



Casa Cares is a simple guesthouse, as well as

- *a place for exchange and dialogue*
- *an attempt to live in an environmentally friendly way*
- *a Protestant voice in the community*
- *a part of the Waldensian social services*

January 2012

Dear Friends

Hospitality can be a demanding “business”, but also stimulating and rewarding. First of all, of course, it is a fundamental act of life and of the Christian faith, that can become a business. One person offers and another accepts. It is persons sharing space, time, themselves. Each person finds his or her own way in hospitality. For some giving and receiving comes more naturally. Casa Cares is proud of its vocation. As in most Waldensian guesthouses, it is curious to note that staff typically arrived without specific professional training. We certainly hope that the on-job experience and accompanying training bring us to a good level. We like to believe that our experiences and training in other fields can enrich what we have to offer as hosts.

But, as underlined by the statement at the top of the page, one which is in our entrance room, at Casa Cares we have also other callings and responsibilities. Each of these in turn, like hospitality, is goal and aspiration. We have no illusion of always being up to the task at hand. For example, as anyone knows who has tried, being “environmentally friendly” in our world today is not easy, certainly not in an enterprise that must have the income to pay the bills. Your imagination can elaborate on this. We do, however, make an effort at it on the various levels of the local community, guests and staff. That a good part of our staff is live-in makes for a particular life style challenge. We are happy to have this emphasis in our center and, while acknowledging our shortcomings, we welcome the fact that we are known locally and in our national church for this part of our identity.

For a Protestant voice in the community, we are typically Waldensian. Most likely the centuries of persecution and imposition have contributed to a timid approach to sharing our faith. We are ready to live our daily lives with certain criteria and to share our thoughts and faith with those who ask, but we are not the type to come knocking on your door. The Waldensians often are criticized for this reticence, maybe rightly so, but this is, so to speak, in our DNA. We do believe strongly that a Protestant presence, just as an atheist or a Jewish or an Islamic or another presence, contributes to a healthier society than one that is dominated in an exclusive way by one voice. Hopefully Reggello has benefitted by our being here, first as a children’s home from 1970-1975 and now as a guesthouse since 1983.

The Waldensians work closely with Methodists and Baptists in Italy. The social service nature of our centers comes from the heritage of these church denominations. Often in centers such as ours a certain social sensitivity is evident in the staff. Hospitality in general, even in the most commercial of settings, is a social service. For Casa Cares it means working with groups like some hosted in the past: Belarus State children’s home, Rom off the streets of Florence, Florence child care centers, schools. Also we have been able to respond periodically to a church’s or the local community’s request to temporarily host persons in need.

With all this going on of course a guest facility is potentially a place of exchange and dialogue. We hope that our setting facilitates these basic, positive human experiences.

THE PEOPLE OF 2011-2012

We write our newsletter in the calm of our winter off-season, appreciating the time to step back to review the traffic of the past months and to plan for that of the months to come. There is no sense to a guesthouse without guests. We have some of the best. We are not for everyone with our

simple (but comfortable and unique!) accommodations, with our emphasis on environmental care (not everyone likes to hear of recycling and energy saving during his or her vacation!) and our rural setting (too slow for some!). Fortunately it is rare when a guests does not feel at home. The coming year promises to be similar to the previous one, which, having been a particularly good one, is fine with us. Several leaders are returning with groups, some new ones are on the way, and individual guests are starting to book.

A major event in 2011 was a large March meeting of friends to discuss the future of Casa Cares. The planning committee organized it to consider whether the objectives of the past decades are still valid or if they need radical change. There was a strong positive response. The points of the mission expressed above are seen as still valid today and deserve on-going and renewed conviction and investment for at least the immediate future.

The Waldensian festivities (buffet, conference, bonfire) initiates as usual the new season, this year on 19 February. In 2012 also to keep in mind are our youth camp (7-15 July), our young children's camp (2-7 September), and the Casa Cares Children's Home reunion (17-20 August). The reunion will commemorate the founding of the home in 1962 and its ministry on three different sites until its demise in 1975 in Reggello. Also worth a note are two one-week violin courses for children being offered in the second half of July. More information for these events can be had upon request.

We are thankful that offers for volunteers, mostly between 18-30 years old, continue to come because they have always been essential to our work. Because of the labor-intensive care of the land and the historic property and because our rates are low, we could not exist as we do now without our volunteers. In 2012 those who stayed several weeks came from Sweden, Denmark, Hungary, Germany, the Netherlands and the US. In 2012 we have a new national presence with the arrival of Nele from Estonia. An encouraging note of 2011 was the successful collaboration of a few older volunteers, who calmed our questions about their having the stamina and enthusiasm we needed.

OTHER CARE

People care is primary, but at Casa Cares care for the historical buildings and land are also essential. In many ways these three aspects are entwined. We speak much about and dedicate considerable time and other resources to the buildings and the land. Sometimes they seem like limitations, and they are, but they are also what make the experience here unique. Both the buildings and the land developed over centuries when life was so very different. The Waldensians hesitated in accepting the donation in 1983 because many understood the responsibilities involved. Once the property was accepted, however, it was best to look forward. That is still true today.

Without denying the difficulties, we are challenged to see the potential in the buildings and the land as special complements to hospitality. We have reported the past few years about major interventions: a part of the villa roof, a complete renovation of the fire safety system, and the photovoltaic panels. Now we are pleased to be involved with other important steps forward. Besides the purchase of several new beds and mattresses, we have hired a local artist to restore the painted ceiling in the main meeting room. After 80 years it had deteriorated and significant damage was done when water pipes burst during the extraordinary freeze of January 1985.

