



#meeting14

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Meeting for Friendship amongst People
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Testimonies from the Edges: A Subject for Development

People who became new actors, shown at the AVSI exhibit

Rimini, August 28, 2014 – Davide Perillo, the director of the monthly magazine *Traces* introduced this session stating that: “What we are interested in discovering is how the work of AVSI is capable of generating new actors and not merely objects of state funding.” Stefania Famlonga, Responsible of Avsi Ecuador, and John Waters, a journalist and the curator of the exhibit “Generating Beauty. New Beginning at the Ends of the Earth,” were the speakers.

Stefania Famlonga works in the *favela* ‘Invasione’, at 3,000 m above sea level, on a hill “crowded by 15 thousand people who wanted to build their house and look for a job, living in constructions without sewage, water, and light.” She looks after 500 families, accompanying parents (especially mothers) in their educative task. When she arrived, eleven years ago, she thought she already knew what poverty was. “I had previously worked with poor people in Romania, I belonged to CL, I was European, and AVSI had money. I was struck when I saw their genuine humanity, without masks. Many of them didn’t even complete the first cycle of grade school, yet they had a humanity that I lacked.” She began having meetings in which they read Fr. Giussani’s or Carron’s writings, reviewing their own lives in the light of those words: their relationships, their experience as being women, and their desire to go back to school.

“I’ve seen myself and them changing, together with their families and neighbors: people who were born again and not crushed.” What changes is the gaze: in the margins she found herself. They decide to print 500 copies of ‘The Risk of Education’ by Fr. Luigi Giussani (in Spanish): “It was moving to see mothers walking on the dusty roads of Pisulli with that booklet in their hands. Until that point they couldn’t read or write...”. Such women became the protagonists of their own life to the point of stating: “it is not enough that you teach our children: we want to learn how to do it.” Famlonga thought her task was thus completed, but instead she found that “that point was the beginning of everything: life is more a question of sharing than a question of success. We can all walk together, in front of the Mystery, on the same level, because we all are needy and poor.”

John Waters recounted: “I was born in Western Ireland. We were four people living in two rooms, but I would have never used the word ‘poor’ to describe my family.” Avsi charged him with the task of observing their projects in Ecuador, Kenya, and Brazil, to create an exhibit. “I didn’t possess the criteria to determine whether one is poor or not, thus for me it was truly interesting to understand that issue. Children in the favelas have a smiling face because the truth has been told to them: ‘You are special, you can fulfil your dreams.’”

Waters met mothers wounded by guilt for not being able to properly feed their children. He realized that “poverty is not just a material issue, but it is also a wound caused by shame and humiliation.” Waters thus



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understood that “money is useless if people are not embraced, because poverty is a wound that is passed down from father to son. Here lies the difference between my family and these: we never conceived of ourselves as poor people, because we didn’t feel humiliated by our modest condition.” To give money is not enough: “What is necessary is that I encounter you. You are like me, we are together. What I had in mind to realize, when I put together this exhibit, is that the visitor could perceive this promise within it.

(M.G.D’A., D.T.)

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