
Father Claudio and sclerosis: a cross that turns into light and overcomes barriers

"When the road is missing, invent it" Robert Baden-Powell, founder of the worldwide Scouts movement, used to say to his Cubs and Explorer Scouts. And that indeed happened fourteen years ago in the St Maximus Bishop of Turin parish in the town of Collegno, when the shocking news of a degenerative disease diagnosed to Father Claudio Campa led an entire community to embrace the sick. "Persons with disabilities share their witness inside the Church, proclaiming the Gospel and the joy of being called children of God, which is clearly manifested," he says today with a smile in his eyes. "There is a vital and communicative force in the liturgies which persons with disabilities participate in, and this becomes a gift and a witness for the whole community. For people with disabilities it is the place of beauty and joy - the place of the liturgy."



Father Claudio, born in Turin in 1961, grew up in a religious household, together with his brother made permanent deacon, and ordained a priest in 1987. After having held positions at the St Lawrence Church and in the Lingotto district, in 2006 he was appointed to the lively St Maximus parish in Collegno, with its many groups involved in charitable activities, liturgy and catechesis. He became suddenly unwell during the Corpus Christi procession in 2008. Father Claudio collapsed and a few days later received the result of his medical examinations: multiple sclerosis. "At first, I felt afraid and unhappy. But I then realised that it was not a question of asking to be healed, from what is, incidentally, a degenerative disease, but of giving it a meaning. Our weaknesses can become cracks where the light shines in, a tabernacle where God speaks to us." Thus, he remembers, hope slowly made its way through. "The loss of strength characterising my movements paved the way for a deeper understanding of life. It brought me closer to the sick: we were united in pain. But we were even more closely united with the Lord, because it is precisely in weakness that God's strength is manifested. We remain weak, but He is our ally who makes the difference with His might." This man, who had practiced sport his whole life, launched the challenge of a bicycle pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela: a 738-kilometre bicycle ride with his parishioners that was "a journey of conversion and a spiritual quest to give a meaning to disease." <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HevQe8wSA4c> Since 2012, Father Claudio has been moving around in a wheelchair and, in addition to the carpark for people with disabilities and the removal of architectural barriers, he and his congregation have also started to remove invisible barriers. Those are the barriers that prevent people with disabilities - and often their family members - from participating in the Eucharist, shared prayer and catechesis. "Being myself a disabled person encouraged me to reflect on how a problem could be turned into a resource", he says. The Catholic community thus joined forces around its parish priest with the creation of the pastoral commission for health and disability, the St Maximus Charta - a dialogue forum involving the parishes and the municipality - and social Saturdays with afternoon workshops, Mass and dinner. "We promoted awareness-raising events on cognitive, sensory and motor disabilities, the Alzheimer café and 'After Us'. But above all" - he recalls - "there is our daily work with children with disabilities who attend catechism, the Mass for the hearing impaired with an ASL interpreter, the scouts, the summer camp for young people, the so-called 'guided cohabitation' and various associations: how many names, how many faces, how many stories! Since I am in a wheelchair, there have been more wheelchairs in church. An elderly person once told me: "'when I feel unwell, I think of you and I take courage'." Dozens of persons with disabilities have moved out of

[their homes and have started to attend the oratory and the various activities. "The best response we are receiving all around us," says Silvia Lova, scout leader and one of Father Claudio's closest collaborators, "is that people visiting us experience an atmosphere of welcome and fraternity, and that disease and disability is embraced in the community as normal, as a normal part of the lives of individuals and families." The ultimate challenge is to move from isolation to inclusion, from discomfort to sharing. "I like to think that whenever I approach the children for communion," Father Claudio concludes, "my raised wheelchair is supported by God's hands. All-embracing and protective hands. I feel the hands of the Lord as my sanctuary, my strength, my security, my home". ***\(Photo and video by Cristian Gennari – Agenzia Romano Siciliani\) Read more*** - Father Claudio Campa recounted his experience with his assistant Silvia Lova in the book *In Praise of Fragility* \(currently unavailable\). Subsequently, three years ago his story appeared with that of 12 other priests in the beautiful volume entitled *"Come un seme che germoglia. Sacerdoti nella malattia di Vittore De Carli"* \(Libreria editrice vaticana 2019, p. 144\), in which he retraced the unforeseen pastoral fruitfulness that stemmed from his condition.](#)

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