

Romans evangelize Denver

Julie Filby Catholic News Service | Jan. 3, 2011

DENVER (CNS) -- Marco and Monica Tesei consider themselves a normal couple: married for 18 years; three children, ages 16, 14 and 11; living in a peaceful family neighborhood in Denver.

The unusual thing about them is that the family left their home in Rome five years ago to serve as missionaries in the Archdiocese of Denver.

They're part of the Neocatechumenal Way, a parish-based faith formation program that has sent hundreds of missionary families around the world over the past 30 years to be a Christian presence by living a life of service, simplicity and poverty.

Monica Tesei describes it as a fulfilling way of life. "When you experience missionary work, you become closer to the Lord," she said "It's a way to meet him strongly."

In 1988, Pope John Paul II started a tradition of blessing such families and their mission to evangelize when he celebrated Mass with 100 families of the Neocatechumenal Way in Porto San Giorgio, Italy, and sent them across the globe.

Precedents for this evangelical mission can be found in the early church: The New Testament tells of the family of Aquila and Priscilla, who collaborated with St. Paul in his evangelization efforts. During the ministry of the Benedictines in the Middle Ages, monks were accompanied by groups of Christian families; and in North America, Franciscan Father Junipero Serra's California missionaries included Christian families who helped the priests.

Rose Mary McLeod, who, with husband Don, is responsible for the Neocatechumenal Way in Colorado, said about 300 missionary families were sent worldwide last year, another 250-300 are expected this year.

"Mission families are going 'like crazy,'" she said. "There are a lot of requests (from bishops)."

The Denver Archdiocese has four missionary families: two from Italy and two from Spain. The Teseis are assigned to Denver's Redemptoris Mater Archdiocesan Missionary Seminary; and the others to St. James Parish in Denver, St. John the Baptist in Johnstown and St. Theresa in Frederick. Three Colorado families recently left to serve in Alaska, Taiwan and Australia.

Missionary families are sent to "announce the Gospel," they say. How that is accomplished varies. In addition to volunteer positions in parishes, seminaries and Catholic schools; the families assist with marriage preparation, catechesis, religious education and even labor such as janitorial work when necessary.

"They do whatever is needed; they're there to serve," McLeod said.

Marco Tesei, an accountant in Italy, and his wife, a former flight attendant, volunteer at the seminary, where he

helps the administration.

"I'm happy to give my help to the seminary because it's where priests are formed to do this mission," Monica Tesei said.

The Teseis, parishioners of St. Thomas More in Centennial, also conduct marriage preparation in English and Spanish at various parishes, assist at the seminary's vocational center and present catechesis at parishes.

Marco Tesei said the family's transition to missionary life happened fast.

They first felt a call to the work in 2004. In May 2005, the couple attended a retreat in Porto San Giorgio and the following January the family received a missionary crucifix and an apostolic blessing for their journey from Pope Benedict XVI. A month later, they said goodbye to family and friends, leaving what they called a "very beautiful life in Rome."

"We left good jobs, our families, good schools -- it was difficult, but that's part of it," Monica Tesei said. "We saw that the Lord is faithful. The Bible says 'you will find a hundredfold if you leave something good for the Lord' and that was true for us."

"We had a beautiful welcome here," she added. "People are very generous."

They visit Italy during the summer or at Christmas. Mission families often live in their assigned diocese for many years or even permanently.

"They go forever, theoretically," McLeod said. "Sometimes they go back home, but for the most part they stay. They become acclimated to the culture, climate, language, everything."

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