

PROGETTO MATILDE

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FIRST CASE OF EXCELLENCE

ALFID Lay Association for Families in Difficulty Volunteers for the Mediation of Family Conflicts

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INTRODUCTION

Family mediation is burdened with some of the needs of families in crisis when couples separate, and particularly those of minor children, who are recognised as having rights to relationships and to both parents. These needs, which essentially involve the need for help, can be summarised in three points:

- 1) to increase the responsibility of the couple, permitting them to be competently assisted, without in this way substituting for them, according to a principal of relief, but rather creating better information, communication and reciprocal understanding, so that they can remain parental protagonists in their family history, and in that of the children;
- 2) to maintain or create networks of solidarity between individuals and generations of a single family group in a context at risk of fragmentation and even of violent conflicts, when it is still possible to "act in advance" or when there are still spaces of dialogue and it is still possible to seek a path to dialogue, in which the main objective is "taking care" of minors and guaranteeing them the family relationships they need to grow and to develop socially;
- 3) to propose implicitly, through the concrete experiences of family mediation, not only a new and different way of regulating conflictual relationships among people, but also a possible social solidarity based on a different type of relationship and of services "networked" among the State, civil society (of which volunteerism is an expression), and the family.

The choice of the first case of excellence was made, therefore, seeking (through interviews with privileged witnesses) concrete experiences that might allow us to examine how this "network of solidarity" can develop itself through family mediation and in particular through the family mediation promoted by a voluntary association.

The elements of excellence of this first "case," moreover, refer to the activation of a "broad" family mediation, in all fields, that is, including a course of listening, welcoming, and advising the husband and wife, or couple, either when some conditions for dialogue and mediation exist, or when such conditions do not exist. In the latter case, a path of "accompaniment" or support for people in managing the conflict inherent in their marital crisis is nonetheless undertaken, in order to later reach true and genuine family mediation. In this way some of the major limitations to family mediation in its strict sense may be overcome, so that precisely those who have the most need, because they have the most conflict, are not kept outside such an institution, but rather attempting nevertheless to activate those potentialities hidden by marital conflicts and in this way recovering possibilities of dialogue and agreement no longer as spouses, but still and always as parents.

In this way the experience of the ALFID has always responded to all the characteristics of a case of excellence. This case of excellence will be examined in the context of what we placed in primary position in our document of methodology (seminar in Lucca, 16-17 February 2001): the "physiological," in that idealised continuum of discomfort and violence which can be created for children when parents separate.

THE EXPERIENCE

The ALFID (Lay Association for Families in Difficulty) is an association of volunteers with headquarters at Trento, composed of 74 members, in which all the statutory functions (President, Council of Directors, Auditors and Arbiters) are carried out by people who perform their activity freely. Besides volunteers, within the association presently there are also four staff, one of whom takes care of administration and three of whom are family mediators.

The creation of the ALFID dates to 1982. In the Province of Trento some people who had been directly affected by the often-traumatic situations of separation and others who were particularly sensitive to family problems decided to create an association regarding these matters. Its purpose was to support and deal with the interests of the weakest family members and to seek their fundamental right to maintenance, above all for children, who are often faced with disinterested or dishonest behaviour perpetuated by one of the spouses.

In the beginning of the 1980's, the institution of divorce was introduced in Italy and the first family consultants were created. Perhaps for the first time, with much clarity, a wide range of family situations emerged and became evident. These were situations that for years had dragged along slowly, between compromises and sometimes unhealthy conflicts, and in that period they were "brought to light."

The ALFID, seeking various supportive actions for these families in crisis, found the help and support of the Bishop of Trento, who at that time appeared so sensitive to the problem that he welcomed the first headquarters of the association into the locales of the "Pastoral Family Centre" (*Centro pastorale della famiglia*).

