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It's all in the way you say it!

The story of *LaParola* (The Word), an Italian language school located in Denver, Colorado

BY TOM ROWLEY

“WHEN I LOOK BACK AT THE beginning of my Italian language school,” *LaParola* director Miriam Turri told me, “I can see that things just fell into place, without my intervention or control. Things just kept happening and I went along!”

Miriam was enrolled as a full-time doctoral student at the University of Denver’s School of International Studies when a friend asked her to lend a hand. Would she be willing to teach one of the Italian courses offered by a foreign language institute? The pay was good; Miriam accepted the position.

When her first course ended, Miriam’s students encouraged her to continue. She was “too good a teacher” to stop. They even offered to set up a school for her. A furnished studio apartment was secured and the essentials for teaching were purchased. Her former students gave her a copy machine, a white board, dry markers and paper. One would think that was enough, but those students also recruited Miriam’s next class for her. Although she wasn’t aware of it, that first course marked the beginning of her new occupation as “entrepreneur.”

Over the following years her classes were successful and the word spread about the talented Italian teacher in Denver. Future classes were made up chiefly of students who came as a result of prior students’ recommendations. Miriam’s new business was underway and, if everything remained the same, the story would be complete.

In 1993, however, Miriam had a life-changing experience. During World Youth Day,¹ which was held in Denver that year, she ran into people from a movement she had met in her youth but had since lost contact with. Her new encounter with the Focolare’s spirituality of unity was a real awakening. “I decided to respond to God’s love for me by giving him the first place in my life, after having ignored him for over 20 years,” she said. Soon after that, Miriam heard about the Economy of Communion,² a new economic endeavor that had been launched in 1991 by Chiara Lubich, founder and president of the Focolare, as a response to the needs of those who suffer from poverty and hunger.

Miriam felt called to put her Italian language school at God’s disposal. She asked Chiara herself to name her business, and the name became, “*La Parola*” (The Word, referring to the word of God in the Gospel). “I knew I was to conduct my teaching in a unique way,” Miriam said. “My main objective is to make my students feel at home, live a joyful adventure learning with one another, enjoy studying, and learn how to speak Italian. I want to live out as much as possible the Golden Rule which says, ‘Do to others as you would have them do to you’ (Lk 6:31). I also knew I wanted to share part of the business’ profits with those in need.”

With this new focus, even though her classes were very well received before this reorientation, the atmosphere in her class substantially changed. There was now a sense of family. “Once I lost my patience with a student who then left the room,” Miriam explained. “I called her as soon as class was over and, without making excuses, I apologized for my lack of charity for her. From that day on, our relationship has grown and now, many years later, it is still a beautiful friendship!”

Miriam recalls many anecdotes. “A former student called one day to invite me for dinner because his wife, who spoke Italian, wanted to set up a school of Italian. ‘This is going to be a competitor,’ I thought. However, remembering the Golden Rule (which is truly golden!) I decided to put it into practice; I invited the wife to participate as an observer at a beginners’ class. I gave her copies of all my materials and ideas for games that I use with my students. She has since become a dear friend of mine, and her children too. Her business is coming along and I continue to offer my help.”

Has it ever happened that people are interested in more than the services Miriam offers? “One day one of my students told me he had come to admire my life and the values I stand for. He wanted to know more about my beliefs and decided to become a Catholic like me because he felt attracted by my Christian lifestyle. He was baptized on Easter in 2003, obtained an annulment of his first marriage and wanted me to be the godmother of his first daughter. Later, when I needed to make an emergency trip but didn’t have enough money for it, he offered me his frequent-flyer miles.”

In trying to live out the Gospel, which promises gifts to those who give (see Lk 6:38), unexpected things come. One of the guidelines for the businesses adhering to the Economy of Communion initiative is to share part of the profit to foster the growth of structures and programs of formation for the spreading of the culture of giving. One of these places is Mariapolis Luminosa, the Focolare’s little city for North America located in Hyde Park, New York. “Every year I help organize a fundraising dinner among my students for Luminosa,” Miriam continued. “A former student of mine, a restaurateur, provides the dinner for the fundraising effort at a very low cost. In addition to this, a large screen and a video projector are provided for this occasion by the local branch of the Dante Alighieri Society where I teach a course, and one of the students from that class sets it up every time. And this has been happening for the past 5 years.”

Many times Miriam has asked herself what she wants to give to her students. “My desire is to run my school placing the student in the central position of the learning and teaching process. It is important for me as a teacher to try and put the Golden Rule into practice in my relationships with the students and their families. I have to give them more than just language skills. They can buy audiotapes for that. My goal is to give my students reasons to be happy, perhaps even to understand the value of prayer and spirituality in their lives.

“I made something for them that I have seen can help each of us live a meaningful and fulfilling life. It’s the ‘cube of love,’ already used by so many people; it has a different task written on each of its six faces. These tasks are: ‘To love everyone, to take the initiative in loving, to love one’s enemy, to share the other’s joy or hurt, to love one another, and to love your neighbor as yourself.’ Many of my students now start the day by throwing the cube. The saying that comes up guides their relationships with others during that day. Many of them are discovering the joy of loving and, in doing so, spread the culture of giving.”

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1) Annual international gathering for youth called for by John Paul II since 1985; 2) Founded in 1991 as an answer to social inequality, the EOC is currently comprised of 797 businesses worldwide following its guidelines. See Living City, June 2004, especially dedicated to this economic initiative or visit www.edc-online.net

Caption:

This and opposite page: *LaParola*'s students. "My desire is to run my school placing the student in the central position of the learning and teaching process," said Miriam Turri (opposite page in yellow). She runs *LaParola*, an Italian language school which follows the guidelines of the Economy of Communion. "My goal is to give my students reasons to be happy."