



The Raven & The Dove

Families found a new Benedict Option community near Norcia



Rod Dreher

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A few years back, on one of my trips to Italy, I met a bright-eyed young Milanese named Giovanni Zennaro, along with his friend Stefano Schileo.





With Giovanni (center) and Stefano, in Norcia, 2017

Giovanni and his wife Alice are serious Catholics, with a growing young family. They and their friends, including the Schileos, are inspired by The Benedict Option, and were looking for ways to live in closer Christian community, in the style I talk about in the book. We became friends. I even went on a subsequent trip to stay with them in their house outside of Milan.

The Zennaros and their friends formed a small association, the Cascina San Benedetto, to pioneer a Benedict Option way of living — a kind of monastery of families. [I wrote about it on my blog here in 2019, and did an interview with Giovanni.](#) Here is the interview:

RD: The Benedict Option needs Christians to think creatively about ways we can construct communities and institutions within which we can live out the faith through hard times to come. Tell me how you and your friends are responding to this challenge?

GZ: Let me start by talking about my initial approach to the Benedict Option. I discovered your book in 2017, while I was completing my novitiate to become a Benedictine Oblate (lay member of the Order of St. Benedict). For me, it was a very happy discovery for two different reasons:

benedict). For me, it was a very happy discovery for two different reasons. Not just because it offers useful insights to live the Christian faith in our post-Christian Western world, but also because it is inspired by St. Benedict and the Benedictine monks, the religious family I'm a member of.

At that time, my wife and I were starting to realize that our friendship with a couple of other families was taking a certain direction. During our usual Sunday meetings we were spontaneously adopting a kind of routine: the Holy Mass, the lunch together, a time dedicated to conversation, Vespers, the dinner. These very simple things turned into good regular practice. We felt the need to maintain and cultivate that practice.

Reading *The Benedict Option* was what made us wonder: why don't we make this friendship stable? "Stable" stands for the Benedictine *stabilitas loci*. It means to choose a place and a community, considering them as the main tools for living a fully Christian life – not because a place or a community have value *per se*, but because being loyal to them helps one's own *Quaerere Deum* (search for God).

We started talking about this with some wise friends, including some Benedictine monks from different Italian monasteries. Thanks to their guidance, we developed the idea of living together in the same place, as a group of families that share some material goods and a spiritual path, through a rule of prayer to be respected every day. That's what you can read in the Acts of the Apostles about the first Christian community in Jerusalem (2:42-47), and that's what the monks do in their monasteries.

We called our community life project "Cascina San Benedetto" ("St. Benedict House"; the word "Cascina" means a particular kind of country house, typical of northern Italy). A year ago we started spreading the first version of our manifesto, in order to ask friends and religious communities to pray for us. We recently published a new version of it, hoping that it will help us to collect the necessary funds to start. We need some money to buy and renovate the first apartments and some community spaces for prayer, school activity and meetings with other people interested in spending some of their time with us.

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... visited you and your young family last year, and met the other families who want to be part of the Cascina. It really was beautiful, observing you all praying together, and feasting together. It seems like the most natural thing in the world, but in fact bringing together young Christian families who want to share lives saturated in prayer and worship is surprisingly difficult. Why?

Because we have lost the social habit of living in community. It seems to me that in the second half of the twentieth century the West completed the mental bourgeoisification process that began with the Industrial Revolution. The main aspiration of the single person and family — regardless of social class — has become self-fulfillment and individual well-being. We have lost the idea of a human community as the context in which the person is born and grows, suffers and rejoices, sharing with the other members the deeper aspects of his own life. Even Christians have not been immune to this phenomenon. Faith has been reduced to one of the many values we try to maintain, rather than being the unique experience that gives taste and meaning to everything in life. Today we can clearly see that a faith of this kind, a practice that does not really affect our lives, can only survive for a few generations.

We live in a secularized society, imbued with relativism. Its teachings are often opposed to those of Jesus and the Church. I think it will be increasingly important for us Christians to practice particular ways of life, similar to the way of life of the first Christian communities. We will need places where faith is visibly expressed in every action of the everyday life. I mean a kind of oasis of faith — certainly not devoid of all our human contradictions and weaknesses — in which one can continuously regenerate oneself. This should also allow us to better live as true Christians in the world out there. “You are the salt of the earth, but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored?” (Matthew 5:13): we need — at least I think I need — places where we can keep ourselves “salty,” where we can continue to feel the typical taste of Christian life. If we don’t first keep that taste in ourselves, we won’t be able to offer it to the world.