To create from nothing a structure that would be appropriate for responding in a concrete way to the needs of families in difficulty was then, in the words of its founders, "hard work." In the initial phases, meeting with a series of problems, especially psychological, trying to overcome deeply-rooted taboos expressed above all in the indifference of public opinion, experiencing difficulty in dealing with the people requesting help, and facing the not-so-easy task of sensitising the authorities, administrations and associations, were the hardest tasks. This involved bringing into the open family crises that were considered "shameful," rendering them public, accusing the city of marginalising those family members and children who belonged to families in crisis, making it understood that these were people who needed not condemnation and marginalisation, but rather help, because they were undergoing serious suffering and pain.

A fundamental step for the association, therefore, was the subsequent encounter with local political forces and members of the Commission concerned with L.P. 35/1983, "Consideration of interventions aimed at anticipating and removing the status of marginalisation." Because of the autonomy assigned to the Provinces of Trento and Bolzano, this opened up the possibility of establishing agreements with the non-profit sector. On the basis of these early meetings the first funds were obtained and an agreement which is still in effect today was reached. The agreement stipulated that the ALFID could guarantee immediate and urgent interventions to people with family difficulties, and at the same time structure some services, then stabilise them over a period of time.

Thus, thanks also to a contract with the city of Trento that offered the housing of the ITEA (Trento Institute for Construction of Habitations), from now on the association can count on four welcoming facilities (three for women and one for men) where people, sometimes with children, can remain during "emergencies" while waiting for more appropriate and more permanent housing. They can also benefit from economic aid in the form of contributions to expenses incurred for judicial protection, when necessary to assure equal status for the weaker party, still in line with agreements with the autonomous Province.

The main activity undertaken by the ALFID today is the welcoming service, which undertakes cases that are often very complex, by informing, orienting, counselling and developing mediation in every field between spouses in crisis. Such effort at mediation tends above all to render the eventual legal separation as non-conflictual as possible. In the case of minor children, it helps to ensure that they are not exploited while conditions of separation are being established. Spouses are also made aware of possibilities for less-traditional agreements, such as, recently, joint custody for spouses, where real possibilities for this can be verified.

Still connected with its basic activity, ALFID has established a permanent collaboration with the UCIPEM (Union of Pre-Marital and Marital Consultants in Italy), to assure that users receive psychological support when such an intervention appears useful or even indispensable.

Other activities have been undertaken relative to the creation of mutual support groups for separated persons. These activities occur in collaboration with specialised staff of the UCIPEM. The results of these groups, furthermore, appear particularly significant and have value as a pilot program anticipating a methodology considered of particular value because of its characteristics.

One final initiative promoted by the ALFID staff is to hold focused regular meetings with minor children of separated couples. Using the ludic method (play), pedagogical and psychological work is carried out, aimed at overcoming eventual complexes caused by the trauma of separation, and at increasing the children's socialisation.

SOME DATA AND INDICATORS OF ALFID FAMILY MEDIATION SERVICES

The number of "cases" or rather of families in difficulty who have resorted to the association to request family mediation support "in the broad sense" were approximately 600 in 2000 and 586 in 1999. From the date of ALFID's creation until now, the number of cases has been constantly growing. Within the last ten years it has more than doubled.

The ALFID is an important territorial contact point for families in crisis. The large number of requests, as well as their constant growth during the association's nearly twenty years of experience, show that families have considered the type of service obtained to be useful. (**indicator of efficiency**)

Two-thirds of the people resorting to the ALFID are between 30 and 49 years old, mostly women from the Trento province (but with some "cases" also coming from other regions and from countries outside the European Community). Among those who came to the ALFID in 2000, 134 were married couples, or in other words, about 23% of the "cases" taken **into the "care" of the association**. This is a role of support or accompaniment towards the separation, in which the

necessary preconditions of collaboration and dialogue, which characterise family mediation in its strict sense, are created or brought to light. (**indicator of appropriateness**)

Of the 134 couples, about 30 were transferred into Family Mediation in its true sense, and continued on to a positive conclusion, that is, to an agreement judged sufficiently stable and lasting concerning the management and development of the parenting role by the couple in crisis. Thus we can confirm that the work of "supporting" families in family mediation "in its strict sense" has been effective.

