



Henri Caffarel, prophète pour notre temps
Colloque International – 8 & 9 Décembre 2017

THE COUPLE, THE TEAM AND THE PRIEST

Amaya Echandi & José Antonio Marcén
Father Gabriel Larraya, o.f.m. cap.

Introduction

(Amaya)

Thank you for giving us this opportunity to provide our own small contribution to the Cause for canonisation of Father Caffarel. We are convinced that this process will contribute to increasing the number of couples who discover the profound meaning of the word “love,” the value of the sacrament of marriage and the transforming power of their communion with priests.

(José Antonio)

In 1996, the year of Father Caffarel’s death, the Team we belong to was five years old. We remember very well that the news of his death had no repercussions in our Sector. If truth be told, we did not know too much about him even during his lifetime. The origin of the Movement had been presented to us more as the initiative of a group of couples with Christian preoccupations about marriage, who had gone to see “a priest.”

It is precisely the opening of the Cause for canonisation, and this Colloquium is part of that dynamic, that enabled us to get to know Father Caffarel’s life and thinking in-depth. We first heard about this Cause during the International Gathering of Regional Responsible Couples in 2009. We remember Father Marcovits words very well, “*I exhort you to read and pray to Father Caffarel to whom we owe so much: and thus, he will become for you as for me someone very much alive.*” Yes indeed, today, we can bear witness to the fact that Father Caffarel is very much alive amongst us; we feel that he accompanies and stimulates us with the same enthusiasm and level of requirement with which he accompanied that first Team.

(Amaya)

The Movement has just published a document (**show it to the audience**) that records an essential part of Father Caffarel’s thinking: the importance of the presence of priests for couples on their journey towards holiness; an intuition that was welcomed and developed by the Teams of Our Lady to the point of becoming one of its identifying marks. Moreover: from numerous testimonies, the document demonstrates that Father Caffarel managed to devise a way of mutual accompaniment between priests and couples, a sort of link between our two sacraments, that is a source of stability, commitment and constant renewal for both parties. “*A fruitful collaboration,*” says the Teams of Our Lady’s Charter and one that is essential for the future of the Church.

Let us share our reflection on this very remarkable contribution of Father Caffarel’s to the life of the Church.



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"Giving Oneself God, Giving Oneself Life"

(José Antonio)

Leading each other towards God: *giving oneself God, giving oneself life...* This is the mystique of the Teams of Our Lady and the ultimate goal of the founding Charter that we are currently commemorating. The long pathway that Teams have travelled throughout the world has enabled us all to understand that priests and laity can mutually help each other to progress in the knowledge of the mystery of Christ. On the one hand, priests accompany couples in the difficult discernment that they are called to make every day and, on the other hand, the proximity of couples who pray and who love each other helps priests to exercise their ministry with more energy and depth.

The dynamic of the Teams of Our Lady is founded upon an "*encounter*," that implies welcoming and accepting each other and communicating. It is an encounter between couples, an encounter between couples and priests, and also an encounter between priests (we have to spend a bit more time thinking about the scope of this last relationship, perhaps). It would be easy to find thousands of testimonies from couples and Spiritual Counsellors about the enrichment they received thanks to this means of communion that the pedagogy founded by Father Caffarel promotes. Pope Francis, in his 2015 Rome speech to Teams, emphasised "*the mutual fruitfulness of this encounter experienced with a priest who supports you, [...] faithful participation in Team life, which brings to each one the richness of learning and of sharing, as well as the help and comfort of friendship.*"

(Father Gabriel)

What does it mean for me, as a Spiritual Counsellor, *to give life* to my Team? Very simply, it means "serving." On this subject, Father Caffarel addressed strong words to both couples as well as to us priests. He said, shortly after having promulgated the Charter, "*You must always come back to this first truth: whoever comes to take, leaves empty handed and whoever comes to give, receives.*"

My essential mission as Spiritual Counsellor is "to be the sign and presence of Christ" and this I accomplish in three different ways:

- By being at the service of married love, that is, helping couples welcome and accept the grace of their sacrament in their daily lives.
- By also being at the service of the Magisterium, that is, promoting the study of the understanding of one's faith, above all using the Biblical texts that we read at every meeting.
- By being at the service of communion, that is, helping the Team to be built and to be re-built if necessary, given the variety of people, mentalities and life choices.