Today the great solitude of people is generating new attempts of

community belonging. Nonetheless, they usually start from important but partial aspects of life: an interest, a hobby, a particular social commitment, a value in which a person strongly believes. In this way, we create forms of coming together in which solitude is fought by being with other people, but without sharing the real drama of life, the big questions about the meaning of our existence. These are the questions that affect the religious sphere of the human being. I think we Christians have the task of practicing for ourselves a different way of being together, and we have to show it to the world. We must live as brothers and sisters not because we are very close friends or share the same interests, but because we all want to build the Kingdom of God and live a holy life to reach Paradise. I believe that this strong common purpose can allow people and families to live together. Just like in monasteries, this will be possible if prayer, and nothing else, is the foundation of all life.

If you all are able to launch the Cascina, how do you think the life together will change the adults? How will it change the children?

From a practical point of view, each family will continue to live its own life: as my wife often reminds me, we must not confuse a Christian community of families with a hippie commune. However, by living in the same place we can be faithful to some community prayer meetings during the day, especially by reciting the Liturgy of the Hours in the morning and in the evening. Sometimes the families will have lunch or dinner together, especially on weekends. We will welcome other people who want to spend time with us, in particular to pray: to make this possible, it would be nice to have a guest house soon.

I think that, at least in the beginning, each of us will keep his current job. Despite this, should we consider it useful, someone will give up all or part of their job to dedicate themselves to the education of children and the needs of the community.

Children's lives will change because the children of each family will have more opportunities to be in contact with adults who believe what their parents believe, and to play with their children. We are not inventing anything: it is a way of life that until a recent past was normal for most

families. We must consider that ours is a generation of immigrants. Even those who remained in Italy often moved from city to city to find a job, and many of those who changed city for their university studies did not return to live in their hometown. This is not a tragedy, but it is a phenomenon that has contributed to cutting our roots: there are many young families who live far from their relatives. This is our story and the story of many of our friends. Also for this reason we would like to live a daily familiar relationship with those who believe in what we believe.

You are thinking about starting a school at the Cascina. Why? How would this school be different from the others your children could attend?

We would like to start a small parental school – which is possible according to the Italian Constitution – to allow parents to be fully involved in the educational path of their children. Private Catholic schools would guarantee respect for freedom of education, meeting our desires and needs. Unfortunately, they are too expensive for families who have to send more than one child there, especially for many years.

And, it seems to me that many families, due to a lack of religious and cultural roots, don't have a clear educational idea. They use school and every other possible activity to fill the time of children, with the illusion of being able to delegate their education to others. Consequently, the school itself becomes a service provider, rather than a tool for the educational role that belongs to the family. We want for our children to grow guided by people who tell them the truth. And the truth is that reality is beautiful and everything is a gift from God. We want them to be able to learn everything, from history to mathematics, in the light of the Christian faith and the teachings of the Catholic Church. We also think that educating small groups of children can promote personalized teaching for each student, enhancing their talents and attitudes.

You all work in Milan, but you want to start the Cascina in the countryside, where you and your wife Alice already live. Why is it important to you all to live in a rural area?

The area in which Alice and I live is still rich in farming and animal husbandry. Many of our neighbors work in the fields and stables. Here you can breathe a genuine air, and it's easier to build new relationships than in the city. Looking around we see meadows and hills, instead of luminous signs and billboards. Silence still exists here. These are conditions that help the spiritual life. We can easily reach Milan every morning to go to work. Moreover, in the countryside the buildings have much more accessible prices.

If you all succeed in launching the Cascina, and everything goes well, what will it look like in 15 years?

OK, let's try to use some imagination. In fifteen years, our older children will be twenty. Maybe they will be about to decide whether to accept or reject the model of life that we have chosen and proposed to them. Perhaps they will be considering whether to stay with us or go somewhere else. By then we will have understood if we have done a good job with them: we will see it not from the choice they will make, but from their freedom in choosing.

Maybe in fifteen years other young families will be added to the community, and we can help them by sharing our experience.

Finally, a dream: perhaps our choice of life will have attracted not only other families, but also some monks who will have built a monastery near our house. There's a story behind this dream: some monks invited us to move near them – they live in an isolated town, many hours away from where we live now – and start our community life project next to their monastery. Having a daily relationship with the monks, participating in their liturgy and involving them in the education of our children would be the most beautiful thing, the best embodiment of our project. We're also considering this possibility. It is extremely fascinating but very difficult, because we wouldn't know how to make a living there. If we have to stay close to Milan, the city where we work, my dream is that the opposite can happen – that some monks will one day come close to us.