The most prevalent needs of those resorting to the ALFID are: first of all, to be listened to (575 requests for listening), to receive information about various aspects of family rights (558 requests for information), to be supported in meetings with lawyers (235 requests for legal support), to receive advice about the relationship with the children during separation or divorce (118 requests), or other types of help (work, housing, psychological support, relationships with other organisations, etc.)

Regarding housing that the ALFID offers to those who have a temporary need, in 1999 the presence of 12 nuclear families was registered, one following another, for an average daily presence of 2 or 3 people per nuclear family. The average age of spouses with children housed in these locals is low, below 40 years of age. These are primarily people from the province of Trento. Hospitality at the ALFID facility is usually established for a brief duration, about three months, with the possibility of renewal.

Three out of four of those resorting to the ALFID do so not because because the association makes its own services noticeable (on the contrary, the ALFID intentionally abstains from publicising their own activities, to avoid increased excessive or improper use of the services offered), but because they have been made aware of it through other people "passing the word." One out of four, on the other hand, resort to the ALFID at the request of social services, family doctors or emergency services, psychologists, priests, lawyers, etc. Usually the family mediation is "voluntary" and only in a minority of mediations are they "recommended" (**indicator of appropriateness**). Besides the prevalence of "passing the word," we should mention that although the ALFID has not made formal studies of **satisfaction** by its users, they must have been satisfied and must have "perceived" some usefulness when they "passed the word" among friends, acquaintances, parents and colleagues.

The average period of mediation is extremely variable. Generally when a course of family mediation in the strict sense is initiated (lasting about 3 months, with 10 to 12 meetings), an activity of support and preparation (which we will talk about later) has already taken place. This consists in a global consultation about all of the couple's problems, including the ownership of the home, legal matters, etc., if requested. Therefore the services are not in any way standardised, but are evaluated from time to time regarding their **appropriateness in respect to every situation, case by case**.

More than 500 of the couples who had recourse to the ALFID in the year 2000 have children: 223 with a single child, 196 with two children, 58 with three children, and 25 with more than three children. The children are mostly under ten years of age: of these, two-thirds are between six and ten years of age, and about a third are under five years of age. The children, also in consideration of their age, are not involved by the ALFID in the family mediation. This is aimed, therefore, at restoring and empowering the role of the parent, by resorting exclusively to the parent, according to the training statement given by the school of family mediation of Milan GEA (**indicator of equity**).

There are no waiting times for entering into family mediation at the ALFID, except for those considered useful and necessary to set up such a program. This demands above all a capacity for

listening and reflection. The waiting time is, therefore, the time considered necessary for a schedule of mediation to be set up with the awareness and cooperation of those involved (**indicator of accessibility**).

Now let us move on to illustrate some **other indicators of process**. The mediation services of the ALFID are today well situated within the network of local services (social services, ordinary tribunals, tribunals for minors, ASL, etc.).

Concerning **accessibility** of mediation services, it should be emphasised that the headquarters of the association (whose facilities are hospitable, clean and happily illustrated with drawings by children) is located in the historical centre of the city, easily reachable by citizens but set apart and structured so as to guarantee discretion and privacy to all those who resort to the association.

In the ALFID services there are four people: three specialised in mediation at the GEA School of Milan (**appropriateness**) and one responsible for office information and reception.

The total budget of the ALFID is approximately 250 million annually, including both the cost of personnel and all initiatives and activities promoted by the ALFID. The services offered are all free and the average cost for each "case" of family mediation is 400,000 lire all inclusive (direct and indirect costs) (**indicator of efficiency**).

