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**SETTIMANA DI STUDIO SULL'ACCOMPAGNAMENTO
SPIRITUALE NEI MOVIMENTI E NUOVE COMUNITÀ**
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Case Study

In the province of Viterbo, a new church reality arose in 2005, the Sons of Prayer Community. The founder, Marco Rossi, is a layman of great faith who, at a time of particular family difficulties, began to assiduously attend a prayer group in his parish that follows a charismatic spirituality. Fr Charles, an American priest who moved to Italy to study and then stayed in the diocese of Viterbo, where he is currently incardinated and where he has taken on services as chaplain to several hospitals, is part of this group. Under the spiritual guidance of Fr Charles, Marco understood the call to found a new community, together with other men and women who belonged to his prayer group and with whom, some years ago now, he began an experience of community life. The community comprises both celibate members who live a common life and devote themselves entirely to prayer and prayer groups, referred to as 'community of life members', and celibate and married members who maintain their own living and professional commitments, referred to as 'covenant members'. They sanction their commitment through promises, renewed annually, to take on the evangelical counsels, in keeping with their celibate or married state. The members of the life community, men and women who live in separate houses, derive their income for maintenance mainly from the production and sale of religious material: books and brochures, icons and song recordings. In a short time the community has experienced a certain growth and, in addition to Viterbo, other houses have sprung up near Milan and Naples.

In the Sons of Prayer Community, the spiritual accompaniment of members is considered particularly important. Since the Founder has no theological training, he asked Fr Charles to perform this service, given his preparation and experience. Moreover, his duties in the diocese allow him a great deal of freedom in the management of his time. Added to this is the fact that, shortly after the founding of the Community, he moved to the men's house of the community of life in Viterbo.

Fr Charles has since become increasingly present in the lives of the members. He has also been entrusted with the vocational discernment of new vocations, both in terms of the form of membership (members of the community of life and covenant members); and discernment of the state of life: celibate, married or clerical, since some young men have expressed the desire to become priests.

The meetings with Fr Charles follow a certain pattern: each week a list is prepared in the Community of people who will talk to him on the following days. Each person voluntarily enters their name. The dialogues are highly anticipated, especially because Fr Charles precedes the meetings with moments of personal retreat in a small house adjacent to the men's community that serves as a 'hermitage'. It is there that the priest claims to have constant revelations from the Holy Spirit about each member for whom he prays. Sometimes the dialogues are preceded by the so-called 'act of handing over', i.e. the handing over of a sheet of paper on which the person has written a question, a doubt, a concern to which they wish to have an answer. In the following meeting, the person may receive from the priest the fruit of the 'revelation' born during prayer, perhaps expressed through a passage from the Word of God. Sometimes the dialogues begin with an invocation for deliverance from evil, always based on what the priest has perceived as a personal revelation. There are days when Fr Charles does not come to the Community: he explained that these are the days of 'difficult' cases in which he must devote even more time to prayer. Since the list of those who will talk is placed in the house chapel, on the altar for prayer, it is easy for the members to guess what the 'difficult cases' are.



Fr Charles insists a great deal with the Founder and the members on the trust to be placed in him, given the abundance of inner 'revelations' he enjoys. Moreover, thanks also to some psychology courses taken in his youth, the priest shows a particular ability to understand and penetrate people's inner selves. Fr Charles asks the members of the Community for "total openness" of heart, because "a good doctor must know the wound to be healed thoroughly", as he is fond of saying.

Martina, a young woman of 24, who first got to know and attend the Community's prayer groups and was accompanied regularly by Fr Charles, recently arrived in the Sons of Prayer Community. Martina manifested her vocational restlessness to the priest and he proposed an intense two-day spiritual retreat at the end of which he 'revealed' her vocation to her: to become a member of the Community of Life. Fr Charles was very close to Martina who had suffered from depression for years. The young woman's first period in the Community went very well, but after a few years, her depressive problems surfaced again. Martina's malaise gradually increased: the young woman spoke to the Founder about it, even speculating about her leaving the Community, but he immediately referred her to Fr Charles. The priest began to intensify his dialogue with Martina: he would not even hear of a possible exit from the Community. He also told the young woman several times that he understood in prayer that she would play a fundamental role in the expansion of the Community and that she was destined for a 'special mission' of prayer among young people far from the faith.

Despite dialogues and reassurances, Martina's situation did not improve; on the contrary, the young woman began to close in on herself more and more and to isolate herself. Then Fr Charles, with the help of a psychiatrist friend, obtained antidepressant drugs to give Martina. To convince her, he reiterated that her recovery was crucial for the good and future of the whole community. On the other hand, it is not the first time that Fr Charles has administered drugs to members, especially in cases of depression.

After yet another moment of crisis, Martina was taken home for a few days: her parents, realising their daughter's situation and the drugs the girl continued to take without a real prescription, decided to contact other parents of members of the Community and go to the Curia to talk to the Bishop, Monsignor Bianchi. Monsignor Bianchi, having recently arrived in the diocese, did not know the Community well, so he chose to visit it and talk to the Founder. To his amazement, he discovered that although the Community is 17 years old, it still has no statutes regulating the internal life of the members, nor any regulations for celibate persons who take the evangelical counsels through promises. He also consulted a canonist to see what steps are needed, especially after learning of Martina's case, which he thinks may not be the only one.

Questions

1. Can you identify one or more examples of spiritual abuse in this case? Which ones?
2. What means of prevention should a movement or new community have to avoid such cases?
3. What attitudes in a spiritual leader can encourage abusive behaviour?
4. How can the Church authority intervene?