

"The birth of a handicapped child is like a tsunami"

Cosimo's birth was at first a great shock to Stefania. But her newly strengthened faith led her to launch out and help begin work opportunity programs for similarly affected children.

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The birth of a handicapped child is like a tsunami, a rogue wave that can overwhelm and destroy you.

Certainly, the birth of my son Cosimo shook me to the core; it completely disconcerted me. Everything seemed to go up in smoke: my hopes, my dreams.... Everything was undone, or at least put greatly at risk.

When my second child, Cosimo, was born, I felt powerless and asked myself the questions every parent of a handicapped child does: What have I done wrong? Why have I deserved all this? God, if you exist, where have you hidden yourself?

Obviously, this situation also affects the people around you: your spouse is even more confused than you are, and you realize that your relatives (although they might say otherwise) are upset and unhappy. Suddenly, you find yourself living a life you would never have chosen, a situation you never wanted to find yourself in.

I had the good fortune (I'd rather called it Providence now) of speaking

with a neuropsychologist who gave me hope. That person assured me that Cosimo would have a beautiful life, perhaps a more difficult one, but worthy of being lived. My son would come to be a marvelous person, simpler than the others, but worthy of love. I only had to believe.... But to believe in what?

One day, when I was still searching for an answer to all my questions, my husband introduced me to a priest of Opus Dei. I recall very clearly the moment when I told him: "Now you even bring a priest home for me and, to top it off, one from Opus Dei."

Back then my faith wasn't very strong. I had faith, but it was as though I was expecting to get something back in return. I believed without believing, without Love. And in the end, it was Love that I found thanks to St. Josemaria Escriva.

Thanks to him, I came to understand that all joy has its roots in the shape of a cross. You can't really enjoy life and be happy if you don't have unity of life, if your joy isn't grounded in its roots, in the cross.

I came to see that having faith doesn't mean possessing an anesthesia against suffering. Rather it means living with the certitude that, also in moments of suffering, Someone loves us; having faith is realizing that we are loved, that we are children. I had discovered that Cosimo, as well as I, are children of the same Father, of the One who loves all of us just as we are. Now I give thanks to God for having given me Cosimo just as he is. I know that Cosimo has a purpose in life; it is I who have to do everything possible to live in a way that will bring me to be alongside him forever. That is the meaning of my life!

Naturally, I wanted to share this great discovery with many people, but how? The path for me has been, and continues to be, SIPARIO, an association in which, with the help of my husband Marco, I try to give hope to other parents who, like us, have children with an intellectual or physical handicap.

The goal is to give these children a "working future," since we all need to work, not only in order to support ourselves but to assist in the improvement of society. The fact that the Book of Genesis tell us that we have been created *ut operaretur*, in order to work, implies severely handicapped people can do so as well.

That's how the first type B social cooperative was born—a restaurant in Florence on Via Serragli. Nine young people are now working there, along with others who assist as

therapists. Since there wasn't enough work for everyone in the restaurant, my husband had the great inspiration to branch out into the field of communication.

Two years after the restaurant opened, another cooperative began called ***SIPARIOTV***, a web TV site that hopefully will soon become a full-fledged digital television channel. For this to be a success we hope many people will come to realize that our youngsters, with their limitations, are also able to stir up interest, to surprise and entertain.

Besides these two cooperatives, a third one has also begun. Called ***Made in Sipario***, this is an arts and crafts shop where creativity and bright colors are the secret ingredients for the artistic items produced there.

My life now is quite a busy one, especially since SIPARIO was born. I

find that I am dedicating more and more time to the young people working there, as well as to the volunteers who assist them.

My whole day, from the moment I get up in the morning until the evening, is filled with occupations divided up among my family and my work at home, assisting my husband in the office, and my work in the cooperatives. All my daily occupations are united by a thread that ties them together and gives them meaning: attending holy Mass and doing a period of prayer and some minutes of spiritual reading each day.

How do I manage to do it all? Truthfully, I don't know. But I sometimes ask myself: how did I manage to live before without doing it? The energy isn't mine: "I can do all things in Him who strengthens me." I think it all comes down in the end to

trying to organize myself so that I have time for the others.

I enjoy being with other people, spending time with my young friends at SIPARIO. I see myself as an aunt to all of them. I love them a lot and want the best for them; they are wonderful people, filled with life and joy. When you spend time with them you can never be sad—tired perhaps, but never sad. And that's not such a small matter!

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