FAMILY MEDIATION: METHODOLOGY

The family constitutes the fulcrum around which all of the ALFID's activities revolve. "The fundamental aim of the association - according to an ALFID publication entitled *Family Conflict and Mediation* - is that of carrying out a mediation action to sew up as far as possible the tears, even out the differences, and clear up obscure points that have brought about the situation of friction and tension [...] especially taking care of the weakest subject and above all the offspring [...] Very often the children are used by their own parents to make the other seem guilty. They either get used to pretending or they withdraw into themselves, become violent and full of anger. They ask the world for help by trying to put themselves on display with negative or provocative actions. It is not the separation in itself that harms the child. In fact sometimes the child himself may suggest it in order to leave a climate of violence and tension in the family. In the rare cases in which it is conducted with civility the child can converse with both the father and the mother, maintaining those affective relationships necessary for his or her growth. In this way he doesn't feel abandoned, different, refuted, or contested, as happens with most of these children [...].

Initially people who collaborated were all "users" - a kind of mutual self aid, in which the headquarters of the association or of the members constituted a fixed point of reference and of encounter. Today all the services offered by the ALFID are professional and carried out entirely or in part by dependent personnel, in collaboration, in various modes and measures, with the volunteers.

The working method that characterises the approach to the family themes developed by the ALFID has continued to move ahead, to be clarified and refined in the course of its almost twenty years of direct experience and progressively verified and fine-tuned through the reflection and re-mediation following the behaviours and reactions verified in the field. **The basic methodology can be summarised in the words of the ALFID staff themselves, in three essential points:**

1. *A fundamental point is made about the effective attitude of hospitality that expresses itself essentially in the "capacity to listen." In situations of difficulty and confusion, which often characterise the condition of the user, this in itself constitutes a first response.*

The problems and needs that cry out within people can thus be expressed and consequently, a little at a time, be sorted out. Such intense listening gives the person an importance, value, and recognition of dignity that favours a re-equilibrium even for the emotional situation, which often accompanies states of family tension. Furthermore, feeling listened to, not judged, recognised in one's own moment of suffering and discomfort, helps to bring about a person-to-person relationship, creating the basis for a relationship of trust that in the course of successive, often necessary, encounters greatly favours the possibility of help, of orientation, of suggestions regarding possible solutions to problems.

2. *A second key point, with particular regard to the crises of the couple, is given by the explicit indication of the need for listening to not only the one who has taken the initiative, but also to the other interested person.*

This person, in fact, is invited to the office not through a bureaucratic, administrative contact, but directly and personally, so as to clarify from the beginning the non-preferential attitude of equity towards the two parties in conflict.

In such a way, on the one hand, both people feel truly understood in their subjective reasoning: on the other hand the person who does the mediation can clarify the fundamental rightness of one party's reasoning over the other one's, because this person is "external" to the conflict and as such is more easily recognised by both as independent and worthy of respect.

With such a foundation, it is then possible to reach an important result: re-establish with the mediation an adequate communication, allowing achievement of concrete objectives, a solution, a composition, where needed, even a formal establishment of rules for the problems or the conflict.

3. *A third very clear point concerning the method adopted concerns the regular effort to make people aware of the entire situation, to make them responsible so that they can knowledgeably face their discomfort, and to lead them, little by little, to make mature decisions for themselves without fleeing from problems but looking reality in the face.*

Within this framework, of special importance is the provision of news, data and information made available to people, especially regarding family law, the tax system, and possibilities offered by social legislation in case of economic difficulty, of minor children, etc.

Often this is little known information that may help to solve complex problems and allow people to confront the personal or family difficulties that they have outlined, in all their aspects, rather than to be drowned by these problems.

The ALFID, therefore, activates a global approach that can be oriented, where necessary, towards specialised technical help, be it psychological, legal or economic, but that first considers the plurality of aspects involved, which often interact in a determinant way.

Thus, this type of mediation also makes use of institutional structures and organisations in the private and social sectors that from time to time appear useful, orienting users to these, and activating, soliciting, and creating networks of services in solidarity with families in crisis.

