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Friendship as a Means of Addiction Recovery in the Cenacolo Community: A Case Study on How Work, Prayer, and Friendship Contribute to the Change of Addictive Patterns

Abstract

Cenacolo community is a Catholic association whose mission is to help people overcome addiction. It originated as a grassroots movement in 1983, by sister Elvira Petrozzi and has over 50 houses worldwide, with headquarters in Italy. Over the years, the community has become known as a place where people change their addictive habits through work and prayer, by living together for an extended period of three years on average. To understand how the method works, we analysed 49 testimonials of former addicts who, at the time of giving testimony, were members of the community. What emerged from the research is that, besides work and prayer, the central motivation for the former addicts to complete the programme, is friendship. This was not clear from the outset, but gradually emerged through the application of the grounded theory. Grounded theory is the methodology developed by sociologists Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss. It allows the researcher to extract the main features of the studied reality by giving voice to the participants in the first place. Grounded theory has rarely been used in theology, and this research is one of the few done so far in the theological realm. The results show that, while work and prayer have a certain importance, the former addicts find friendship to be the main force which helps them to change their habits and start a new life.

Keywords

practical theology, addiction, friendship, grounded theory, methodology.

1. Introduction

The Cenacolo community is a Catholic grassroots initiative started in 1983 in Italy by the religious sister Elvira Rita Petrozzi, in an abandoned villa in the small Italian town of Saluzzo.¹ Since then, the community has become an international Christian movement, with more than 50 houses worldwide; more than 1,100 residents in recovery and around 200 long-term residents, many of them former addicts as well. In 2009, the Pontifical Council for the Laity approved the Cenacolo Community as an International Association of the Faithful.² One of the movement's main concerns is the long-term liberation of people who struggle with addiction. The community houses are not classical rehabs, but rather places of maturation for people who have undergone detox in medical institutions. Liberation from addiction, according to Petrozzi, occurs through the leap of faith, which requires a serious effort to change one's habits and attitudes. Petrozzi's goal is to free former addicts from shame and guilt and make them confident, independent, and productive citizens, able to thrive in the fast-paced and competitive world.³ This transformation happens through living together on a long-term 24/7 basis – on average, three to five years – with days organised around work and prayer.⁴ Christian spirituality of work and prayer, having its remote roots in St. Benedict's rule, is central to the Cenacolo recovery method.⁵

Our research question is which aspects of Christian spirituality former addicts in the Cenacolo community consider crucial for their recovery. We approach the term spirituality in a way as it is understood in Cenacolo, that is, a communitarian lifestyle interwoven around intense work and prayer.⁶ The goal is to understand the features of the interior and exterior journey which

¹ Cf. E. Petrozzi, *Nulla è impossibile a Dio*, Saluzzo 2008, Comunità Cenacolo, pp. 2–5.

² Cf. www.laityfamilylife.va/content/laityfamilylife/en/sezione-laici/repertorio/comunita-cenacolo.html (10.4.2020).

³ Cf. E. Petrozzi, *The Embrace of God's Mercy: Mother Elvira and the Story of Community Cenacolo*, Manchester, NH 2019, Sophia Institute Press, pp. 4–5.

⁴ For more details how the community life is organised see S. Aragno, *A Hope Reborn*, Saluzzo 2008, Association San Lorenzo.

⁵ Cf. M. F. Hoffman, *Ora et Labora (Prayer and Work): Spirituality, Communication and Organizing in Religious Communities*, "Journal of Communication and Religion" 30 (2007), pp. 187–212.

⁶ Cf. E. Petrozzi, *The Embrace of God's Mercy*, p. 47.

the former addicts in the Cenacolo community undertake in order to change their lives. This journey comprises a whole spectrum of changes in habits, relationships, and life priorities. According to the Cenacolo sources, it takes three to five years on average, and is performed through communitarian living based on prayer, work, friendship, and trust.⁷ However, the nature of this process is scarcely elaborated. It is not clear how prayer, work, friendship, and trust interact to produce a change in a former addict, which will allow them to thrive in their future life, without using illegal substances or corresponding medical substitutions. This research gives an account of how different aspects of prayer, work, friendship, and trust contribute to the recovery of former addicts. Voice is given to the former addicts residing in the community at the time of their testimonials and their narratives.

2. Methodology

2.1. Grounded theory and the selection of testimonials

The research is developed through the application of the grounded theory methodology. We rely on Kathy Charmaz's constructivist grounded theory based on symbolic interactionism.⁸ The grounded theory belongs to the field of qualitative research. Its distinct feature is that it allows for the data and the structure of the inquiry to emerge from the participants' voices. Then, only as a second step, it analyses the data in a classical way, that is, in dialogue with the existing scholarship.⁹ Due to the limited space of this article, it is not possible to explicate the details of how Cenacolo-grounded theory has been developed. However, we present the graphical presentation of the methodological structure we used, and further on in the text, we indicate how the most important steps have been followed.

