

Anna GERHARDT

Emmaus Communities in France:

A New Chance for the Poor in a Rich Country

The French organisation Emmaus was founded in 1953 by the Roman Catholic priest Henri Grouès, also known as Abbé Pierre. Today, it is well known and respected all over France, and Emmaus International has groups in more than 50 countries around the world. This article aims to explain how Emmaus communities in France function and what a crucial role values play in daily life there.

THE BEGINNINGS

After World War II, the housing situation in France was bad. The Roman Catholic priest **Abbé Pierre** helped homeless families with the construction of dwellings. This was often illegal and he got into conflicts with the administration. He founded the very first Emmaus community when he met a homeless man and invited him into his house. In 1953, **Abbé Pierre** founded the association Emmaus. In the winter of 1954, many people suffered from the cold and had to live under bridges due to the lack of decent housing possibilities. One night a woman died on the streets of Paris. She still held in her hands the document which declared her expulsion from her apartment because she could not pay for it anymore.

This was a signal for **Abbé Pierre**: on the radio he asked people to give him blankets to help the people living on the streets of Paris. He said that this action should be an 'insurrection of goodwill'. Surprisingly, many people donated blankets and other material to help those in need.

EMMAUS COMMUNITIES TODAY

This principle still functions: people can bring almost everything they don't need or want anymore to the Emmaus community next to them. There, the former homeless people who have joined the community the so-called "companions will check the donations", eventually repair them and then sell the goods at reasonable prices. Often, poor people can buy equipment such as refrigerators or furniture for less money if they bring some proof that their financial situation is especially difficult.

In each of the 115 Emmaus communi-

ties all over France live between 20 and 100 companions. The communities may be very different, for example regarding their wealth. How rich a community is depends often on the region it is settled in and, as a consequence, on the quality of donations and the ability of customers to pay for the goods.

Without the companions, there would be no community, but without their boss, it would not function as well. Being the boss of an Emmaus community is not a job for everybody; it needs a lot of enthusiasm and strength. Companions are mostly men who have had and still have a hard life not always easy to handle. Some bosses live in the community; others leave in the evening to go home. I experienced that this generates an important feeling of independence; companions stress the fact that they are not children that need somebody to look after them all day long.

The boss and a secretary are paid for their jobs. They manage the community like an enterprise because they are responsible for the financial balance of the community; but on the other hand, they are like social workers who are an important contact for personal problems.

A newly arrived person can stay for some days or even find a new home for many years if there is a free place and if she or he is willing to accept some rules that are necessary for life in the community. According to her or his health, the new companion will get some kind of work: cooking for the other companions, driving a truck to collect donations or to deliver goods from the community shop, controlling the quality of the donations, repairing electrical equipment and furniture, or selling in the Emmaus shop.

Everybody gets a single room, so there is enough space for privacy. This is crucial because life in a community is not always easy, especially if one lives there due to the lack of better possibilities. An Emmaus community offers stability and thus enough time to reconsider one's life before eventually starting something new.

Some rules have to be respected, e.g. no drinking of alcohol in the commu-

nity. Companions get some money for their work and they are free to decide if they want to spend or to save it. In companion assemblies, important topics of the communitarian life are discussed.

The expression companion emphasizes that living in such a community is something special that one can be proud of. It also generates a new sense of belonging: the companions constitute the community and make it run. They have all the same rights and duties; there is no hierarchy among them.

Of course, there are "old" and "new" companions, and rivalries between groups or individuals may occur. But nevertheless, I could often experience a special sense of belonging together, especially between companions who have lived a long time in several Emmaus communities and who know each other from these communities or from companions gatherings. This leads sometimes to beautiful and strong friendships, regardless of differences in age, nationality or belief.

In our community, there were three good friends: a man in his 50s from Belgium who was an excellent cook and had made several times the pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela; a 30-year-old man from Italy; and another 30-year-old man from Morocco, a Muslim. This shows that the companions of Emmaus are no homogeneous group: young and old, French and foreigners especially from Eastern Europe or the Maghreb countries meet and live peacefully together.

Some of the companions really make the community their new home and take excellent care of their own rooms. This showed me that whatever may go wrong in my own life, I can start a new life by looking for a place in an Emmaus community and just never giving up.

Besides the companions and their boss, there are the volunteers. They signify a contact with the outside world. Some come regularly and share some hours of work, a meal and human contact with the companions. In several communities they have international youth summer camps.

Communities who take volunteers for a whole year give them the chance to

learn a lot about the companions and their problems. The fact that a young person shows interest in their way of life and probably organises special activities for the companions brings diversion to their everyday lives.

WHY EMMAUS?

The name of Emmaus communities is very symbolic: in Luke 24,13:35 we can read the story. After Jesus had died, two of his disciples walked to the village of Emmaus in mourning. Jesus met them on the road and walked with them, but they did not recognize him.

Arriving at Emmaus in the evening, Jesus pretended to continue his journey, but the two disciples asked him to stay with them. When they had dinner together, he took the bread, thanked

God and broke it they way he used to do and gave it to them.

At this moment, their eyes were opened and they recognized him, but Jesus had disappeared. They understood that their Lord had risen from the dead and they were very happy and went back to Jerusalem and told the other disciples what they had seen.

This is why the story of Emmaus is so powerful: out of a meeting with an ordinary person, we may learn something new, something that creates new hope and confidence. Without knowing it, they had hosted Jesus. If you do the same, you too may be rewarded: in every person for whom you open the door, you open the door for Jesus. We just have to be open-hearted, open-minded, and give them and ourselves a

chance to get to know each other.