From a methodological point of view, at any rate, undoubtedly interesting changes have been noted, above all beginning in the second half of the 1990's, following a specialisation undergone by the ALFID staff at the GEA school for family mediators in Milan. Until that time, the association had carried out works of mediation by refining its own specific methodology of intervention, which was based above all on "SHARING WITH." This is a typical component of most voluntary associations. The methodology was thus based on welcoming people, sharing their suffering and pain without

judging, without being "invasive," **putting aside any type of ideology**. "Certainly involvement is wanted," the ALFID staff affirmed, "but we can argue about what kind of involvement to have. We cannot confront the situations that present themselves with an assistance-style approach. Rather one must become involved, remain alongside the person, without "FUSING WITH" or bonding with the person, understanding in fact that there is a boundary between the ALFID staff and the others, a transparent threshold that allows participation but without which we would be conditioned and disasters would be created. Involvement therefore is an ambivalent term, which should always be posed, in a continual self-interrogation and self-doubting, in group work, in looking again and again, every day, at the method and the operative strategies. Work that is involving is, however, very creative: not only and not so much in the sense that it asks us to continually invent something new, but rather in the sense that, where there is a direct and intense involvement there is also the need to give a more profound and specific meaning to what one does and **how one does it ...**"

With this basic methodology, then, the ALFID staff have in these last years perfected a path of support for people in family mediation that constitutes a combination of the past associative experience, based above all on sharing, and the more "technical" type of the GEA school of family mediation of Milan. In particular, they have made some aspects that were already present in the ALFID experience more systematic. We can summarise these in two more methodological points:

- ?? This involves substituting the logic of victory of one party over another with that of agreements taken together in the interest of parents and children, so that the end of the marital couple does not coincide with the end of a common parental effort. Instead, this should have even more reason to continue and to reinforce itself. This involves, for the ALFID staff, further refining their techniques of mediation, and so also their objective and "equal" positions with the spouses. The service offered is a neutral place, a tool for parents, where staff try to "bring communication back into the circle."
- ?? To reinforce the "network," spreading the "culture of mediation" through it, not only is the entire family nucleus involved, but also that of the magistrates, lawyers, and social service staff who under different titles intervene in the separation event and who sometimes can feed the conflict rather than "mediate" it, if not adequately sensitised and involved.

Three different phases of accompanying parents to family mediation can therefore be specified today. These are well structured and differentiated within themselves, and the methodological points above are applied to them:

- 1) a first phase of consultation and orientation, during which all information of legal, economic, and psychological (if requested) character, explanations and "cleaning of those interferences" that might not permit moving towards mediation, or that would get in the way (for example: grandparents, parents, colleagues, neighbours, lawyers, who would add their say, intervene in various ways and measures, sometimes creating confusion for the spouses) are furnished;
- 2) a second phase of pre-mediation, during which more urgent and immediate problems connected to the acceptance or non-acceptance of the choice of separation on the part of the spouses themselves are specifically faced. (Almost always, only one spouse decides on the separation, while the other still is unaware of this; the awareness thus takes more time, so that acceptance by at least one of the two spouses can mature);
- 3) the third phase is of family mediation in the strict sense, during which parents phase decide to salvage agreements to continue and to try again with new, reciprocal faith and effort, to be

parents to their children, promoting common choices in the interest of the children's well-being, elaborating a personal educational plan.

In conclusion, the methodological choice that has been strengthened in recent years is one of refining the methodology known as "techniques of mediation." This has been added to the sharing aspects that were more typical of the first phase of the birth and development of the ALFID.

THE CULTURE OF MEDIATION

The culture of mediation, as has already been emphasised, is spread through the ALFID, always and in varying ways, by the families themselves: "... a single subject of the nuclear family is not treated alone, but rather the entity as a whole is considered. There is an effort to create relationships with the respective families of origin in order to re-create a certain harmony, keeping in mind above all the interests and needs of the minors...."

To such end the ALFID tends to work together with "networks" throughout the territory. Among public services, the links are directed above all to the territorial social service, which is the referral service for situations of difficulty and the privileged observatory for possible recommendations. Through this constant collaboration, paths are identified and personalised projects are formulated, seeking various forms of reception, through the Association's housing or through other private social structures. Multiple links are maintained with the ordinary Tribunal, Minor tribunal, Family Consultancy, services of infantile neuropsychology, employment agencies, and other provincial and city structures.

