

Dialogue Lived in Communities of Gospel Life

by Ted Keating, SM

We continue our theme in this issue of *Today's Marists* suggested by Pope Francis' World Day of Peace Message of January 1, 2017: *Nonviolence: a Style of Politics for Peace*. Following Pope Francis, we saw how the principles of dialogue in our last issue were a practical way for bringing home this theme of non-violence into daily life and spirituality. We also went back to Paul VI's *Ecclesiam Suam* (1965) which re-visions the Church as a Communion in dialogue in the midst of Vatican II.

Inspiring lay movements in the Church have led the way for us in implementing the principles and practices of dialogue in dealing especially with Islam and in witnessing to the deeper tolerant history of Islam they find there. If we stereotype Islam as an inherently violent religion against the declarations of Pope Francis, we would have no hope of appealing to its Sufi mystical elements or to its deeper history of tolerance. For example, the most famous poet in the world right now is the Sufi Sunni mystic, Rumi. But for the most part the ordinary opportunities for dialogue in our contemporary world seem to be in the local inter-religious communities in which we live today. We interviewed two of those communities for this article.

Focolare

Focolare ("the hearth") is an enormous lay movement (a lay ecclesial movement in Church language) represented in 182 countries with about 140,000 members. Its truly humble beginning was in Trent, Northern Italy in 1944 at the height of World War II. "Chiara Lubich and her first companions attended the Mass on the Feast of Christ the King. At the end of the Mass she and her friends remained recollected and reflected on a phrase they had just heard from the book of Psalms: 'Ask it of me, and I will give you the nations as your inheritance, and, as your possession, the ends of the earth'" (Ps 2,8). They asked God to help them put this phrase into action by saying to God, "You know how to bring about unity. Here we are. Use us." (From the website at www.focolare.org) Their mission and ministry is simply one of unity in our diverse and conflicted world.

A long-time leader of the movement here in the United States shared with us that the simplicity of their charism— "living the simple life of the Gospel in search of human unity"

— avoids complexities or qualifications. The community is uniquely attractive to religious people across all spectra of religions and even people without religion. Early on they formed relationships with Lutheranism in Germany and included Lutherans in their core Catholic Movement. They saw Vatican II as a confirmation of their world charism along with their deep devotion to reading of and prayerful reflections on the Gospel (not so common before Vatican II). By 1956 they had spread across Europe; in 1958, South America; and in 1961, North America. In 1963, they reached Africa; in 1966, Asia; and in 1967, Australia. Now they have two million "adherents." It includes people from 350 churches and ecclesial communities. People from other world religions including Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus and Sikhs embrace their simple spirituality and way of life. Their ability to admit Islamic and Buddhist members was received directly from the Vatican in more recent years.

Like the Marists, they describe themselves as "The Work of Mary" and see the simplicity and humility of Mary as the model for their opening to their truly diverse membership and "adherents" across so many nations. Their radical witness to Gospel Life is a following of Mary's way of being present to the world as the "perfect disciple."

Their openness to Islam began early in their history and they describe one striking example here in the U.S. on their website:

In May 1997, Chiara Lubich, the founder, was invited by Imam Wallace Deen Mohammed (leader of the American Muslim Mission, with over two million followers) to give her testimonial in the Mosque of Harlem (New York) dedicated to Malcolm X, the renowned religious leader and human rights activist, killed in 1965 while he was speaking before hundreds of people. Never before had a woman, a Christian and even more, a white person, spoken in the New York Mosque.

Chiara Lubich launched an invitation to Christians and Muslims to work together side by side, for universal brotherhood. Over 3,000 people listened to her in absolute silence, also in other seven halls connected via video conference. «A historical page has been written here in Harlem today» **Mohammed solemnly announced**, and right after the meeting accepted the invitation to make a pact to work



together for peace and unity, in the name of the only God. “God is a witness that you are my sister. I am your friend and will always give you a hand.” **Two great religious leaders and a sole objective: to create a world of peace.**

Focolare celebrated the 20th anniversary of this momentous event with the American Muslim Mission here in Washington this past May with a keynote by Cardinal Theodore McCarrick. When we questioned our *Focolare* friend about how this began, she explained that they move in this direction firstly by opening to relationships across boundaries and then develop openings to dialogue across the great cultural, religious and racial divides here in the U.S. It was an outgrowth of their charism and their Marian simplicity of life completely rooted in the Gospel living and without layers of complexity. It is a radical living out of the Gospel. It is the simplicity of the House of Nazareth for them, but not in many words but in many loving deeds of listening and kindness without blinders or walls. *Focolare* often provides hospitality to the U.S. Imam in Rome. Their name *Focolare* is the Italian word for “hearth” and is a symbol of this hospitality of Nazareth spread to the world. The name came from their earliest days in Trent when the homeless and hungry talked about going to the “hearth” for some food, shelter and kindness.

