

The seed sown by David
Gianni and Myriam Marcheselli,
Milan, Italy

It was when Gianni and Myriam's son David was thirteen, in March 1982, that he said he wanted to renew his baptismal vows and to be confirmed into Christ in the presence of the two communities, Catholic and Vaudois-Methodist, without having to make a denominational choice. "It is Christ who baptises", he had read in a review, and reflection on this had led him on to make the proposal. David had been seriously ill with leukemia for eighteen months and had several times been close to death; his parents had watched his christian faith growing to maturity through his suffering.

But they were perplexed; they had always thought that one day their children would have to decide for themselves to be confirmed in one church or the other. They spoke to their older children about it. Stefano and Emanuela reacted at once: "David has put into words what we feel as well. If it's possible for him, we'll do it too." (They were several years older - Stefano twenty, and Emanuela eighteen.)

A few days later, David had a relapse. Six weeks of suffering and tension followed. Against all the expectations of the specialists, he lived. A transplant of bone marrow was urgent; it was to be attempted in July.

In the short time which remained, David's parents approached the church authorities; could David's wish be granted? A long discussion took place with two Vaudois pastors on 14th June. At one point they were talking about *where* such a confirmation could take place. "But what do I mind within which walls it happens?" exploded David. "Christ is more important than our walls." The pastors decided to recommend the consistory of the Church of Milan to agree to the request at its next meeting, which it did.

On 3 July the Marchesellis were received by the Archbishop of Milan, who listened carefully and responded affirmatively. But time had run out. The departure for New York, where the transplant was to take place, was fixed for 4 July. However, it was agreed that on David's return the Archbishop would confirm him in the presence of a Vaudois pastor and some of his people; and that subsequently David should express in the course of an evangelical service his intention of living in brotherhood and communion with the Vaudois-Methodist community.

The transplant on 20 July was a success; Stefano was the donor. But an infection followed. David died on the Feast of the Transfiguration, 6th August. "For his confirmation, he has no need of our divided churches" said a pastor. The Archbishop of Milan wrote: "Certainly the seed sown by David will bear fruit, in God's time, and how he chooses. For us now it is important to make a study of confirmation following the method of the 1982 Lima document (Baptism, Eucharist, Ministry). We must get the theologians, biblical scholars and pastors involved. Catholics also need to progress in the understanding of confirmation."

Stefano and Emanuela

One year later, Stefano and Emanuela set out to see what they could do. Stefano proposed to be confirmed as David would have been. Emanuela wanted to be confirmed in the

evangelical church, in the presence also of the Catholic community. There were long months of dialogue, difficulties, tension.

At one time they thought of a simultaneous celebration of the two confirmations, but this idea foundered on the question of where it should take place; the "walls" which had irritated David reappeared. Sadly, they had to accept two separate occasions. There were difficulties too over a proposal for reciprocal eucharistic hospitality at the two celebrations. There were many hesitations and criticisms on both sides, as well as much loving concern and solidarity. And so, end Gianni and Myriam, *from now on it is our two adolescents who are bearing the burden. They have set out on a long, hard road. Belonging to the today of our divided churches, it is their task to live already in the tomorrows of God. "*

Emanuela's profession of faith

Emanuela made her profession of faith and was received into membership of the Vaudois Church of Milan in the course of a communion service on 20 May 1984. The Catholic priest and representatives of the parish were present. During the ceremony Emanuela told the story of her upbringing in the two churches, her period of crisis and her return to Christ as the "one way of truth and life in the times of suffering and of revolt against the 'why' which has no answer."

She had freely decided to belong to the evangelical community in which she had grown up, she declared, but she also felt that she belonged to the Catholic community. "I am making my profession of faith here and ask to become a member of this community. I want to add that, strengthened by the education I have received and the experience I have lived, I ask that the Catholic community, represented here, takes note of my declaration of double ecclesial commitment, that is to say, my personal commitment within the two churches, evangelical and catholic.

"Within the-community, I make my profession of faith in Christ the Lord who baptised me as an infant. My confirmation into Christ takes the form of denominational choice because our churches are still divided. But this choice does not separate me from the Catholic community to which I also belong, for Christ's love for us is greater than all our denominational differences."

