and of respect for human life. It is the breeding ground of Christian virtues and cooperates in the proclamation of the Kingdom of God. In the strictest sense of the word, it is a faith community since it lives out the experience of God and fulfils a function within the Church of educating in the faith. The Colombian theologian, Silvio BOTERO wrote that: “*We can affirm that the family is the nearest ‘we’ in the experience of human beings in that they are created for love; it is also the nearest ‘we’ to God [the Trinity] who is the source and model of interpersonal relationships. And so it is that the family is at the cross-road of the human and of the divine*”¹⁰.

For their part, Alvaro and Mercedes GÓMEZ-FERRER, consider that “*perhaps the most important lesson that Teams give us is to remind us constantly that the family depends on the couple and that, to be concerned about the couple, their love and their growth always proves to be beneficial to the family, since the family depends on the love of the couple that must remain throughout time*”¹¹.

The upbringing of children in Christian values is at the heart of the family. This upbringing is by a process of ‘imitation’ which, according to social psychologists, is three times more effective than verbal instruction. Therefore, dear parents of Teams, do not be so preoccupied with what you say to your children, but rather with giving them the witness of your love and of consistency between what you believe and what you practise. This is all that is necessary!

5. The Teams of Our Lady, a living community of couples

In the document “What is a Team of Our Lady?”, one reads: “*A Team of Our Lady is not a mere human community: it meets “in the name of Christ” and it seeks to help its members to grow in the love of God and of neighbour, so as to respond better to the call of Christ*”¹².

The Movement is a community of communities in the faith. Our wonderful gathering, which would be categorised as a *social conglomerate*, is much more than that because we are living out these days in close communion with Christ in his Spirit.

In July 1957, Father Caffarel gave a very important conference on “the Church”, at Sao Paulo in Brazil¹³. In it he stated that “*for a meeting of Christians to be an Ecclesia, that is a faith community, there are a number of conditions to be fulfilled:*

- *to meet together in faith;*
- *to make a break with what we are attached to;*
- *to meet in Christ’s name;*
- *to unite oneself with Christ through brotherly love;*
- *to listen to Christ present in his Word;*

⁹ Cf. Silvio BOTERO. *La familia en el Tercer Milenio*. Ediciones San Pablo. Bogotá, 2000. p. 117

¹⁰ Ibid. p 127

¹¹ GÓMEZ-FERRER, Alvaro and Mercedes. “*Los Medios que proponen los Equipos para desarrollar un Proyecto de Familia*”. National meeting of Responsible Couples of teams. Madrid, Saturday 27th of September 2003, p. 3.

¹² Teams of Our Lady, “What is a Team of Our Lady?” September 1976.

¹³ CAFFAREL, Henri. “*L’Ecclesia*”. Op. Cit. pp. 9 and ss.

- *to respond to Christ through personal prayer and team prayer (thanksgiving, praise or petition)."*

We have just listed the conditions that Father Caffarel put forward for a team meeting to be an authentic faith community; nevertheless, we all know very well that the team meeting is only the high point of team life. Team life carries on permanently in non-defined ways. It is in this that one finds one of the fundamental conditions for a community: namely its permanent character that is rooted in mutual giving between its members. It is this permanence that makes the difference with a simple "group" that meet frequently in the pursuit of a given objective; once the objective has been achieved, the group loses the reason for its existence.

The faith community also pursues a specific objective. Nevertheless, because its objective is not, by its very nature, fully achievable, it is necessary to extend its pursuit over time. This objective is none other than the holiness of its members. According to Pope Benedict XVI, it is a question of *"the permanent effort that we must make in order to model ourselves on the Son of God..."*¹⁴

The team achieves its full maturity as a faith community *"when prompted by the Spirit of Christ, it sends out its members in the world to reveal the love of God"*.¹⁵ The faith community does not exist without compassion for 'the other' and without this giving of oneself to 'the other'. Its members commit themselves to 'the other' in the spirit of the parable of the Good Samaritan. It loses its meaning if it remains shut in upon itself. Its essence is to be committed to the world because Christ, in his love, has given his life for the whole world and not only for a specific people.

Jean VANIER affirms in this connection that *"the feeling of belonging to a people, and the covenant and commitment that it entails, are at the heart of community life."* And, immediately after, he asks himself *"What is my people? Is it only those with whom I live and who have the same choices as I have; or is it those for whom the community was created?"*¹⁶ Clearly his answer points to a wider community. In the case of the Teams of Our Lady this means that our sense of belonging, 'our people', cannot be limited to those who, today, constitute our team or who belong to the Movement; rather, in a wider sense, 'our people' includes all Christian couples and, in an even wider sense, all those who live out their love as a couple.