And Father Caffarel was right: I receive a lot. As the Pope rightly perceived in his recent meeting with the Teams of Our Lady, in the contact that I have with the members of my Team and their families, I always find "*priestly joy, fraternal presence, emotional balance and spiritual paternity.*" Not being a biological father was the greatest renunciation of my life. But my experience in the Teams of Our Lady helped me understand that the priest's fruitfulness overcomes this void. This deprivation of myself enables me to give life by giving God. Father Caffarel described this joy of giving life that the priest feels very well, "*life was within him and suddenly he communicated it.*" (L'Anneau d'Or, 1955)

But it is not only a question of personal growth. I also am blessed to see the Church being enriched by the contribution of so many couples who are mature in their faith. It is something that I have been able to verify personally in the International College sessions of the Teams of Our Lady, where we deal with the



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current challenges for couples and the family with determination and in depth. These debates and reflections that I participated in were, in their subject matter and intensity, a bit like the “aperitif” before the two Synods called for shortly afterwards by Pope Francis and at which the Teams of Our Lady’s opinions and voice were even heard. Father Caffarel clearly spoke of this before the 1987 Chantilly Gathering of Regional Responsible Couples, when he said; *“The alliance between the priesthood and marriage that is created in Teams facilitates the vital dialogue so that the Church’s thinking tries to respond not only to needs, but also to the inspiration of couples.”* (and I highlight the word *inspiration*). From this perspective, Father Caffarel’s charismatic formulation *“let us seek together”* acquires an ecclesial dimension.

A style of Spiritual Accompaniment

(Amaya)

For our part, we are delighted to belong to the Teams of Our Lady because we enjoy a type of spiritual accompaniment, according to the Pope’s very words, *“which call for prudence, understanding, patience and docility to the Spirit.”*¹

Team life has enabled us to understand perfectly the significance of the priest as both “father and brother.” In him, we find a respectful, compassionate, committed attentiveness that is very different from that of a simple observer. With discretion and wisdom, he creates a place in which Scripture gradually becomes incarnate in us; our understanding of the sacraments increases little by little; and he helps us discern when faced with world events and those in our own lives. But he also shares his weaknesses and difficulties, and when we see his own struggles, we become stronger in our own.

It is in the Teams of Our Lady that we have noticed the transforming power of the union between priests and couples in small communities: the capacity for transformation without limits, without blind obedience, without fundamental ideologies. We have proved that it is possible to build Christian communities that are open, varied and complementary.

(José Antonio)

Yes, it is in the Teams of Our Lady that we really felt ourselves to be “living stones of the Church.” The Movement’s dynamic, and particularly its link with priests, makes the love of the Church, the awareness of belonging and the commitment of its mission grow.

It is in the Team that we learnt to welcome and honour priests, just as Father Caffarel specifically asked. However, it is a readiness that is confined not only within Teams, but one that continues and extends to all other priests, especially our diocesan pastors.

Such a strong link with our Spiritual Counsellor creates a spiritual concern for us: if his joy is “to give us life,” how will we help him if we do not show ourselves to be alive, active and continually growing? ... It is the worry of not making available the great treasure of the Teams of Our Lady: that is, the presence and accompaniment of priests that Father Caffarel kindled.

¹ *Evangelii gaudium*, 171.



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Conclusion

(Father Gabriel)

Allow me to finish up with a brief personal conclusion:

Father Caffarel sensed that married spirituality, the foundation of spouses' Christian life, could reach its goal if the grace of the marriage sacrament was complemented with that of the sacrament of orders. But, at the same time, the priest's spirituality was enriched and became more fruitful with the accompaniment of the spouses who shared their faith and love with him.

I can bear witness to the fact that this intuition, which the Holy Spirit breathed into Father Caffarel, has become truly effective in the Teams of Our Lady.

In my Franciscan order—I'm a Capuchin monk—the life of brotherhood offers you the possibility of practicing all of the Endeavours that I later encountered in Teams, including the "Sit-Down," which is a very intimate communication. As I grew older and as I spent more time living in brotherhood with older monks, communication was not so profound and, by some, was not felt to be so important. It was precisely at that moment that the Teams contacted me—20 years ago already—and I was able to experience a religious rejuvenation by sharing my life of faith and my experiences in another atmosphere: with couples and families. I always have had the feeling that my presence as a Spiritual Counsellor was not to be there to see how to help these couples, but rather that the Lord put me with these couples so that together we would seek God and his will for each of us. Them with me and me with them. Team life, and the responsibilities that I share with Amaya and José Antonio, have made me value even more the generosity of couples and the richness and universality of the Movement. How humble I have felt when I compare my relatively easy life with the dedication and daily involvement of my Team members.

I believe that the Movement ought to continue to help Team members and priests discover and experience the joint grace of their two sacraments. Spiritual Counsellors cannot be considered to be mere extras in the Team's spiritual life. We have to live out our particular vocation as an integral part of the Team to which we belong. This was a gift and a grace for me that helped me as a person, as a believer and as a religious priest.