⁷ Cf. S. Aragno, *A Hope Reborn*, p. 55.

⁸ K. M. Aldiabat and C. L. Navenec, *Philosophical Roots of Classical Grounded Theory: Its Foundations in Symbolic Interactionism*, "The Qualitative Report" 16 (2011), pp. 1063–80.

⁹ Cf. J. Corbin and A. Strauss, *Basics of Qualitative Research: Techniques and Procedures for Developing Grounded Theory*, Thousand Oaks, CA 2008, Sage, p. 49.

Step	Central activity	Recurring activity
Data collection	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Testimonials of the former addicts who are now members of the Cenacolo community – Other sources on Cenacolo, published either by the community or by third parties (such as religious and secular publications, videos, radio transmission, artefacts) 	Constant comparison: through all of these phases the process goes back and forth between collecting new data, examining it in the light of the analysis of the previous data and through refining codes, concepts, and categories.
Coding in three cycles	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Initial/line-by-line coding – Selective/focused/axial coding – Theoretical coding 	
Theoretical sampling (from codes to concepts to categories)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Organising codes around concepts – Grouping concepts into categories – Recognising patterns and links between categories 	
Theoretical saturation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Theoretical saturation in grounded theory is achieved in a different way than in the other forms of the qualitative research 	
Writing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Developing a consistent theoretical model 	
Theory	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Generating a theory of the Cenacolo spirituality of recovery, which reveals that, in understanding of the participants, friendship is central to their recovery, while work and prayer have an effect only if taking place within a friendship-imbued environment 	

The key source to generate the grounded theory of how former addicts in the Cenacolo community understand their recovery process, are testimonials given on various occasions and published on websites, books, and magazines.¹⁰ Written in relatively plain language and autobiographical form, these testimonials offer first-hand insight into how former addicts see the transformation process they undergo in the Cenacolo community.

The selection and number of testimonials are motivated by three factors. First, we are interested in how the Cenacolo method works, when it works. We want to give voice to those who claim the method works for them. We acknowledge that no addiction recovery method works for everyone. Addiction is a complex phenomenon, and there is no one-size-fits-all approach. The same is valid for the Cenacolo community. Its method works for some and does not work for others. Usually, those who realise the Cenacolo community is not the right

¹⁰ Cf. “Testimonianze,” www.comunitacenacolo.it/official/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=114&Itemid=516 (10.8.2020).

place for them, leave during the first couple of months. The second factor is that we focus upon those who continue their recovery journey when they realise it helps them. Therefore, we use testimonials of former addicts who have been in the community for two years or more.

They have an experience of personal transformation and the capacity to articulate it. It is important to note that our testimonials are published on the Cenacolo official website. We assume that the Cenacolo community, like every other organisation, publishes the testimonials of its members, former addicts, who benefited the most from its recovery method. The third factor is that our research is limited to the production of the theory of transformational journey, as it occurs in the Cenacolo community. This is a case study, and we do not intend to generate a universal theory of Christian-based recovery, even less an all-encompassing theory of addiction recovery. We are interested in how former addicts, now Cenacolo members, understand what they claim to be a life-transforming journey.

2.2. The process of generating a theory of recovery as it happens in the Cenacolo community

The analysis of the testimonials commences with line-by-line coding, whose aim is extracting the core meaning of every single sentence.¹¹ For example, in Keri's testimonial (23, US), she says: "I used to be good at school, this helped me feel I was competent, and fill the void that was inside of me." We coded this as "Exploiting success in school to fill the inner void." The coding of the first ten testimonials, performed in this line-by-line manner, has generated 175 codes from male and 206 from female testimonials. To pass on to the second coding phase, called focused or selective coding, we look for similarities, patterns, or relations between line-by-line codes, identifying subtle patterns and significant underlying processes.¹² We gradually realise that we can aggregate the relevant codes in the following tentative groups:

- Entrance into the Community
- Peer support
- Prayer and faith

¹¹ Cf. J. Saldaña, *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers*, 4th ed., London 2012, Sage, p. 36.

¹² Cf. K. Charmaz, *Constructing Grounded Theory*, 2nd ed., London 2014, Sage, p. 132.

- Healing and changing
- Reconnecting with family
- Mother Elvira
- Vocation and future
- Gratitude.

