

Living on the margins of life

The project now under way at Jerez de la Frontera (Spain) began partly through friendship with a social worker. The sisters visit the place. The needs are great; thanks to the help of the "Association for the Suburbs" they find work and a place to live. Contact with human misery, drugs and sickness. The service offered. The idea, now realised, of building a house to take people with AIDS. The Siloe Association. Creating a home for the terminally ill, seeking to reunite them with their families. Making them aware of being loved by the Father, in the spirit of service and prayer of Mother Géline. A particular care for those in prison.

Community reflection.

Our search

This venture began at San Sebastián, the regional city of one of the Basque provinces of northern Spain.

A look around us (religious communities were numerous in our former territory) and a reflection carried out in community showed us that we needed to find a new place to live, one which would allow us to live close to the people in a simple lifestyle. The visit of a friend, a social worker, gave us a new and positive orientation.

She had been living and working professionally in Andalusia (southern Spain) at Jerez de la Frontera; a city which in the last sixty years has seen its population increase to 200,000, with families coming mainly from the country and now living in the suburbs, in flood areas.

The visit to Jerez by two sisters of the community put us in con-

tact with the "Association for the Suburbs", made up of people who were aware of the extremely unhealthy living conditions of more than 3,000 families. Once houses have been built, the Association aims at carrying out work mainly aimed at accompanying families during the stage of adaptation, directing them to the various serv-

ices which are being created: schools, nurseries, means of transport, parishes, and neighbourhood organisations.

The Association for the Suburbs had offered us team work in one of the districts as part of a community development project; and they also offered us accommodation. The work of the three sisters would bring in a stipend,

The sisters by the trees, Community of Jerez



modest but sufficient for our lifestyle.

We decided that this mission corresponded to the aspirations we had at the beginning of our community reflection, and we began drawing up a foundation plan to present to the General Government. It was approved at the General Chapter, and our community expressed its thanks for the support and trust the Congregation was giving us.

The beginnings.

The community project

Arriving at Jerez, we were welcomed by the Association, which had arranged for us to stay for a while in the religious community of the Reparation sisters. While at their house in the city centre, we dedicated some days to observation, to reflection, and to hearing about the social situation of the people of Jerez; and at the same time we made our first contacts with the people of the district, our future neighbours, in the place where our apartment was being completed.

When this indispensable work was finished, the three sisters began their community life in the San Telmo housing estate. Having gathered information, we drew up an initial community Project which would allow us to take the first steps in the fraternal and apostolic life we were planning to live.

One of the first objectives of the Project ran as follows: *“To live with the impoverished people of our district in order to know them better, to go forward with them on their search for a life with more dignity; and in this journey we make together, to*



A moment of relaxation under the pergola of the house at Siloe

proclaim the Gospel to them”. We were introduced to the Bishop of Seville (Jerez is now constituted as a diocese); he received us graciously and encouraged us to keep living our community Project.

In the project, we took as our starting-points:

-to begin to live an Apostolic Life, sent out in mission by our Congregation just as Mother Géline sent out her daughters;
-to adopt a simple lifestyle, consistent, as far as possible, with that lived by the great majority of the families of our district;
-to foster relationships within the community: changing from a life that was semi-conventual to an active life as apostolic Dominican sisters;
-to give ourselves time to adapt to change of habits, to the language, to food and to the climate;
-to be aware that our neighbourliness with the people demands a constant exercise of re-

sponsibility and taking of decisions;

-to live in community by our work, on the stipend given us by the Association.

(This Project was always intended to be adapted to the demands of the mission.)

At this stage, one sister worked as a teacher in the district's nursery school, set up by the Association; another sister worked for the social assistance, and the third as a social worker. The Prefecture sent her to work in another district, also in the suburbs of the city.

After a few months a fourth sister came to join us, to offer nursing care in a small dispensary, helping the sick who could not go to the city healthcare centre. The first needs satisfied were:

- children's education: the nearness of our neighbours enabled us to make the parents aware of the importance of sending their children to school, especially the small ones;
- enrolment on the civil regis-

ters: whole families had never done this, but there were also registered families whose villages of origin had suffered devastation during the civil war;

- as members of the parish Pastoral Team, we took part in everything to do with its organisation; we began to celebrate and pray with the people who wished;
- visits to families to carry out the district census.

Stages in living out the community Project

a) The completed census brought in important information about the San Telmo housing estate:

- approximate population, 5000 inhabitants;
- a high percentage of families had come to the district to lodge in tiny houses or shacks; they were coming from the country or had been living in caves;
- families of ethnic gypsies were not having any difficulties integrating into the area;
- most families responded to traditional practices of faith (processions, young people joining the confraternities).

Subsequently, the population came to be settled in housing estates, which were a response to the numerous requests for accommodation.

The parish of St Paul, made up of these housing estates, was caring for 3,000 families.

b) Our community grew - with the first profession of a young woman who had taught cutting and sewing in a workshop organised for women. When her time of postulancy and novitiate

was completed, she continued her work with the women of the district. Then one of the sisters of the community died; and we experienced the affection and warm friendship she and all the community had received from many persons with whom we had been working, in the parish and especially in Adult Catechesis, in Pastoral healthcare, in Liturgy groups and the Caritas groups. We had also collaborated in the Neighbourhood Association to improve living conditions, and with organising all the structures and materials that were needed.

Little by little the community mission is adapting to the changes which people were experiencing; and new needs are emerging.

c) *In the community we continue to practise itinerancy; we keep ourselves in search, open to new needs brought by social change: open to people, open to the defence of equal rights for men and women, open to social situations brought about by the challenge caused by new "concepts of family" in today's society.*

This new scenario presupposes that we are open to social changes and are willing to collaborate in giving responses to emerging needs.