I often meet young people like you who want to do something like

this, but don't have the resources. I know you all aren't rich. How are you going to afford to do this project?

If we fail to get some help, we will try to start with our resources anyway, even if they are very scarce. We would like to settle right away not only our apartments, but also some small community space for prayer, for school and for guests. If it must be a "monastery of families," it must succeed in fulfilling the typical functions of the monastery: prayer, study, manual work, hospitality. This is why we are looking for financial support. The monasteries live on their own work and on what God provides them. We will do the same.

One final question: how countercultural is this idea for young Catholic families in today's Italy? You are all in your 20s, maybe early 30s. What advice would you give to other Christians in Italy, as well as in the US and other countries, about doing a project like this?

Our idea is certainly countercultural in Italy, but not entirely new. Thank God, there are several other communities of Christian families, born in recent decades within specific ecclesial experiences or around particular social works. We are in contact with some of these communities, we can learn a lot from them. The peculiarity of Cascina San Benedetto is that we want to be inspired by the monastic model: our "social work" will be prayer.

I don't know what advice I can give to other Christians who want to carry out similar projects. The only thing I can say is to pray a lot and try to always listen to the will of God: his projects will flourish, ours will die. We ourselves don't know yet what the Lord intends to do with this great desire of ours.

Eventually the Zennaros relocated to a hamlet outside of Norcia, to be close to the Benedictine monastery. Last night, Giovanni wrote me:

Caro Rod,

We can finally announce our new life on the mountains above Norcia and our new name: La Banda del Corvo e della Colomba. More information here: <https://corvusetcolumba.it/en>

We Zennaros moved here in June 2020. The second family arrived a couple of months ago. Other two families (one from Lombardy, one from Germany) are planning to move here in a few months. Every family is currently homeschooling its own children, but we want to start as soon as possible (I hope in September) a parents-run school also involving a teacher (one who can share our vision, friendship with the monastery, etc... of course).

They call their new association the *Banda del Corvo e della Colomba* – in English, The Band of the Raven and the Dove. [I went to the website to find out more.](#) Look:

The *Banda del Corvo e della Colomba* – formerly *Cascina San Benedetto* – is a small group of Catholic faithful who have chosen to live following the inspiration offered by the Rule of St. Benedict and the life of the Benedictine monks, *that in all things, God may be glorified (1 Pt, 4:11)*.

Pursuing this goal, in 2020 we settled in the mountains overlooking Norcia, Italy, the birthplace of the father of Western monasticism and his sister St. Scholastica. Here we hope to cultivate a life that is both simple and free from distractions, so that our thoughts and actions can be more and more turned to Christ.

We regularly visit the nearby [Monastero di San Benedetto in Monte](#). There, we attend Holy Mass and the Divine Office.

By invoking the symbols of the raven (*corvo*) and the dove (*colomba*), our name calls to mind two distinct images from our Catholic tradition.

First, in the Book of Genesis, the raven and the dove are the two animals that Noah uses to probe the level of the water after the flood.

The raven and the dove are also the traditional iconographic attributes of St. Benedict and St. Scholastica. In the second book of his *Dialogues*, St. Gregory the Great tells us that a raven helped St. Benedict to get rid of the poisoned bread that was sent to him by a priest envious of his holiness. In the same book, we learn that when St. Scholastica died, St. Benedict saw

her soul rise to heaven in the form of a dove.

We are in the early phases of starting a small, parent-run school in which our children can receive an education that is fully rooted in the faith and moral teaching of the Catholic Church.

The little band is getting by on not much money, and welcomes donations from people who believe in their mission, and want to help. [Go to their website to find out how you can give to help launch their school.](#)

I'm going to do a new interview with Giovanni and put it on my blog. I just wanted to bring the good news to you newsletter readers first. Good things *really are* happening!

Along these lines, one of you readers e-mailed, in response to my report the other day about the Monasphere movement in France:

You will be pleased in knowing that this is happening with gusto among Orthodox Christians in the US. For, at least, five years or more families have established fraternal neighborhoods around the monasteries of St Anthony's in AZ, Holy Archangels in Texas, St John the Baptist monastery WA and Holy Protection in PA and others. Homes and land around the monasteries are rapidly being bought up by the faithful laity and schools for their children established. I am sure you would like your readers to know about these thriving Orthodox communities.

Glory to God! It's happening! [Here's a link to Three Hierarchs Academy](#), a private Orthodox school the community living around St. Anthony's Greek Orthodox Monastery in the Arizona desert.

Pray for all these families, their schools, their teachers, and the monasteries whose spiritual light has drawn them.



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