We continue coding the following ten testimonials in order to theoretically saturate these groups of codes and see if there are other indicative patterns. Thus, we reinforce our tentative categories by investigating their different aspects and elaborating their properties, which leads to what Glaser calls “the conceptual density.”¹³

The second round of coding, or focus coding, gradually leads us to narrow down tentative groups into five categories called ‘narratives.’ These narratives represent a higher level of abstraction than the tentative code grouping. In grounded theory methodology, higher levels of abstraction are needed to put the generated grounded theory in discussion with the broader scholarship.¹⁴ The five tentative categories are:

1. Childhood narrative – life before drugs (childhood and adolescence)
2. Addiction narrative – falling into addiction and the details of the ups and downs of the addict’s life
3. Despair narrative – hitting rock bottom
4. Awakening narrative – the decision to change the course and join the Cenacolo Community
5. Transformational narrative – events regarding life in the Cenacolo community which indicate various transformations that have occurred between the entrance and the giving of the testimonial, usually two to three years.

At this point, the question arises: which of the narratives helps us decipher how the Cenacolo method works? After analysing the five categories, we decided to bracket codes assigned to Childhood, Addiction, Despair, and Awakening narratives. Although these codes could be precious in understanding the roots of addiction in childhood, how addiction developed and brought the participants on the brink of despair and beyond, we put them aside as they are not

¹³ B. G. Glaser, *The Grounded Theory Perspective: Conceptualization Contrasted with Description*, Mill Valley, CA 2001, Sociology Press, p. 191.

¹⁴ Cf. L. DeSantis and D. N. Ugarriza, *The Concept of Theme as Used in Qualitative Nursing Research*, “Western Journal of Nursing Research” 22 (2000), pp. 351–72.

relevant to our research question, that is, how spirituality practised within the Cenacolo community helps the participants to transform their lives. Instead, in terms of understanding the Cenacolo spirituality of recovery, the 'transformational narrative' references in the testimonials seem to be the most promising.

When we realised that the incidents pertaining to the transformational narrative are crucial for our research, we decided to go back to the first ten testimonials looking for the content related to the transformational narrative. Focused coding implies selecting the initial codes that seem most promising in terms of capacity to, as Charmaz says, "sift, sort, synthesize, and analyse a large amount of data. Focused coding requires deciding which initial codes make the most analytic sense to categorise your data incisively and completely."¹⁵ Having noticed a good number of incidents directly related to the transformative experiences of the participants in each testimonial, the next step was to look for content with a higher explanatory capacity in this regard.

Considering all the above, we re-coded the first ten testimonials with the following adaptations: (1) skipping less relevant sentences; (2) no longer coding line-by-line, but according to the broader units of meaning (usually two to three sentences); (3) slightly raising the level of abstraction as we already have a well-established pattern of five broader narratives and we noticed that the transformational narrative is the most relevant; and (4) skipping the topics related to Childhood, Addiction, Despair, and Awakening narratives.

Finally, the third coding cycle consists of looking exclusively for the incidents in other testimonials belonging to the transformational narrative, in order to achieve theoretical saturation. Theoretical saturation means filling the categories (which we define as narratives) with properties that help to explicate them in the consistent theory.¹⁶ Filling different categories of transformational narrative confirm that relationality is the most occurring theme in this narrative. Besides, incidents related to relationality run throughout other categories, depicting situations that preceded addiction, as well as the situation during addiction, indicating the importance of relationality in a former addict's life. Out of all types of relationships mentioned in the testimonials, friendship is the one highlighted by all participants. Some mention it explicitly, while others speak about brothers and sisters' support, help, and encouragement. All participants,

¹⁵ K. Charmaz, *Constructing Grounded Theory*, p. 138.

¹⁶ Cf. M. Birks and J. Mills, *Grounded Theory: A Practical Guide*, London 2011, Sage, pp. 16–31.

with no exception, point to peer support as being crucial in the moment of crisis and discouragement when the temptation to leave the programme is strong.

To understand the role of friendship in the Cenacolo recovery method, we enter into dialogue with several theologians who wrote on friendship. Australian practical theologian Anne-Marie Ellithorpe has recently published her research on the contemporary theology of friendship, and she will be one of our main interlocutors. Besides, we enter into conversation with Jurgen Moltmann, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Stephen Fowl, and several scholars who wrote on friendship from philosophical and sociological perspectives, such as Niobe Way and Danielle Allen.

3. Friendships as a means of recovery, as it happens in the Cenacolo community

This section starts with an insight into the world of loneliness, which almost all participants of our research mentioned as a critical reason for falling into addiction. It serves as a backdrop to understanding why former addicts identify friendship as crucial to their recovery. Then we look into different expressions of friendship which former addicts' testimonials have indicated as important, such as trust and community building through the practice of life revision, the role of Jesus Christ, the possibility to gradually construct and tell their life story, friends as role models, and the relationship between suffering and friendship.