This is precisely the point that Father Caffarel stressed indefatigably; *"Teams must not be a 'nursery' for grown-ups... its members must be always involved in all spheres..."*¹⁷ - *"Why did I join Teams? Was it to take or to give?..."*¹⁸ - *"You do not appear sufficiently concerned with INVENTING your team life..."*¹⁹ - *"If the Teams of Our Lady are not a formative way for men and women, ready to take on courageously all their responsibilities in the Church and society, they lose the reason for their existence..."*²⁰

Blessed Charles de Foucauld, for his part, affirmed that: *"Every Christian needs to be an apostle; this is not just a word of advice, but a commandment: the commandment of love."*²¹

As baptised persons in union with all other baptised persons in the world, we, members of the Teams of Our Lady, belong to the great community of communities: that is the universal Church. For its part, the Teams Movement is an active community in the Church; its members are 'united' in the Spirit and are a living expression of 'a community' in human society. Consequently, Teams couples, as couples joined by the sacrament of marriage, we must be builders of a society based on love according to God's plan.

¹⁴ BENEDICT XVI, at his general audience on Wednesday 7th of September 2005.

¹⁵ Teams of Our Lady, "What is a Team of Our Lady?" September 1976..

¹⁶ VANIER Jean. Op. Cit. p. 93.

¹⁷ Teams. *Monthly Letter, June 1948:* "Nurseries for grown ups"

¹⁸ Teams. *Monthly Letter, December 1948:* "Accommodating Spirituality"

¹⁹ Teams. *Monthly Letter, March 1949:* "Be inventive"

²⁰ Cité dans : *Le Guide des Equipes Notre-Dame.* Mars, 2001, XI - B)

²¹ The best sayings of Charles de FOUCAULD. Vatican City, Monday 19 September 2005. (ZENIT.org)

6. The Church, community of communities, united by the faith

Theologians today consider that it is not possible to live an authentic Christian life outside of a Christian community. Some even go so far as to say that the Church is the fundamental sacrament, understood as a faith community (Karl Rahner). It is only thanks to the presence of Christ that we can relate to each other within the community that is the Church. The Church is where the Gospel comes true. The Second Vatican Council expressed itself thus: “*God, however, does not make men holy and save them merely as individuals, without bond or link between one another. Rather has it pleased Him to bring men together as one people, a people which acknowledges Him in truth and serves Him in holiness.*” (*Lumen Gentium*, n. 9)

We have all been brought up in an individualistic and selfish culture that prevents us seeing the Church as a community, as the People of God. Like the early Christians, we must rediscover that Christ is in the midst of us. He enables us to establish ourselves as a faith community in so far as we constitute an environment within which the risen Christ can live and in which we are the true “People of God”. It seems to us that this is a point that is fundamental to our work of reflection.

What does “People of God” mean? All peoples (or nations) are identified by the fact that

- they occupy a specific geographical location with well established frontiers,
- they have historical and cultural links that unite them,
- they have given themselves a body of laws that defines an autonomous State.

God the Father wanted us to be his People (nation) and to that end he gathered us - not in a territorial location with defined borders (as in the case of the Jewish people in the Old Testament) - but around his Son Jesus Christ, in union with the Father and the Holy Spirit, in accordance with the New Testament.

Our identity is therefore defined by our degree of identification with the Spirit of Christ that we receive in baptism. Our law is the new commandment of love. Our language is the charity practised with our brothers and sisters - not only those that belong to our People, the Church - but with all human beings. Our most valued asset is the Gospel. It is because of this that Christ is at the centre of our life and of our faith. We are not formulating a theory, but noticing a reality, namely, the unity that we are experiencing in this Gathering in which neither geographical, linguistic or cultural barriers have prevented us from living as the People of God, united by the Spirit of Jesus.

On the occasion of the World Youth Day in Cologne in 2005, Pope Benedict XVI said: “*Create communities founded on faith! [...] It is also important to preserve communion with the Pope and the Bishops. It is they who guarantee that we are not searching for private paths, but on the contrary that we are living in the great family of God that the Lord has founded with the twelve Apostles*”²².

7. The evangelising role of the Teams of Our Lady in today’s world

At the beginning of this conference, we asked ourselves the question: in what way can the Teams of Our Lady, a living community of couples, provide a convincing and shining response to the needs of today’s world?

