



## Mercy in the world

*Analía & Diego Velasco*

“We consider that serving others is a privilege. We try every time to do it wholeheartedly. We know our action is only a drop into the ocean, but without our action, that drop of water would be missing” Mother Teresa of Calcutta.

We are Analía and Diego, from Cordoba, Argentina.

We’ve been married for 28 years and members of Teams of Our Lady for 27 years. God gave us 5 children and now we also have a granddaughter. From a young age, while still engaged, we used to pray together to obtain the grace to start a family that would always be ready and open to help others. The Lord gave us His love and in our Team we experienced growth, which increased the maturity of our Faith and our community life.

When our youngest daughter was 5 years old, we thought it was a good time to temporarily integrate into our family other children who were suffering abandon or vulnerability and needing a family to support them until a proper home could be found for them. This way and for over ten years, six children grew up amongst us. They arrived and filled our home with joy and tenderness whilst we shared our life with them. Seeing them growing was wonderful and a miracle to see how the love of God transforms everything. We could live the Gospel words: “who welcome this child in my name, welcomes Me” (Lk, 9, 48). We also experienced Mother Teresa of Calcutta’s words: “love until it hurts” because each farewell after two years living together was painful and sad. With anguish and tears we learnt how to live with the experience of a loss but also had the satisfaction of completing an important task. The future of these children was changed forever. These were God’s visits that were preparing us for what we had to live later on. These steps we followed as a family, made us trust God’s plan for each one of his children, acknowledging we are mere instruments, to remind all people that the Lord lives among us and with his strength everything is possible, “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me” (Phil. 4, 13)



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We were with our eldest children, some of them already working and others at University, and the youngest already aged 15, on a Friday in August. Whilst being all together and talking at the end of our shared dinner, the refugees' issue came up, as the drama in Syria was present in all media. We learned about an association called Humanitarian Shelter (Refugio Humanitario) that had a connection in Syria to an Argentinian priest who was informing families who wanted to immigrate and was connecting them to Argentinian families who were ready to welcome them and help them. Touched by the words of Pope Francis who said "let's open our houses and parishes to welcome refugees" then we decided that our family would be part of the response. We received the list with names and data of refugees. We found a family similar to ours in terms of size with 4 children between ages 5 and 14. We thought about the very difficult situation they were living in and imagining them trying to survive in a hostile world distressed us. We thought that it was going to be difficult to find a place for them as there was six of them, and we thought of our family mission as Christians and members of the Teams of our Lady, and we decided to offer ourselves to receive them. We decided to move forward and started with the legalities and paperwork. It was months of waiting and starting contacts. It was difficult because of the language. We made contact several times with an Argentinian priest as translator. He used to work in Aleppo, assisting people damaged by the war, and giving hope to the most affected.

The family we would receive were Orthodox Christians, so through Faith we had an opportunity to approach one another. Meanwhile the news kept informing us about more attacks in Aleppo and we felt unable to confirm the time for their arrival. We could only pray and believe that this plan will be only possible if it was God's will. We left everything in his hands. In December we were informed the papers were ready so we started organizing our house in order to host two families. We would be 12 people in total. The garage was converted into two rooms as well as the office. Praying and working we were overcoming obstacles until we knew they had already left their country and were about to catch a plane in Beirut, Lebanon, towards Rome and then Buenos Aires. Then we were informed they were captured in Lebanon as they didn't have permission for the stop in Rome and they needed a special Visa. Again we had great anguish and



we left everything in God's hands, as at that distance it was impossible for us to do anything. We talked to so many organizations asking them not to lose their tickets and not to send them back to Syria. After 15 more days they took another flight to Buenos Aires and by the end of January we could finally meet one another and hug at the airport. They were scared and communication wasn't easy; a new way of life was starting for both families with the challenge of shared daily life and integration.

Despite of the cultural gap we felt united by faith and the certainty that like all families we need peace and love to grow and develop. We started so many strategies to communicate... from signals and mimic, to phone text translator. We used notes repeating sentences, etc. A few days after they arrived they started daily Spanish classes and the children learnt at a great pace. For the adults it was more difficult and reading and speaking was very complicated. After only a month the children could read and write and they had learnt how to swim and play soccer. Our children took the responsibility to approach the other children, talk to them and entertain them. We could see with joy how they become more and more relaxed and were feeling part of the house where the routine of this large family was settling everyday more and more. With Rima, the mum, we shared activities at the kitchen and we started short conversations sharing a cup of coffee with cardamom she brought among other spices from her country giving us new aromas. We also shared our famous "mates"<sup>1</sup> that they surprisingly accepted.