3.1. Loneliness, lack of genuine friendship, and addiction

Sociological and cultural studies, with prominent representatives such as Anthony Giddens, Charles Taylor, Jurgen Habermas, and Zygmunt Bauman, show that a relational crisis is a common problem of our age. People are experiencing increased isolation, loneliness, insecurity, fear, and declining social skills like empathy.¹⁷ A 2006 study shows that personal networks in the US are continuously shrinking, with about 50% of participants claiming that they have nobody

¹⁷ Cf. S. H. Konrath, E. H. O'Brien, and C. Hsing, *Changes in Dispositional Empathy in American College Students over Time: A Meta-Analysis*, "Personality and Social Psychology Review" 15 (2011), pp. 180–98.

to talk to about personal issues.¹⁸ Negative outcomes are associated with emotionally closing off, isolating, and lacking mutually supportive connections. The US sociologist Niobe Way relates this to a lower life expectancy of males and the rise in adolescent suicide rates.¹⁹

Testimonials from Cenacolo members are in line with Way's findings. Almost all participants indicated troubled friendships in their childhood and adolescence. They speak of their inability to create friendships due to shyness, a sense of inferiority, or what they call 'wrong' friendships with peers or groups already on the wrong path.

Relational difficulties are sometimes caused by traumatic experiences, but not always. For example, Sara (22) points out that she was third out of five siblings, which gradually made her distant from her family: "I am the third of five siblings. This increased my jealousy and led me to comparisons and envy; I became distant from my parents, so dialogue with my family disappeared." Keri (23), on the other hand, at the age of seven, was placed under foster care: "I went to live in foster care with another family. It was hard times, I was just a little girl, and I didn't know how to handle my emotions; I had lost my mum, I couldn't rely on my father, and they were keeping me away for my nan to place me in a whole new family... all this led me to a huge sadness, so I learned to 'turn off' my emotions and distract myself with other things. I used to be good at school, and this helped me feel I was competent and filled the void inside of me."

In our study, the codes grouped under the category of Childhood narrative, indicate that the participants describe their pre-addiction period of life as one characterised by disrupted relations or incapacity to establish healthy relations due to personal traits, poverty, trauma, shame, or a blend of those. The codes subsumed under the category Addiction narrative show that participants often recur to substances to fill the void because of feeling different, and the substance was the easiest way to be accepted by peers. Finally, in the codes belonging to the category Despair narrative, the participants become aware that addictive substances and 'high' moments cannot resolve their need for meaningful and healthy relations.

¹⁸ Cf. M. McPherson, L. Smith-Lovin, and M. E. Brashears, *Social Isolation in America: Changes in Core Discussion Networks over Two Decades*, "ASR" 71 (2006), pp. 353–75.

¹⁹ Cf. N. Way, *Deep Secrets, Boys' Friendships and the Crisis of Connection*, Boston 2011, Harvard University Press, p. 267.

The codes related to the Childhood narrative, Addiction narrative, and Despair narrative reveal that the participants, in their self-understanding, see disrupted relations as intrinsically linked to their addictive habits. It resonates with Way's notion that "ignoring the importance of close friendships, trust, empathy, and emotionally supportive relationships" has a detrimental effect on people's mental health and is one of the causes of addiction.²⁰

3.2. Trust and community building through the practice of life revision

An American-Danish historian Brian McGuire, building on Isidore of Seville's definition of a friend as a guardian of the spirit/soul (*animi custos*), identifies two key characteristics of friendship under the aspect of spirit/sole guardianship.²¹ The first is familiarity with the inner life of a friend, and the second is care for a friend's well-being.²² The guardianship, at the difference of classical spiritual direction, can be mutual or less. In other words, reciprocity is possible but not necessarily required.²³ Christian (22) talks about his experience of an *animi custos* relationship at the very beginning of his journey: "The first thing that touched me was the 'life review': I watched the guys tell each other the truth with sincerity but with love, and this was something new for me; in their eyes, there was a desire to help and at the same time the desire to welcome the help of the brothers to change." He testifies that friendship implies a certain level of discomfort. Still, that effort is worthy as it helps personal growth: "I'm grateful to all the guys who have been close to me by helping me with truth, demanding from my life, teaching me to pray, loving me, forgiving me, and accepting me with all my shortcomings."

Living together on a 24/7 basis, in communities such as Cenacolo, has the potential for transformative change that is otherwise less likely to occur. Through working, eating, and praying together, former addicts have a chance to interact closely in a number of different situations and learn from them. In their earlier life, even if they had hundreds or thousands of social media friends, the

²⁰ N. Way, *Deep Secrets, Boys' Friendships and the Crisis of Connection*, p. 267.

²¹ Cf. S. A. Barney et al. (eds.), *The Etymologies of Isidore of Seville*, Cambridge 2006, Cambridge University Press, p. 213.

²² Cf. B. P. McGuire, *Friendship and Community: The Monastic Experience, 350–1250*, 2nd ed., Ithaca 2010, Cornell University Press, p. 339.