Networked relationships are also maintained by the ALFID with other associations in the non-profit sector, through constant exchanges of information and instances of reciprocal help, as well as through shared reflections within the appropriate provincial co-ordination, provided for by Provincial Law 35 concerning social exclusion and connections with the non-profit sector.

The diffusion of the culture of mediation is promoted by the ALFID through varied initiatives: conferences on diverse themes, always regarding separation, both legal and psychological, making use of experts in the field; collaboration with schools (from elementary to upper-intermediate), to sensitise them both in general and specifically in terms of mediation; collaboration with dioceses that train seminarians, to sensitise them to family themes and problems; collaboration with some parishes to re-structure pre-marital courses; collaboration with the co-operative "Punto d'Approdo" ("Landing Place") of Rovereto, which also works in the area of family mediation; collaboration with the course promoted by the Trento province in 2000 to train public staff as family mediators and then locate them in various consulting services present throughout the province.

We can thus understand how the ALFID has managed to spread a "culture of mediation" throughout the province, so much so that local agencies have not only promoted the formation of twenty family mediators among their dependants, but are also developing experiences of mediators in penal affairs for minors. It is thus foreseeable that within a year family mediation at Trento will be spread in a capillary fashion throughout the provincial territory, by way of the new mediators who are being trained and who will still find in the ALFID the principal point of reference in the territory.

SOME PRELIMINARY CONCLUSIONS

Entering the ALFID, speaking with staff, volunteers, past and current presidents, and users of the services, as was done in order to analyse this "case" of excellence in family mediation, one

constantly notices a "climate" of awareness of the suffering and pain of those who separate: the suffering and pain of a family that "breaks apart," that in the best of cases tries to recompose its pieces, with the help of the ALFID, so that ex-spouses can still manage to be parents to their own children.

Sometimes couples in conflict seem unable to have any other type of relationship besides a conflictual one, regarding the same issues for which they separated, without managing to see different future possibilities even when they will no longer be living together, even when they will no longer be married. Sometimes there are spouses who don't know how to understand, to resign themselves to not being loved, or to not managing to make themselves loved by the other spouse as they would have wanted or perhaps would have needed, although that person still remains an important and valid point of emotional reference. Sometimes the children, on their part, seem unable to accept this situation, displaying their disagreement and desperation in many ways: so many that the ALFID has been induced not to involve children in mediation, but to consider them the final receivers of mediation services. The ultimate aim of mediation services is in fact precisely the recovery and reinforcement of the parenting role that responsible parents can recover and strengthen in a new way, responding as much as possible to the children's need for emotional security and stability, according to an "educational project" agreed upon by the couple itself.

But what does "educational project" mean, when the parents separate? To educate comes from the Latin *educere*, which means "to draw out," that is to help the baby, the child, to orient his or her innate nature, permitting it to be expressed freely, to let it emerge and to benefit from its essential characteristics, to develop its positive possibilities by supporting, at least partially, its natural path. Almost always, however, the contrary happens, in that parents, and teachers in general, tend to "put in," in terms of their own desires: above all in the period of separation or divorce, parents tend to "put in" their own dissatisfactions and hostilities, on the other hand taking little note of the constituent elements of the educational process of their children, that is of their need to feel above all appreciated and loved for what they are. If parents therefore think they can "parentify" (make similar to themselves) the child, using the child against the partner and taking over, they violate the child's nature, needs and rights, and they don't develop his or her education. For parents in family mediation, to make a joint and shared educational project means therefore to take "effective" care of the children and of their need for growth and healthy development, putting aside some of the conflictuality and dramatising of the separation and putting the children "at the centre." In the contrary case, the children become "vulnerable" subjects, themselves at risk of social marginalisation, inasmuch as they do not develop the necessary self-esteem (in other words, to educate also means to help the child to admire what has been "drawn forth") in important and fundamental relationships, like those with parents, based on shared affection (I love you for what you are, not only if you are similar to me or against him or her). The children of separated parents, moreover, tend, even unconsciously, to shoulder some of the responsibility for the separation.