We could check what is said in Luke 18,27 "with God all is possible". Life was happening with complete normality, and children were back to school in the same place I work as a teacher. After that, many other samples of solidarity happened from teachers with translations as well as many other people who became real "guardian angels". "We enjoyed giving as well as receiving" (Sir. 14. 16) and we could observe the daily progress of the children with vocabulary as well as their integration. At the same time we were worried about the slow progress of the parents, who by staying at home, had difficulty connecting with

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<sup>1</sup> "Mate" is a very common infusion of plants in South America. It is prepared in typical containers, in which hot water is added to drink throughout the day. It is part of the "ritual" to share the "mate" with friends.



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other people. We started looking for a job for Tayseer, the father of the family and an opportunity serving Arab food in a restaurant in the city came up. Later on, once they had a formal job we thought it was a proper time for them to move into their own home by themselves, as a good step forward toward integration and becoming responsible for their daily life. We spent two more months together and then they were starting a new phase with our close support. They were a little bit scared by the change but, very soon, they were enjoying their intimacy and recovering all their habits and customs. All the time we were supported by the prayers of all members of Teams of Our Lady and in our monthly meetings we shared a lot about this experience and all were supporting with a lot with food, groceries and the Arab food we bought from them.

There is a saying “if you want God to laugh, tell him your plans”. When we were convinced that life was taking a good direction, as we had planned during long months, and we felt happy, as Tayseer had got a job, the children were at school and with very good marks, becoming part of the community. But then God gave us a difficult challenge. We had even to reconsider the essence of this project. We were reminded that only God has the plan, and we owe everything to him.

During these days, Tayseer was feeling that most problems and urgencies were already solved and the most threatening situation was settling down. But at the same time all the emotions in him were emerging and upsetting him. All the achievements of the family were transformed into a deep sadness in him. He felt completely isolated among so many people who tried to support them whilst he was unable to communicate, unable to share any feelings or thoughts.

Our customs were so different that, for him it became a big heavy burden. He felt that having put aside his feelings in order to focus in the family problems, these were now coming back with greater strength. What seemed easy then, now was almost impossible. He thought it was going to be easy to recover, but it was a really difficult task. He was missing so many things; friends with their warm conversations, even hugs. He was very homesick. The smell of home. A walk in the neighbourhood with the trees and houses he knew. He was missing brothers, family, connection with others, chats, spiced food and black Syrian coffee.



The exile was becoming an immense pain that was affecting Tayseer’s heart and soul. It is very difficult how to explain with words what happens in the heart of a man emotionally injured, with a lost look, but for him solving small problems of daily life was now extremely difficult as his mind was in his loved Aleppo. So we started asking ourselves, how to help now? Have we failed? Maybe we didn’t do enough-, as we are imperfect and sinners. Finally Tayseer could put words to all that his heart and mind was asking.” I want to go back to my country, I cannot support this anymore, I can’t deal with all this”. Then we remembered the three golden words from Pope Francis: “Permission, Forgiveness and Thanks”.

Permission to enter his family, to enter his heart, his intimacy, to discover his values, his small things and his riches.

Forgiveness for the pain caused, because we do not own their lives or their future, respecting their freedom and dignity because in sincere forgiveness we all experience the Mercy of God, who first loved us and He never tires of forgiving.

We thanked God for the experience of meeting them and because we could grow together during that time. Thanks to everyone who supported us. To say “thank you” to God and to all our brothers and sisters. It is important not only to feel it but also to express it because through the expression of our feelings we can grow and receive Grace.

For over two months we tried to show him how great it was living in Argentina, all possibilities opening at his path, but with no solution except of returning back home. We spoke with so many people, priest, friends, in our Team, we prayed, and we felt that this plan was not connected with the original idea to develop their life in peace far away from war. They felt like prisoners in a strange country. Tayseer changed completely when we agreed to support them to find a way to return home. He was again, as at the beginning, with plenty of plans, with a future. God wants us purified from any selfish search, He wants us to understand



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that we cannot do anything by ourselves. He wants us to grow on charity and Faith.

We hug as people who know they may never see each other again. It was the first of November at the airport, we saw them walking towards the boarding gate, with their suitcases full of new things to show to their loved ones, and with their souls charged with emotion like ours, to know that after almost a year, we were not the same, we had grown, because God passed between us to make us grow in mercy and show us a different way. Perhaps future generations, today's children, will contribute to the construction of a world in which love and peace are values that circulate as "currency". We are convinced that the sowing that the Lord performed in the heart of each one of them during these 9 months in one way or another will yield abundant fruits of peace and love in the time God decides, wherever they live. We all could see that the Love of God transcends borders, that it is possible to create bridges between each other. We have no doubt that in each of the children will be recorded forever the experience of friendship, welcome, tolerance, integration and life in peace. That peace that in the future will try to replicate in their environment and their lives.

"We do not have in our hands the solutions to the problems of the world. But, facing the world's problems ... we have our hands. When the God of history comes he will look at our hands " Mamerto Menapace<sup>2</sup>.

Thank you very much

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<sup>2</sup> An Argentine friar, born in 1942, author of short story books and parables