²³ Cf. A. Ellithorpe, *Towards Friendship-Shaped Communities: A Practical Theology of Friendship*, Oxford 2022, John Wiley & Sons, p. 26.

intensity of face-to-face interactions was often reduced to superficial encounters with just a couple of persons a day. Regarding social media, Ellithorpe notes that, although it may have a positive impact in maintaining old friendships and building new ones based on shared interests, such virtual, disembodied interactions are “not well-suited to building, reinforcing, or maintaining trust, openness, and authenticity.”²⁴ As earlier, Cristian’s testimonial on the life revision, demonstrates that trust, openness, and authenticity were key factors that touched him and helped him persevere on his way out of addiction.

The life revision practised in the Cenacolo community revokes a concept of “the politics of radical openness to the other,”²⁵ as formulated by Australian theologian Charles Ringma. Such openness is not likely to occur spontaneously. Instead, it is a product of a nurtured culture transmitted within a group. A living example of the senior Cenacolo former addicts disclosing their inner struggles, is that they first surprise, and then encourage junior members to do likewise. After initial resistance, the junior members give it a first, often clumsy, try. Over a period of time, they improve and articulate their inner and outer life. By doing this, they learn to accept themselves as they are, and grow from there. The life revision contains elements of the Ignatius Examen, somewhat simplified and adapted for use in addiction recovery settings.²⁶ Simplified because the participants in this study, by far and large, are not motivated so much by spiritual growth, but their goal is to rid themselves of their addiction. Therefore, the techniques from the Christian spiritual tradition related to personal growth, are not of particular interest to them as such, but rather they use them as auxiliary tools for the liberation from addiction.

3.3. Influence of New Testament writings and the figure of Jesus on an understanding of friendship by former addicts in recovery

New Zealand theologian Māori Marsden sees Jesus as a supreme creator of relationships who spends his life “weaving all things in creation into a vast fabric

²⁴ A. Ellithorpe, *Towards Friendship-Shaped Communities*, p. 30.

²⁵ C. Ringma, *Hear the Heartbeat with Henri Nouwen: Reflections on the Way of the Seeking Heart*, Vancouver 2014, Regent College Publishing, p. 64.

²⁶ Cf. J. Boehner, *Praying for Change: The Ignatian Examen in the Remedial Classroom*, “Journal of Education and Christian Belief” 16 (2012), pp. 215–27.

of relationships.”²⁷ Nevertheless, historic Christianity did not give due credit to this relational aspect. Moltmann sees the relational facet of Jesus’ ministry as neglected in favour of the emphasises on his divine attributes as a prophet, priest, and king.²⁸ Further, Moltmann points to Jesus’ urge to forge friendly relationships with others as a manifestation of the harmonious interweaving of Jesus’ human and divine nature. In other words, Moltmann understands that the very nature of the divine and human relationship is friendship.²⁹ He sees friendship not only as a fourth designation to the common prophet-priest-king *munus triplex*, but also as a relational fabric which permeates all other designations and holds them together.³⁰

Observing Jesus’s relationships, especially in John 15, Moltmann develops the concept of open friendship as a counterpoint to the idea of friendship being exclusive and essentially selfish. He contends that the word ‘joy’ in John is the gateway through which Christians can enter a new fellowship with God. Jesus proposes a relationship characterised by openness and joy: an open friendship.³¹ This approach rejects the confined and exclusive Greek definition of friendship.³² Moltmann questions the Aristotelian concept of friendship, which confines friendship to a few peers with comparable social status. According to Moltmann, the incarnation indicates that God abolished the closed concepts of friendship based on social uniformity and expanded it across the board.³³ He says: “The friendship of Jesus cannot be lived, and its friendliness cannot be disseminated when friendship is limited to people who are like ourselves and when it is narrowed down to private life [...] Because it is the core on which his open friendship is based, a total concept of friendship will have to be developed which

²⁷ W. M. R. Te Kaawa, “*Re-visioning Christology Through a Māori Lens*” (PhD diss, University of Otago, 2020).

²⁸ Cf. J. Moltmann, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit: A Contribution to Messianic Ecclesiology*, New York 1977, Harper & Row, pp. 114–5.

²⁹ Cf. J. Moltmann, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit*, p. 115.

³⁰ Cf. M. Kotze and C. Noeth, *Friendship as a Theological Model: Bonhoeffer, Moltmann and the Trinity*, “In die Skriflig/In Luce Verbi” 53 (2019), pp. 1–7.

³¹ Cf. J. Adiprasetya, *Revisiting Jürgen Moltmann’s Theology of Open Friendship*, “International Journal for the Study of the Christian Church” 21 (2021), pp. 177–87.

³² Cf. J. Fitzgerald, *Christian Friendship: John, Paul, and the Philipians*, “Interpretation” 61 (2007), pp. 284–96.