Immediately after Emanuela, Stefano spoke in his turn. His experience had been the same as his sister's in an interchurch family. He had finally chosen to be received into the Catholic community; his confirmation would take place a few days later. "But like my sister, I want to say that I also feel I belong to this evangelical community which, since my childhood, has helped me to grow and develop." Like others who had lived an ecumenical experience, he had realised that our denominational divisions contradict God's gift to us. Unity, he said - not uniformity - is required by God's love shown in Christ, love which includes and transcends all historical and theological values.

By this act today I want to reaffirm and pursue the path of double ecclesial commitment which has been lived in my family from the beginning. I ask this community to welcome me, so far as it can, in solidarity and prayer. Our action is not intended to be simplistic nor a sign of confusion. We are not saying that one church is as good as another. On the contrary, we are convinced that our search for Christ is enriched by the interchurch situation which we live

in our family, and by the different ways in which the christian churches have witnessed to their faith."

Pastor Soggiu then presented both Emanuela and Stefano with a Bible, and Stefano read a prayer which he and his sister had written: *'Lord, you received publicans and sinners. Receive us too; we need to feel that you love us. Receive our churches, including even their contradictions and their limitations. Teach us to love one another. If you do not receive us, Lord, we do not know where to go, because you alone have the word of eternal life. You alone, Lord, can cause our churches to live their differences in communion and no longer in division. We have set off with great hope; be our help on our way. May we not lose courage when we fall. Come to the aid of our weakness. The important thing is not what we do, but what your love brings forth. For all your gifts we thank you, Lord. Amen.'*

Stefano's confirmation

On 12 June 1984 Mgr Saldarini, vicar-general of the diocese of Milan and Chairman of its Diocesan Ecumenical Commission, presided over Stefano's confirmation and Emanuela's declaration, which took place in a Catholic parish church in Milan. Pastor Soggiu was there with his wife and representatives of the evangelical community. After Bible readings, a homily by Mgr Saldarini and a hymn to the Holy Spirit, Stefano addressed the congregation.

He explained his background and his upbringing within two church communities. "The confusion which people fear has become for me a stimulating enrichment."

"I have chosen now to be confirmed in the Catholic Church to which I owe a good part of my upbringing and which has always guided me in my personal quest. But I want it to be clear that in the future I shall continue to participate in the life of the two churches to which my family is attached. My profession of faith is made in Christ our Lord; it is he who chose me when I was baptised and it is he whom I ask to confirm my choice now, expressed in this community gathered round the bishop's delegate. Our christian churches still live the terrible contradiction of division, but that does not mean that my choice implies separation or detachment; it is a choice which has come to maturity in love, accepting the challenge of a double ecclesial commitment."

The day was not an arrival point but a departure point for him, said Stefano, and he asked for the prayers of all that he might be able to witness to Christ who is greater than our divisions and who is constantly making all things new.

Emanuela spoke immediately after Stefano, referring to her own confirmation in the evangelical church on 20 May, when a group of Catholics were present to hear her declaration that her action did not imply any break with her participation in the life of the Catholic community. She wanted to live an on-going reformation within the universality of faith, and to do this by a personal commitment both within the evangelical church and within the Catholic church. It might seem pretentious or simplistic to want to reconcile what had been separated over the centuries, but surely that desire is Christ's grace for our own time.

"In his name, I ask you to pray for this new and difficult experience; that it may be blessed by the Lord Jesus. It is in his name that it has begun, it is to his call that it responds and on him that it depends - not for our personal comfort, but to give him the glory, who is Lord and Saviour."

There followed the renewal of baptismal promises and the confirmation of Stefano by Mgr Saldarini.

Stefano read one of the bidding prayers, and finally Emanula read the prayer which she and Stefano had written and which he had read at her confirmation earlier.

Mgr Saldarini presented to both the gifts which the Cardinal Archbishop of Milan had personally inscribed for them: a New Testament in Geek and Latin for Stefano, and a collection of his writings for Emanuela.

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