As we have just said, we are aware that we are constantly struggling in an individualistic - nay even selfish – world that has taken a direction that rapidly distances it from the Christian ideal of a civilisation of love. Paradoxically, our world is not unlike that experienced by early Christian communities: a world characterised by a predominantly God-less culture. It would not be an exaggeration to define it today as a “neo-pagan” culture. Referring to this culture, Father P. Bartolomeo Sorge, SJ wrote: “*Like paganism of old, it glorifies moral deviations, violence, wealth and power. It has, especially, clearly shown an inability to bring about a happier, freer and more just human society. And though it is true that it has allowed us to ‘have’ more, it has condemned us*

²² BENEDICT XVI, *homily on the occasion of the World Day of Youth*, in Cologne, 15th August 2005.

to 'be' less..." With him, in the face of this reality, we ask ourselves the more fundamental question: "How can we proclaim the Gospel today in a way that it can be understood and freely accepted by all?"²³

The Gospel is not a collection of abstract truths; it is not only a doctrine but a living experience. To evangelise is first and foremost a matter of broadening peoples' outlook so that they can discover union with Christ; it is to open peoples' heart so that they can become receptive to the coming of the Spirit of Christ in them. The Gospel is a person; it is a community. The Kingdom of God can only exist in a community of faith.

The evangelists described as follows the creation of the small community of Jesus and his twelve disciples. "Thus began for the disciples a direct acquaintance with the Master. They saw where he was living and they started to know him. Indeed, they were not to be the announcers of an idea, but the witnesses of a person."²⁴ When we read the Acts of the Apostles, we notice that, later on, Paul, who was thrown out of the synagogues, was obliged to frequent a new kind of place, initially among the families of believers of Jewish origin and then among pagan families, transforming their homes into a place dedicated to the proclamation of the Gospel. Nevertheless, Paul's principal role was not to preach. He was "himself" the proclamation of the Gospel since, as a person identified with Christ, he influenced the family community by transforming the current human and natural values of the pagans into Christian values. In other words, Paul set going veritable conversions; he awakened faith in the person of Christ by transforming ordinary pagan families into real Christian communities.²⁵

Our strategy cannot, therefore, be other than that followed by the early Christians: namely to insert ourselves in homes and in families so as to imbue their culture at their very base with evangelical values. In fact, the spreading of the Gospel cannot be done either on a massive scale or by rational arguments; it must be a "live" process, making us witnesses of the person of Christ. This is why we need to seek a community life for it is only by it that it is possible to insert the Gospel into the various aspects of human life, so as to transform consciences, cultures and customs from the inside with the strength and light of the Gospel. To be a Christian is to live according to the values of the Gospel within the culture in which we live.

However, we must bear in mind that, according to Sorge, "the Church and Christians are a small minority today within a society and culture that is largely de-christianised and neo-pagan. Nevertheless, it is not a bad thing for the Church to be a minority: it is its original condition... Indeed, the Church – a little flock (Lk 12: 32) – was not born to be a vast crowd but to be the yeast".²⁶

It is in this perspective that we can look at the evangelising role of the TEAMS OF OUR LADY in the world today. Sixty years after our foundation, we have a very significant "relative advantage": we are present in the five continents with more than 10,000 teams; this means approximately 50,000 couples, that is to say more than 100,000 members. Few movements in the Church can count, to quote the words of our Charter, on "volunteer commandos" in such numbers and of such quality, with a sustained annual growth rate in the last twelve years of 4¼ % that are present in all corners of the world. It did not happen by chance. It is a clear manifestation of Providence and of the Holy Spirit, as Father Caffarel recognised a few years before his death.²⁷

In spite of this advantageous position, we are still a *minority*. This is why, within our "living community of couples", we need to be converted and acquire a clear historical sense of the mission to which we are called, as His Holiness John Paul II reminded us in his address to Regional Couples in January 2003: "Called to become a light for those who seek the truth (*Lumen Gentium* No 35)

²³ SORGE, Bartolomeo S.J.. *Per una civiltà dell'amore*. Quiriniana. Terza edizione, Brescia 1999. Cap. 7, pp. 97 et ss.

²⁴ BENEDICT XVI: "The Apostles' adventure", "Experts on Jesus". Wednesday Catechesis 22nd March 2006.

²⁵ BAENA S.J., Gustavo. "Lineamentos de Pastoral de la Cultura". En Sínodo Arquidiocesano de Bogotá – Seminario – Taller de Discernimiento. W. Taller Editorial. Bogotá D.C., 1993, pp. 217-252.

²⁶ SORGE, Bartolomeo S.J.. Op. Cit. p. 101

²⁷ Cf. CAFFAREL, Henri. "The founding charism" Chantilly, 3rd March 1987.

