

Testimony of Daniel, a young Milanese

"I grew up immersed in a deafening material culture"



My name is Daniel Zaccaro. I am 25 years old and I lived my childhood in Quartoggiaro, a difficult neighborhood in Milan. Here - as unfortunately happens to many young peers - I grew up immersed in a deafening material culture. Money, success, image, power: I had no other prospects. To feel myself up to the situation, I started doing crimes since I was very young. Initially, small thefts in my neighborhood. Around the age of 17, I arrived to commit bank robberies. For this reason, I was arrested and I turned 18 in a cell in the Beccaria juvenile prison in Milan.

With the arrest I thought I had achieved some notoriety in the neighborhood: everyone would talk about me, I imagined. I understood over time, however, that it was only the beginning of a long, very painful journey. Inside the prison I implemented my default script: rejection of authority, intolerance for the rules and to children of other ethnic groups. I remember the first days in the cell with two other Roma boys: a real nightmare! I could not accept having to share the cell with them. Due to misconduct, I have taken several disciplinary reports into jail. What's more, I was transferred, for questions always disciplinary, in three other Italian juvenile prisons: in Bologna, Catania and Bari. I was unmanageable and violent, incattivito a prison environment that I perceived only as a punitive place.

At Beccaria, from the early days, I met Don Claudio, one of the two chaplains together with don Gino. With him I could talk and make me listen. I was not used to trusting adults, except those in my neighborhood. With don Claudio it was different. That is why, after a year in jail, I asked the judge the possibility of going to

live in his host community. I was not ready for the surveillance judge. I had combined too many! Two years passed in prison, until the magistrate consented. Finally I entered the Kayros community of Don Claudio.

In the past, I had already experienced some communities from where I had left after a few hours. In each of them, the approach was always the same: even before knowing my name, the manager read me an endless list of rules that I would have to subscribe to and then follow. In the Kayros community of don Claudio everything was different: I immediately felt at home, welcomed with sympathy and trust. Not that there were no rules, but my freedom was taken seriously. I was called to decide, I was faced with my choices with responsibility.

Today, I understand that Don Claudio was very "smart" with me. He imposed nothing on me, but always questioned my freedom. Like that time when I wanted to stay away from home outside the time allowed by the judge, I called him to snatch a yes or to hear a predictable no. Don Claudio's reply was: "You are great, you decide with your head. You know the answer, I do not have to give it to you. I know you'll know how to choose well!" This was one of the episodes that started my change. There was someone who believed in me and in my positive capacity for choice and called me to consciously assume my responsibilities.

I was two years in the Kayros community. When I finished my legal sentence, I returned home to Quartoggiaro. I felt ready, already changed. I only spent six months. For another crime, this time the doors of San Vittore, the adult prison in Milan, opened up.

Six hard months, where I really touched the bottom like never before.

As often happens, however, a meeting in the harshest moment of the prison helped me to face the challenge. An elderly volunteer from San Vittore put in my heart the desire to resume her studies.

After six months I asked Don Claudio to return to his community. I was not obliged by law, but I felt that I needed a new period of reflection and growth.

Don Claudio accepted and, after two years, here I am. Today I live in community with a Senegalese, a Moroccan and a Russian. I do not make any more problems like I used to; on the contrary, I learn a lot in sharing life with young people of different cultures and religions from me.

It has been incredible two years, where I discovered another me in amazement. I'm back at school. I changed my course of study, finishing with high school the high school I had interrupted five years earlier. Last year I supported my high school diploma and now I am supporting the first year exams at the Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore of Milan in the Faculty of Education Sciences.

Also last year I also received the sacrament of Confirmation to which I have prepared thanks also to the seminarians in pastoral training in community. Many questions of faith were born in me. I started asking a lot of these questions to Don Claudio and I started to get to know him in a new way. In prison, Don Claudio had never spoken to me about God, also because I was not interested in certain speeches. Today I understand that to educate young people about faith, it is first of all necessary to allow them to rediscover the lost questions.

My curiosity arose and I began to learn more about the world of the Church. Don Claudio often brings me to meet other young people in the parishes and so I got to know other priests and young people like me. I asked myself: "Among the many people I know, Christians are undoubtedly the happiest and most real people". In these days I am preparing the Theology exam at the University on the Gospel of Mark. It's incredible: it seems that this text written centuries ago speaks to me, to my life. Every person encountered by Jesus seems to contain a piece of my story. The passage of the Gospel that most challenges me in these days is that of Mark 8:36: "What is the use of man to gain the whole world, if he then loses his soul".

If I had to say something about the theme of this seminar and the synod of young people, starting from my experience, I would certainly say that no discernment is possible if you are always with those who resemble you. In my neighborhood we were all the same, we repeated patterns of customary behavior. Today I understand that only the comparison with someone different from me helps me to know myself better and encourages authentic choices outside and within the Church. In faith, as in life, we never grow alone. And to be together, we need to put forgiveness at the center.

I can not yet tell myself a true believer, but I always feel the beauty of Christianity more and more. And the Christian proposal is beautiful because demanding, because it seriously challenges my freedom and does not propose me easy shortcuts for happiness. In the context of emotional relationships, for example, the Christian proposal fascinates me even if I am not able yet to live it fully. Many young people accustomed like me to live love as possession and in the utilitarian logic of disposable love, placed before love forever tremble not a little. Yet I understand that only a love that is a gift can last a lifetime.

What I ask of the Church and this Synod. Not to forget about us, of those young people who, through a mysterious plan of life, have known abandonment, prison and solitude. We, precisely because of our mistakes, for all the suffering and the experience of change that we are experiencing, can be a gift for other young people.

I also ask that we meet a living Gospel so that our being a church is not just a facade or convention. A living Gospel that expresses itself through the faces of real and happy people, as happened to me in these years. I thank God for the people who put me next to me in these last years. Through their daily testimony, they fascinated me and attracted me to Good. And the Good done silently, it makes a lot more noise!

I know now it's my turn to offer others a true testimony, as I try to do this today, accepting your invitation. Thank you for the occasion you gave me to take part in this Seminar. It's a real *Kayros* for me.

Source: <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/pope/news/2018-10/synod-youth-2018-pope-francis-noi-per.html>