Similar relationships of simple love and kindness with Islam occur across North Africa and the Middle East including Nigeria, Morocco, Egypt, Israel (in both Israel proper and the Palestinian Territories), Iraq and Syria. They have delivered reflections in more than 40 mosques worldwide. They describe themselves as a “People born from the Gospel to bring people back to the home of Nazareth” irrespective of their beliefs or differences. They live lives of witness more than preaching. Is *Focolare* the very core of the first essential steps to dialogue? Does it show that the attractiveness of the Jesus of the Gospel is the basis of a truly human movement beyond religions and ministries and Christian labels? It brings new depths to Paul VI’s mystery of the Communion of the Church in the image of Mary as a mission as well as an identity. The Society of Mary, the other “work of Mary,” could perhaps find great riches in a dialogue with this gently powerful Marian group with a mission and charism so close to its own “Work of Mary.”

The Community Sant’Egidio

The other great Lay Ecclesial Movement of our time is the *Community of Sant’Egidio* founded in 1968 by a young man named Andrea Riccardi (a senior in high school). He brought together a number of other young men smitten by the *Universal Call to Holiness of Vatican II*. Like the *Focolare* they arose out of a simple but profound desire to live truly and authentically the call of the Gospel in all of its simplicity and to root their prayer lives together in the Gospel and in what it called them to be and do. They realized that they were blessed with education, resources and an understanding of their culture and social system. They called themselves simply *The Community of Sant’Egidio*.

I had the opportunity to interview one of their members who is very close to the Marists. He described how they grew in their early decades, so the Church of *Sant’Egidio* in the Trastevere area of Rome was given to them by the Vatican as a base for prayer and work leading them to their present name. Like *Focolare*, they saw themselves as a community without boundaries, open to the world. It has about 70,000 members

in more than 70 nations. Unlike *Focolare*, their founding inspiration was not directly from Mary but from the heart of Vatican II reflecting their deep meditations on the Church of the Acts of the Apostles where the early Christians lived lives of simplicity and service sharing their resources. This led to the obvious comprehension of Mary among the Apostles and then gradually to Mary as the “perfect disciple of the Lord” leading them ever more clearly to the poor and marginalized and on to the whole world.

It would take pages to describe the truly impressive peace keeping projects of Sant’Egidio around the world. The community was born out of a passionate desire to serve those who are poor and vulnerable in the way of the Gospel, a mission that took them eventually around the world dealing with everything from AIDS in Africa (developing a widely recognized expertise in this area) to the dire poverty in many developing nations.

Their deep life of prayer rooted in the Gospel led them to the discernment that “War is the Mother of every poverty,” a motto leading them to bring the high trust that they had evoked in many nations into the midst of conflicts tearing away at these societies. They began this work in Mozambique in the midst of the Mozambican Civil War. In 1990, the Community was accepted as a mediator by the ruling FRELIMO and rebel Mozambican National Resistance, playing a key role in the Rome General Peace Accords signed in 1992. They continued peace initiatives in Algeria (notably the 1995 Sant’Egidio Platform), the Balkans, the Democratic Republic of the Congo and other areas of the world. They have received numerous international awards for this work and were nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize by the Italian Congress. This past June 20, 2017, they mediated a political agreement in Rome that will lead to the pacification of the protracted war in the Central African Republic.

Conclusion

It is puzzling how *Focolare* and the *Sant’Egidio Community* have gained such enormous trust and friendship with so many diverse and dissimilar groups often in conflict with each other. There are international aid groups galore across the face of the world, but they are not being called to mediate warring parties nor are they spending time speaking in Mosques all over the world. These successes are amazing in themselves by any secular standards, but they are more so the product of groups of committed lay people rooted “only” in the tools of an intensely lived simplicity of the radical call of the Gospel, the fruit of prayer and discernment always with an eye to how it will be lived out each day. It does not take a long reading of history to find that this style of life and commitment was the original inspiration of many of the great religious orders in the Church. The Ecclesial Lay Movements often including the single, the married, the ordained, the vowed living in communities without borders (a phrase used by both of these movements) may have picked up that torch for our times. Can they be compared to Dorothy Day’s *Catholic Worker Movement* from our last issue of *Today’s Marists*?

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