³³ See J. Moltmann, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit*, p. 121.

included the soul and the body, the people who are like ourselves and the people who are different.”³⁴

The US theologian Peter Slade holds that open friendship is at the centre of Moltmann’s religious paradigm, primarily through the call directed to the Church to open up to people who do not fit its image of the ideal congregation member.³⁵ Now, with former addicts in recovery, who usually do not fit the image of the ideal congregation member, the question is how to open friendship works among them. Especially in terms of its communitarian aspects, therefore, friendships are not only forged between two individuals, but among the various members of the group simultaneously. For example, we find numerous references to brothers and sisters in the plural, showing an awareness that new life, of which the first glimpse came through offered friendship, is a group endeavour. Although the emphasis on attributing personal success to the concrete, individual gestures of the offered friendship of a particular person, usually the guardian angel, there is always an explicit recognition of the contribution of the broader support of the group in the context of the fraternity in which things are done together.

The theme of a friend’s presence in daily life and of a friend as a protection in times of crisis is highlighted by Marco (32), who says that “Entering the fraternity of Envie, I immediately felt a solid ground that helped me to live in the truth also the crises, the difficulties and the daily problems [...] I felt again loved, sought, accompanied, contrasted, discussed, understood and taken seriously.” Moreover, it seems that the former addicts recognise an opportunity to create what Moltmann calls “a fellowship of friends who live in the friendship of Jesus.”³⁶ For example, Silvio (21) says, “The first thing that touched me deeply was my ‘guardian angel’, the guy I was entrusted to and who helped me take my first steps. In his presence as a true friend, I ‘saw God’ next to me: it was like a call to learn to work and live seriously.” Or Marco (32), who says that “Upon entering the Envie fraternity [...] I have built friendships that have been like bridges to get to meet Christ, friendships that I still keep in my heart as “special” gifts from God.” Keri (23) adds that “The Community teaches me to live

³⁴ J. Moltmann, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit*, p. 121.

³⁵ Cf. P. Slade, *Open Friendship in a Closed Society: Mission Mississippi and a Theology of Friendship*, Oxford 2009, Oxford University Press, p. 21.

³⁶ J. Moltmann, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit*, p. 316.

the Christian life in a very concrete way. I can change, love, be loved through friendship and meet Jesus in the people around me.”

Silvio, Marco, and Keri link friendship to knowledge of God. At the same time, they emphasise a public aspect of friendship. By doing so, they confirm Ellithorpe’s notion that on many occasions, “Friendship has been identified as a metaphor for God and an analogy for a relationship with God. While contemporary communities have privatised friendship, faith communities reverse this trend as they rediscover the public character of friendship.”³⁷

3.4. Narrating one’s story as a practice in addiction recovery

The US theologian Stephen Fowl identifies the narration of one’s story as an important aspect of Paul’s theology of friendship. Namely, in the letter to Philippians, Fowl points to Paul’s exhortation to his friends to, “narrate their lives within the larger drama of God’s economy of salvation.”³⁸ Narrating one’s life within the larger drama of God’s salvation is part of the Cenacolo recovery method. Former addicts are encouraged to testify about their transformation through small everyday gestures of attention, love, and respect towards each other. It has a two-fold purpose. One is to make this new way of being in the world their second nature, opposite to their previous life of selfishness. Another is encouraging junior members who need a living example of new, non-addicted, non-selfish behaviour.³⁹ The practice of narrating one’s life is not typical only for the Cenacolo community but is widely spread as a method in community-based addiction recovery, as confirmed by Dutch theologians Sremac and Ganzevoort: “Experiences of spiritual transformation, like a religious conversion, can thus be an important element in the coping process inherent to recovery. In the context of conversion and addiction research testimony is the biographical reconstruction, or denarrativization, of one’s life, where the subject actively reinterprets past experiences and self-conceptions from the vantage point of the present, in such a way that it redefines the relationship with self and others.”⁴⁰

³⁷ A. Ellithorpe, *Towards Friendship-Shaped Communities*, p. 37.

³⁸ S. E. Fowl, *Philippians*, Grand Rapids 2005, Eerdmans, pp. 208–9.

³⁹ Cf. S. Aragno, *Cenacolo Community: A Hope Reborn*, pp. 64–5.

⁴⁰ Cf. S. Sremac and R. R. Ganzevoort, *Testimony and Transformation: Addiction, Meaning and Spiritual Change*, in: H. Westerink (ed.), *Constructs of Meaning and Religious Transformation: Current Issues in the Psychology of Religion*, Vienna 2013, VUP, pp. 223–39.