Regarding the land, we have been fortunate to find Giordano to do the farming. As a young, skilled person thoroughly committed to the care of the land, he is a rarity in our rural area, sadly one in many "developed" parts of the world. He will be employed part time from March of this year but the production in our vegetable garden which he tended voluntarily for the past few months is evidence that he is a blessing to us in our work. With him we can plan to replace a number of our olive trees and we can make a bigger commitment to garden production for our guests' table.

Many of our guests would remember Luca, our former farmer. He had to leave us due to back problems about two years ago. By the way, he is fine now but cannot farm regularly. He

helps us now as a good friend in other ways, as a consultant and as coordinators of the local buyers' cooperative that offers local, organic foods.

For an aspect of building care, we are very enthusiastic about the progress made on the restoration of the structure below the villa, the one-time chapel and olive press rooms. Friends and the central church administration responded to our appeal for funds. Progress is evident in the beautiful new chestnut beam roof covered by the terracotta tiles we were able to reuse. In the first quarter of this year we hope to have an unfinished but useable floor. There will remain much, much more to do such as also here using the historical tiles that Beppe so perseveringly removed to finish the floor. We shall go as far as donations and work camps take us, but already when this first step is done, perhaps by April, our guests will have access to a great space for worship, music, art, theatre, meditation, and other gatherings. It has been a responsibility and thrill to work on a building basically untouched in over two centuries, the origins of which go back longer that we have been able to determine.

NOTES EVERYWHERE

We often say that the Casa Cares life is not complex "vertically", that is, deep and complicated. But it is complex "horizontally" in that there are many elements in the life here: the guests themselves from numerous backgrounds with different needs and programs, an international staff including volunteers coming and going, the many spaces in the historical buildings, land care and production, multiple tasks. It can take months, when it does work, for a new arrival to have a sense of understanding it all.

For that reason the place is full of written guidelines, notes and suggestions. Immediately as one enters the villa this is obvious with newsletters, statements, brochures, guidelines for environmental care, newspaper articles, information on the Waldensians, and welcome notes. Perhaps it is too much! But the idea is to take what you need to feel comfortable during your stay.

To close this newsletter we share three of the informative notes, on our logo, our meals, and donations. For friends who want to follow us regularly, we try to put a monthly note under "What's new" on our website.

THE LOGO – INTERCONNECTEDNESS, INTERDEPENDENCE

A logo to represent the hope of Casa Cares is found in the simple design of three Tuscan woods braided together. On the one hand, as a centre of the Waldensian Church we are interested in dialogue among persons of diverse heritage and perspectives. Only through contact and exchange can we truly come to appreciate diversity as a gift and not only as a challenge. Dialogue between church and society; among Jews, Christians, and Muslims as well as other religions; among Orthodox, Roman Catholics, and Protestants.

The Waldensians also are known for their work for peace and justice. At Casa Cares we think that we can help promote in our churches, among our guests, and in our local community the realization that without a concern for a third dimension, the integrity of creation (environmental issues), there can be no true peace and justice in our society.

In this simple piece of woodwork interrelate:

- the delicate, light wood of the cypress, an evergreen line of beauty that graces our horizons and that has been used for constructing our doors and windows;
- the spectacularly grained wood of the olive tree, a tree blessing us with its fruit and oil, growing slowly for decades and even centuries;
- and the wood, often dark in tone, of the chestnut, a basic for charcoal and whose beams support magnificent homes; the fruit sustains wild and domesticated animals and has often also sustained humans.

THE SLOW FOOD MEALS

Our kitchen gives priority to our setting both in products and in menu. It seems a paradox, but in this farm community there is a lack of variety in the local production due to the dominance of wine and olive oil, certainly of high quality but dictating that most produce comes at least from the distance of the Valdarno.

The wines for sale are almost exclusively Tuscan, often with options from organic or bio-dynamic farms. The house wine comes from the Bonsi farm 2 km away, which is also the distance our bread travels from the Agnoletti bakery in San Donato in Fronzano. The honey comes from a young, local beekeeper. Some of her hives are visible on a terrace of our land below the parking lot. Fresh milk for breakfast comes from Tuscan farms.

Depending upon the season, our vegetable garden provides a good quantity of what is presented to our guests. The jams for breakfast come from our fruit, predominantly plum with at times an option of cherry or blackberry.

We are ready to meet special dietary needs such as vegetarian, lactic-free, and gluten-free.

We are working with the local buyers' cooperative dedicated guided by the Slow Food Movement emphasizing local, organic products.

The meals are family style, which includes the elimination of individual packaging with their considerable environmental impact, for example with butter, jam and sugar. If you are still hungry, check with the neighboring table and the kitchen.

Leftovers go either to our cats or to our compost (or even to our volunteers!).

DONATIONS

Perhaps you do not know that the income from our work of hospitality is just adequate to cover our operational expenses. To carry on we depend upon the gifts of friends who share our vision of contributing to an inclusive, just, participatory and sustainable society.

We are thankful therefore for all the persons who everyday accompany and encourage us with their financial, material, and voluntary work donations. For example, we use these gifts to

- host free of charge or at a reduced rate persons in difficulty or with limited means;
- increase and improve our investments in the environment-friendly management of our center;
- promote local and cultural initiatives.

We note that upon request we can issue a receipt valid for tax deduction. Certainly we are available for further clarification. Thank you!

Greetings from Casa Cares

We appreciate your accompanying us into the new year,
For the staff and board,
Paul Krieg

*Welcome to those who come
Peace to those who stay awhile
Blessings on those who move on*

(from the façade of a Swiss home)

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