The "hard work" of a family mediation, which establishes the objectives of resolving the conflicts and of agreeing on educational projects for the children, together with the difficult moments of separation of the spouses, permeates both the vision of the ALFID staff and the users who resort to these services. The hard work and drama often border on moments of violence between spouses and even in regard to children. Among spouses this is primarily manifested against women, who not uncommonly undergo physical violence (blows, mistreatment, molestation and impositions, even sexual). Among minors various types of suffering and discomfort appear, ranging from isolation and social exclusion on the part of school companions, friends and parents, to suffering due to parental conflict, during which they often end up being "used" in various modes and measures. In fact, mothers above all - the ALFID staff affirm - tend to "use" children (maybe considering them as the only "weapons" or genuine "judges" in the family dispute) against the husband, making it

difficult for him to recover the paternal role, or even visiting rights. In such a way, joint custody, when possible, can constitute a solution at least worth experimenting, or trying, if some indispensable presuppositions are demonstrated.

The management of the suffering has constituted, just the same, a strong bond and the very reason for the existence of this voluntary association, which took responsibility for families in difficulty when the public services had no approach for families undergoing separation. This voluntary association was therefore created in a social area of need that was entirely unsatisfied. Not incidentally, the Trento Province then entrusted the ALFID with an agreement including it in the fight against social exclusion and marginalisation.

The ALFID had the advantage, compared to all other types of public services created at that time in Italy for family mediation, of having anticipated the response - a typical characteristic of voluntary associations - and of having done it by taking care of all the needs of families undergoing separation, but above all of the needs of children, that is of the "weakest," whose rights are generally the least respected and least valued.

Perhaps it had this role of anticipating needs and adjusting responses precisely because it is a voluntary association, which has as its basis a strong sense of sharing: those who founded it, the members themselves, shared the pain and sufferance of these families and made every effort to help them. They shared because of personal experience or because of a sense of social responsibility, because of a role of active citizenship that went beyond the limits of what existed, to propose innovative solutions when there was no service, or only legal and health services, for families that were falling apart and mistreating each other.

The strength of the ALFID, its specific added value, is precisely this sharing, which has led it to create and manage an association in the Trento territory for twenty years now. The favourable terrain for its development has certainly been the "alliances" that made it possible: with the Province, thanks to a law that anticipated the role of the non-profit sector; with the city; with the City, Diocese and Parishes, which have listened to and supported the association even if with distinct roles; with the lawyers, magistrates, ordinary tribunals and tribunals for minors, which found in the ALFID valid synergies with other services and providers of family mediation that only since the 1990's have begun to appear in Italy as well.

Sharing thus brought the ALFID to create something entirely unique in the Italian context of the 1980's, but unique also, we believe, in its positioning in regard to other family mediation services existing in the national territory. Unique because it tries to balance, in a constantly verified and measured equilibrium, its sharing with the more "technical" content of family mediation, tending to harmonise professionalism and voluntarism in environments that are continually evolving, along with the evolution of family problems.

What is more, the family crises of the most recent, youngest, couples, are posing new problems for family mediation at the ALFID, for which adequate responses have not yet been found. These are marital crises in which the spouses have a minor sense of responsibility for their own parenting role, in which an attitude prevails, perhaps, more of the "image" of matrimony rather than of any real occasion for the creation of a family. Emblematic is the case mentioned by an ALFID staff member, to whom two young spouses resorted when they wanted to separate just after the ceremony of their matrimony, affirming that they only wanted to see the image of it, as in a film. How can we respond to this new type of separation? Can this kind of person have a space within the association, and furnish new models for interpreting the basic requirements of new family crises, certainly very different from those of the past? This is one of the challenges that the ALFID will have to face in

the near future and which, already, it seems it must confront. But this type of "discomfort," of family crisis, is very different from that which led to the creation of the ALFID in the 1980's.

Surely the ALFID has represented since its creation a real way out, as far as may be possible or necessary, for resolving conflicts, above all concerning parenting, and has also represented a way of thinking and living that goes beyond the task itself.