Through testimonials, former addicts construct their new identity and confirm new collective belonging in the process, which Marshall calls the “technique of the self.”⁴¹ Here, a testimonial serves as an expression and confirmation of “acts and experiences of faith whose focus is on interiority, enacting in various forms processes of self-examination and giving an account of oneself.”⁴²

3.5. Friends as role models

The previous point of narrating one’s story leads us to another aspect of the genuine Christian community indicated by Fowl, and that is the importance of personal example. This importance is both horizontal and vertical. Fowl once again relies upon Paul, who expresses his human struggles to his fellows in Philippi.⁴³ By doing so, Paul encourages the integration of the community members’ bodily, material, and spiritual dimensions of life. According to Fowl, this is “the practice on which all other practices of Christian friendship are based.”⁴⁴

Cenacolo’s testimonials vividly illustrate this integrational approach. When the participants talk about friendship, they do not refer only to feelings, but point to the concrete, embodied, practical help they receive from their peers. Like Ellithorpe, Petrozzi, the founder of the Cenacolo community, is aware that in order to make this happen, both the individual and the group must develop habits and skills that foster such integration.⁴⁵ Both former addicts and Ellithorpe confirm unanimously that acts accomplished in practice are essential to foster genuine friendships.⁴⁶

The dynamics of the Cenacolo community, with former addicts helping each other to grow, with just a minimum interference from the permanent community members, resonate with Danielle Allen’s concept of viewing the members of a certain group as the “founders of institutions,” implying that all

⁴¹ R. Marshall, *Political Spiritualities: The Pentecostal Revolution in Nigeria*, Chicago 2009, University of Chicago Press, p. 129.

⁴² R. Marshall, *Political Spiritualities*, p. 129.

⁴³ Cf. S.E. Fowl, *Philippians*, pp. 208–9.

⁴⁴ S.E. Fowl, *Philippians*, pp. 208–9.

⁴⁵ Cf. A. Ellithorpe, *Towards Friendship-Shaped Communities*, p. 101.

⁴⁶ A. Ellithorpe, *Towards Friendship-Shaped Communities*, p. 101.

of us contribute to the way in which life in our group or community is shaped.⁴⁷ This resonates with Petrozzi's claim that the rules and the culture of the community have been laid down by addicts themselves, especially in the first few years, and that all she learned about addiction recovery she learned from them: "I am not afraid to say that my teachers, experts, and books have been the guys themselves. I've turned the pages and learned to read the book of life with them over these years. It holds the mystery of the Cross, pages written with pain, wounds, and anger, but I've also contemplated pages of mercy, forgiveness, goodness, joy, simplicity, and resurrection. My human, Christian and religious advancement came from the young men. They taught me everything, and I wanted to be the first to learn from them, to be a student at their school. Who could teach me how to help them find freedom from the drama in their hearts if not they themselves?"⁴⁸

Although it may sound counter-intuitive that a group of drug addicts can set the rules for themselves to get out of addiction, Petrozzi's and Allen's insights show that it can be successful within the right framework and with sufficient supervision.

3.6. Relationship between suffering and friendship

Stefano Aragno, a senior priest and educator in the Cenacolo community, draws attention to a notion that is sometimes overlooked. He states that the greatest wound the addict suffers is not connected with drugs but it is about loneliness, sadness, and fear of not being loved. By joining the community, the other members offer courage and friendship, which helps to overcome initial struggles; they explain, listen, and help keep one going.⁴⁹ It is the culture which, with the help of prayer, makes former addicts become friends, capable of understanding, forgiveness, overcoming disappointments and starting anew. Aragno adds that through the culture of brotherhood within the fraternity, or what Moltmann calls open friendship, former addicts learn to accept the poverties of the brothers and understand them as gifts, that is, opportunities for personal growth.⁵⁰

⁴⁷ D. S. Allen, *Talking to Strangers: Anxieties of Citizenship since Brown v. Board of Education*, Chicago 2004, The University of Chicago Press, p. xxi.

⁴⁸ E. Petrozzi, *The Embrace of God's Mercy*, p. 34.

⁴⁹ Cf. S. Aragno, *Cenacolo Community: A Hope Reborn*, pp. 64–5.

⁵⁰ S. Aragno, *Cenacolo Community: A Hope Reborn*, pp. 64–5.

In Aragno's notion of sadness, loneliness, and fear of not being loved as the greatest wounds which the addict suffers, and friendship as a vehicle for healing these wounds, there is a resonance of Bonhoeffer's experience. Shortly before he died in the Flossenburg concentration camp in 1945, Bonhoeffer wrote a letter reflecting upon friendship as a cultural phenomenon, considering it equally important as state, family, and work.⁵¹ Liz Carmichael notes that as a result of his experience of being in prison and undergoing major existential suffering, Bonhoeffer has contributed to such a high regard for friendship.⁵²

Aragno and Bonhoeffer come from different positions. Aragno joined the Cenacolo community in place of military service as a conscientious objector, later became a priest, and is now one of the community leaders. His knowledge sprouts from his decades-long work with former drug addicts. Bonhoeffer was in a far worse condition and wrote his letter from prison. Yet both realities, imprisonment and addiction, imply intense human suffering. It is indicative that speaking from a space of intense personal suffering brings about the same high regard for friendship. Bonhoeffer considers friendship as "a rare and precious treasure,"⁵³ while former addicts in their testimonial use almost the exact wording when speaking about their recovery experiences in light of friendship received and given.