*especially for their children; husbands and wives will then be able to make use fully of the graces of their Baptism in their specific mission within the family, society and the Church...*²⁸

Admittedly, the fundamental charism of our Movement, the reason for its existence, is none other than to live with God as a couple, discovering the riches of our sacrament of marriage. For us, members of Teams, that is what living out married spirituality means. To that end, we come together as a team (a community of couples) so as to help one another to pursue our ideal. Thus it is that, over the years, Teams have shown a great capacity to train Christian couples in the light of the Gospel. In this way, there is no doubt that they constitute authentic faith communities. Nevertheless, in agreement with Jean VANIER, “*a community becomes truly one and influential when all its members have a sense of urgency about their mission*”²⁹.

We hear it said, outside of our Movement, that team life is inward-looking and has little impact on its environment. Nevertheless, we read in the Guide to the Teams: “*The members of the Teams of Our Lady live in today’s world. They are fully part of it and want to be the ‘yeast in the dough’. This is why they must constantly discern the signs of the times to discover the new realities and the needs of couples today*”³⁰.

Historical and cultural influences have had an enormous impact on people’s way of thinking, on their set of values, their attitudes and their behaviour. “To discern the signs of the times” means to accept the effects of these influences on the evolution of the aspirations and needs of men and women of our time and to interpret their aspirations and needs accordingly. One must observe the signs of the times more particularly in people of today, in each successive generation, in their most harrowing questioning of life today and tomorrow, in their deepest aspirations and deepest frustrations.

We cannot remain indifferent to the reality facing the people of our time. We are called to be “*the yeast in the dough*” (Mt 13: 33). Admittedly, the yeast in the dough is in the ‘minority’, but it is not for all that ‘marginalized’. If it is good, it is destined to ferment the whole mass.³¹ Similarly, the salt is a ‘minority’ in the food to be salted, but its task is not ‘marginal’ for all that.

As members of the Teams of Our Lady, we must be well aware of the demands of our Christian vocation and, discerning the signs of the time, to respond actively and quickly to the call of Christ to be salt of the earth, light of the world and yeast in the dough. In so doing, we will ensure that our Movement has a lasting place in history. We must also be aware, as Christian couples, that the family is recognised by most sociologists of all times as being at the very heart of society. We are called to give witness to our faith, to our love and to our hope in a world that floats rudderless in a sea of individualism. We cannot fail to proclaim the good news of Christian marriage to all married couples, to those preparing for marriage, to the ever-growing number of couples co-habiting before marriage and even to those civilly married, that they may discover that Christian marriage is a way of love, of happiness and of holiness. This is our “people” in Jean VANIER’s terms. Let us not allow our teams to become “kindergardens for ‘respectable’ adults”, but ‘commando units’ within the Church and society.

Furthermore, the number of divorces and separations are increasing exponentially. The ‘sick’ are the couples left lying by the side of the road. Our sense of a loving community means that we cannot exclude from our “people” all those couples in difficulties and who have similar aspirations, such as divorced persons and remarried divorcees. Because of our vocation and formation, we are called - among our non-Teams activities - to ‘accompany’ such people, as too few people do, so that

²⁸ JOHN PAUL II., *Address to the Regional Couples of the Teams of Our Lady*. Rome, January 2003, n. 5.

²⁹ VANIER Jean. Op. Cit. p. 92

³⁰ TEAMS OF OUR LADY. “*Guide to the Teams of Our Lady*”, p. 6.

³¹ SORGE Bartolomeo S.J., Op. Cit. p. 101

they can find the love of God the merciful, as John Paul II asked us to do in the course of his address quoted above: “*May they find on their journey witnesses of the tenderness and mercy of God.*”³²

In conclusion, we must bear witness to the fact that only Christ, the centre of our life, can give meaning to our lives as individuals, as couples and as members of a team that is an authentic faith community. In this way, we can contribute effectively to the building up of the Kingdom of God in our society under the sign of the NEW CIVILISATION OF LOVE!

There is no more appropriate way of ending this conference than to say the prayer to Our Lady with which Pope Benedict XVI concluded his Encyclical “God is Love”:

*Holy Mary, Mother of God,
you gave the true light to the world:
Jesus, your Son – Son of God.
You surrendered yourself totally
to God’s call
and thus became the source
of the goodness springing forth from Him.
Show us Jesus; guide us to Him.
Teach us to know and love Him,
that, we too, may be able
to become capable of true love
and be springs of living water
in the midst of a thirsty world. Amen.*

Alberto and Constanza ALVARADO
Team members

³² JEAN-PAUL II, *Allocution aux couples responsables Régionaux des END*. Rome, janvier 2003, n. 7.