This simple action, to invite a stranger in, this is what in Emmaus communities is called *welcome*. “I was a stranger and you invited me in”, says Jesus in Matthew 25. This is exactly what Emmaus communities are about: inviting people in, giving them something to eat and drink, a bed, a shower, medical help, and if they want to, the possibility to stay at the Emmaus community and work there. “Whoever knocks at the door is sure to be let in whatever may be his religion, his origin, his thoughts, his past, his successes or failures”.

LIVING EMMAUS VALUES

One cannot explain how the communities work without explaining Emmaus values: *welcome, work, solidar-*



ity (*accueil, travail, solidarité*) are the founding principles of life in community. These abstract values become a reality that everybody can experience and learn to pass on to others.

Welcome means: everybody who knocks at the door is *welcomed*. There are no criteria such as sex, race, religion, age or others. It does not count what you did wrong in the past; you get a new chance if you are willing to adapt to some essential rules that make the life in community possible. So, other companions will never know where you are from if you are not willing to tell them. This makes it much easier to behave without prejudices towards people.

I *welcomed* a man from Vietnam who had problems with his residence permit, so he stayed illegally in France. I got to know him better and he told me something of his former life: growing up in Vietnam, first his father left his mother, then his mother left the boy and he lived on the street with other children. Years later, the young man lived in France and worked as a carpenter until the police got him because he was smuggling drugs.

After ten years in prison, he was supposed to return to Vietnam. Now, he works as a seller in one of our shops. Not knowing everything about his past helped me to *welcome* him without prejudices. Working as the person who is responsible for the *welcome* gave me the opportunity to start relationships with new companions very soon and sometimes I was surprised at how the person changed, once she or he had a shower, something to eat and some sleep.

One or several companions have to take care of the newcomers. This is work they do in addition to their normal work, and sometimes means a lot of work such as washing towels and linen, cleaning the guest room, providing them something to eat even if they arrive late at night, and showing them their new surroundings. And, last but not least: to *welcome* a new arrival means respecting her or him as a human being, supporting her or him, talking to her or him.

In communities where the the head of the community leaves in the evening, it is especially the responsibility of the companions to take care of newcomers. This may be difficult, but it gives them responsibility and shows them they are important they don't only need help, but they also can give support to others, even if they have their own problems and are poor.

So, on a cold winter night, somebody called at our community and asked if we could take care of two families from Chechnya who tried to sleep in a municipal park because they could not find any accommodation and other social organisations said they had no place for them. The companions accepted them into their care and started to gather enough blankets to prepare them a place to sleep. Manu, a companion who worked as our cook, knocked at my door and I could give him my pillow and a blanket. This was simple, but at the same time, it was very important.

Another aspect of *welcome* is showing respect to other companions. As respect is a crucial value for people with personal problems and for the functioning of a community life, our boss expected everybody to greet each other in morning. This was a nice and powerful ritual that took time. When somebody refused to greet another companion, this normally meant there was a real problem between them that everybody noticed, and our boss talked with them.

Work is very essential in the life of the community. Work unifies the companions: everybody has to do it, expect when she or he is ill or physically not able to work. As Emmaus communities do not get money from the French state or other social organisations, they have to make enough money to survive. This generates a special pride amongst companions but also for the individual: one knows that one works for what one gets from the community. Work is also about learning to have responsibilities. Then it occupies people and they have less time for thinking about sad things in their past.

Solidarity is the third value that defines what Emmaus communities are about. Generally spoken, there are

two types of solidarity: the solidarity within the community, and the solidarity that shares money and experiences with other communities or projects on the local, national or even international level. This is important, and very simple: you are never too poor to share something with others.

So, the community I lived and worked in cooperated with an African organisation. Once a year, some companions flew to Africa and worked in a village to improve their access to water. This was a very good experience for them to see how poverty looks in other regions of the world, and to see they can become actors of solidarity towards people who are more in need than they are. The other way around, the African people who came to our community got a more realistic image about Europe: they could see that even in France, there is a lot of poverty.

A CHANCE FOR EVERYBODY

In spite of the difficult life many companions have, the atmosphere of an Emmaus community may be very friendly and positive. I never laughed as much as I did during my year in France. This is one of the reasons why I have so much respect for the companions: many of them did not give up, but saw the life in an Emmaus community as a new chance instead of complaining about their situation. And even if they seem rather lethargic, you never know what efforts they have to make to get up early every morning and start a new day with a lot of *work*.

All in all, Emmaus communities seem to me a very good place for people who are marginalised in our societies. They give a chance to everybody who knocks at the door but they also require respect for some essential rules and values. They offer a place to calm down, but they also help to start a new life outside in the "real" world. They prove that a communitarian lifestyle is possible at least in small communities. If I were to define the meaning of Emmaus communities in one word, I think I would use the word "hope".

Suggested Reading
www.emmaus-france.org
www.emmaus-international.org

Anna GERHARDT is a German Lutheran who was born in 1984 in Hamburg. Currently she is studying in Łódź, Poland, pursuing a B.A. in European Studies. Baptised in 2005 in Chemnitz, she discovered the Christian meaning of

Emmaus after her one-year stay in the Emmaus community of Montauban in the south-west of France. She is fond of hiking and philosophy, as well as dancing, journalism and social work. Her email is anna_gerhardt@web.de.