Bonhoeffer's notion of the relationship between friendship and other sociological pillars, namely state, family and workplace, where he sees friendship as "the cornflower in the wheat field", gains further relevance when we think of friendship in the context of addiction recovery.⁵⁴ Ellithorpe draws attention to Bonhoeffer's understanding of the role of friendship as slightly subversive when compared to state, family, and workplace.⁵⁵ She says that Bonhoeffer depicts friendship as "self-sown, unique, and fragile. It is not deliberately planted, nor does it belong to or receive support from the main crop."⁵⁶

⁵¹ Cf. D. Bonhoeffer, *Ethics ["Ethik"]*, trans. Neville Horton Smith, London 1955, SCM, p. 253 n. 1.

⁵² Cf. L. Carmichael, *Friendship: Interpreting Christian Love*, London 2004, T&T Clark, p. 161.

⁵³ A. Ellithorpe, *Towards Friendship-Shaped Communities*, p. 32.

⁵⁴ D. Bonhoeffer, *Ethics ["Ethik"]*, trans. Neville Horton Smith, London 1955, SCM, p. 253 n. 1.

⁵⁵ Cf. A. Ellithorpe, *Towards Friendship-Shaped Communities*, p. 32.

⁵⁶ A. Ellithorpe, *Towards Friendship-Shaped Communities*, p. 32.

Is this subversive aspect of friendship one of the reasons why former addicts highly regard friendship? Does friendship, having the allure of something alternative that cannot be imposed by the system but grows organically, have the power to be an efficient recovery tool for the former addicts who were used to alternative forms of living and surviving?

Although a detailed elaboration of this hypothesis goes beyond the scope of this research, it would be worth exploring the link between the subversive nature of friendship and its application as a tool in addiction recovery. Cenacolo sources indicate that friendship in the Cenacolo community is not, as Ellithorpe notes, “ignored, devalued, or discouraged”, as it happens today within many contemporary communities of practice within the Church and broader society.⁵⁷ However, we see that official Cenacolo sources do not highlight the role of friendship either. Instead, its importance has emerged only after a thorough analysis of the Cenacolo members’ narratives.

4. Contribution of this study

This study aims to elaborate on the Cenacolo community’s recovery method from a theological point of view. Cenacolo community, based on work and prayer, does not use replacement drugs in tackling addiction. Instead, it views spiritual growth and development of the relationship between a former addict and God as being crucial in their recovery. Our study shows that former addicts develop a strong relationship with God during their long-term stay in the community. However, it is not the relationship with God that they find central to their recovery, but extensive peer support received and given through multiple friendships forged in the community. Their narratives show that developing relational skills, which gradually occurs through friendship given and received, is crucial to their recovery. Although prayer and work play a significant role in recovery, friendship is the phenomenon which keeps them going during hard times, when the temptation to leave the programme and revert to the old addiction-based lifestyle, is strong.

The novelty of this research is that it applies a grounded-theory methodology in the community organised in the form of stable and relatively secluded groups of former addicts living 24/7 for an extended period in an environment

⁵⁷ A. Ellithorpe, *Towards Friendship-Shaped Communities*, p. 34.

based on work and prayer. Our goal is not to measure the results of the method, but rather to identify what the addicts for whom the method works find most important for their inner spiritual journey.

There are four main contributions of this research to the field of practical theology. The first is methodological. Grounded theory, used in this research, is recognised as a tool for understanding individuals and the social structures they feature in, including their values, aspirations, and challenges. Yet the application of grounded theory in studying Christian communities and their theology is rare. By applying it to the context of the Christian community constituted of former drug addicts in recovery, the grounded theory is used in the field previously unexplored in a similar fashion. Secondly, the research conducted on the Cenacolo community, while being exploratory and descriptive in terms of practical theology, is the first scholarly-based articulation of the Cenacolo recovery approach. It proposes a theological framework of Cenacolo faith-based practices developed spontaneously through the everyday living of founder Petrozzi and the former addicts. Thirdly, this study contributes to the interdisciplinary field of addiction care, pastoral training, and spirituality studies. The results might be beneficial not only for researchers in these fields, but also for pastoral workers encountering people afflicted with addiction. Finally, this research contributes to a better understanding of contemporary religious communities and movements and community-based recovery in general.

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