Drugs have begun to make inroads into our district: the young, who are without work or even the hope of a first job, use them, and whole families are dedicated to selling them as an easy way of making

money, together with other activities of the backstreets economy.

The consumption of drugs has also contributed to the spread of AIDS, which affects many young people of the district.

The population has not always been well-informed about this disease. Families were afraid of their neighbours' rejection, and did everything possible to hide the sickness which raged through members of the same family. The situation was precarious, and in many cases there was overcrowding even in small houses because of the numbers of families seeking a place to live. Those who were hospitalised also suffered rejection, even by some healthcare personnel who lacked sufficient knowledge about the disease.

What can we do? was the constant question in our community reflection. Contact with the sick and their families was not sufficient; visits to hospitals, however, offered us opportunities to talk to people sensitive to this problem.

Creation of the SILOE

Association – our team work

We began through meetings of reflection with people in the healthcare sphere; we were con-



tinually troubled by the thought of how we could even begin giving effective help to these people, who suffer not only from "clinical" AIDS, but from "social" AIDS.

We gave priority to our formation and to gathering the necessary information to give to stricken families. The team agreed to create an association, and we gave it the name of *The Jerez Help Association for those suffering from HIV/AIDS, SILOE*. At the same time, we organised a campaign to make other groups in the Parishes (and neighbouring Associations) aware of the problem and its ramifications.

The principal object of the Siloe Association was clear: the creation of a house for the sick of the Jerez region. The AIDS-awareness stage lasted for three years, during which time various plans were developed: accompanying sufferers in their homes, accompaniment of families of the sick in hospital, counselling and information offered in a small premises which had been opened in the San Telmo district. Here we met with the sick, and with the first volunteers who were beginning to arrive.

By this time, the Association was growing: formation and information helped us to establish short/medium/long-term objectives. The Association was making itself well-known to the Prefecture of the city: it was time to reveal our plans to the Prefect. He trusted the members of the Association, encouraged them and made them a gift of the site where the house would be built. The building was finished in a



year. The debts were great, and this time the Prefect said to us, "You think about the care of the sick, and the Prefecture will think about the debts".

We are seeing how, as religious, it is possible to bring ourselves close to present-day situations and problems in a discreet way, like yeast in the dough, like salt. It was unthinkable that we could bring about a project of such importance as building a House; we experienced here, as at other times, that there are very positive results when we work together, give a presence, share projects, give ourselves and proclaim Jesus to those who are neediest, along with other people who are concerned and actively involved in the problem. Our union with them is effective and positive.

d) When we had achieved our goal of building the house, our community saw how useful it would be if the sister who had been working in the local school asked for a three-year leave of absence, to dedicate herself to the new mission of the House of Siloe; with the possibility of returning to the school if this

seemed best. The example of Mother Géline and her way of showing mercy and compassion for the weakest made us appreciate the urgency of this mission.

This sister took over the work of instruction in the House; another sister was the nurse and carried out the task of dressing ulcers, and other nursing duties.

The sister engaged in the cutting and sewing workshop did all the sewing that the House required; and the sister who did social work made her own specialised contribution: the sick were offered help with practical details of obtaining personal identification, the re-establishment of family relationships was encouraged, and teams were arranged for the social reintegration of the persons received into the House. Help was offered for coping with the illness; and the sick were assisted at their death when that moment arrived.

In the first stage of the House's inauguration we received the first sick people gradually and circumspectly, so that the care team could adapt to this complex work. Relationships with



the sick proved difficult, as almost all came from broken families, and had been long dependent on all types of drugs. The physical and psychological consequences of the illness, aggravated by a disorganised lifestyle (also great difficulty with language), produce disabilities which call for continuous care, because the sufferers are not independent enough to carry out the activities of daily life.

At this stage, the communities of the former Province of France collaborated financially to buy electrical goods and different domestic materials for the House. The Director thanked the Congregation for this act of solidarity in the complex initial period through which the House was passing.

There are cordial relationships, born of mutual confidence, between the Director of the House and the governing body of the Association.

Many of the residents are people who have lacked affection, several of them rejected from infancy, and now marked with the social stigma of AIDS; they have passed through difficult situations, spent long years deprived of liberty; others have survived, many years on the road, sick and in extreme poverty.

Once the clinical side is stabilised, another stage opens for them: they begin to recognise

that someone loves them, that someone is paying them attention, that for us each person is important, each with their own problems and their own lives: communication is established, and the moment has arrived when they can talk of the darkest aspects of their lives, their desires, their expectations... They know that we are religious, and in certain cases this facilitates closeness; through the friendship and affection which they receive in the House, the Father of all leads them to discover his love for them.

In community, we continue to search. Young people's long-term unemployment, a crisis situation which strikes heavily at those who have no special professional skills, makes them vulnerable to the abuse of toxic substances, and involvement in their sale. To meet this situation, we have created a pastoral service of prison-visiting, in which one of our sisters is involved. Our entry into different prisons gives the Pastoral Team the possibility of making contact with the prisoners of our district, and with their families with a programme organised and established at diocesan level.

We believe that this approach to people deprived of freedom is a mission which responds to today's needs, in which lack of economic means shows up ever more clearly the injustice of a society in which people are not treated equally. This is a problem with which we live daily in our district.

The community of Jerez de la Frontera (Spain)

*The Community of Jerez in 2010.
From left to right: Sr. M. de Jesús Sanchez,
Sr. Loreto Aracama, Sr. M. del Pilar
Bartolomé and Sr. Arantxa Guerrero*

