(Translation)

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Interview of Maria Voce with Monica Mondo, for the TV 2000 programme ‘’Soul’’

Monica Mondo: Welcome, Maria Voce!

Maria Voce: Thank you!

Monica Mondo: Maria Voce, as President of the Focolare Movement, currently in your second term, which is an ecclesial movement, can you explain what the Focolare Movement is and why it bears this name. Everything began in the year 1943 which was a tragic moment in history for the nation, wasn’t it? There was a group of young women in Trent…

Maria Voce: There was a group of young women in Trent, especially one, Chiara Lubich, who was the founder of the Focolare Movement. This group of young women decided to live the Gospel to the letter. Practically speaking, this was how it all began.

Monica Mondo: That is, to respond to suffering.

Maria Voce: To respond to the situation that existed there which they too experienced in that terrible period of the Second World War. However, it was not an attempt to respond; it was, I believe, an inspiration. I am sure that it was an inspiration from God. It enabled Chiara Lubich, first, and then she shared it with her companions, to understand the desire of every human heart to have an ideal that never passes away. Instead, they saw that all human ideals passed away – at that time it was more than evident – and the answer came strongly within their hearts: there is an Ideal that does not pass away; the ideal that does not pass away is God. No other ideal ever remains – only God remains.

The start of the Focolare Movement

In that disaster, they decided to choose the ideal that never passes away, to choose God. This immediately meant a concrete commitment for them. God had spoken; he had sent his Son. “God had given us his words,” they said, “let’s see what he’s saying to us and to live accordingly.”

Monica Mondo: You say it with such conviction; it shows you believe it too.

Maria Voce: Yes, I believe it too, absolutely, because I experience daily that it is true, that the Gospel transforms the circumstances of life. Today the Gospel interrogates me, “Are there terrorists?” Yes, there are terrorists, it is a fact, but God is far greater than they are and he will win out in the end. This certainty comes from life; it does not arise from the fact that we are convinced of it, but from the fact that we have experienced it.

Monica Mondo: Look, Maria Voce, today the Focolare Movement is present in 182 nations, I think, involving more than two million people, Not all of them are Catholics, there are also some Buddhists, Hindus, Muslims and Jews. However, its real name is not the ‘’Focolare Movement’’.

Maria Voce: "The Work of Mary’’.

Monica Mondo: And it is the only ecclesial movement that, according to its Statutes, must be led by a woman. What does this betterment of women mean? What does it mean with respect to the role of women in the Church?

The role of women in the Church

Maria Voce: I think that the betterment of women is much simpler than what we usually think. I believe that it means, above all, to recognize her specific characteristics without which man cannot fully express himself. Why? Because God made humankind in his image and likeness, and he created man and woman distinctly, in order to create humanity in them. Hence, humanity exists if there is the contribution of both man and woman, and her part, her femininity is very important, in summary, her capacity to give of herself, to organize life, her capacity to sacrifice herself, to the point of losing the fruit of her womb since she loses it when the child is born, and then throughout her lifetime in order to continue giving her child to humanity.

Woman has something to give to humanity, and consequently to the Church; or to the Church first and then to humanity, it is the same.

Monica Mondo: So it is not about power or positions of influence, as is often debated.

Maria Voce: Not at all, not at all. Woman does not need to have more power.

Monica Mondo: The Church is already too clericalised; why clericalise women too?

Maria Voce: Absolutely not.

Monica Mondo: Let us now talk a bit about you, a young woman from Calabria who became the first lady lawyer in your part of Italy.

Personal experience

Maria Voce: Yes.

Monica Mondo: Let us talk about a rather stubborn young woman who was rather misunderstood by her family for choosing to consecrate herself to God, and go to live far away. How did it happen?

Maria Voce: I was studying at university and I met a group of young people who were also studying there. They attracted me because of the strong unity they had, but I did not understand what it was.

Monica Mondo: You were brought up as a Christian.

Maria Voce: Oh yes, I already attended daily Mass then; I belonged to the Catholic Action and was the leader in my hometown. I was entrusted with the younger ones; we went for walks together and organized many activities. In this regard, I was completely free because my parents were good Catholics too. I come from a traditional and practising Catholic family, there were no problem about my involvement.

The problem started when I decided to consecrate myself to God. It was a problem for my father, I must say, because he was attached to me and had many "plans" for me. It was love on his part; I am sure it was love. I was the eldest, and in Calabria females were considered less important than males. So from the start, of course, my parents wanted a boy.

Monica Mondo: Therefore the least she could do is get married and give us grandchildren!

Maria Voce: At least give us grandchildren, if possible.

I was also a very good person in the family; being the first of seven siblings, we were a joyful bunch, a happy company. So it was also natural for me to think that one day I would get married and have many children, like my mother. I wanted a beautiful family. That’s what it was like for me; I had no other thoughts at that time.

When I met this Movement, it gave me the chance to live the Gospel, and my life changed. I had begun to practice law in my town, and so I had clients who came to me for advice, to make a police report or file a complaint. I started to see in them a brother or sister to love. This transformed my life; they were a brother or sister to love, with problems which became mine too, so it was to try and find solutions together, without breaking relationships or hurting others, trying to build peace, to re-establish harmony.

Monica Mondo: Were you able to patch up the misunderstanding with your father?

Maria Voce: Yes, much later. I left without his blessing; it was almost a rejection on his part. I often received news from my mother. At one stage she said to me: ‘’If this is your choice, then I am sure that you have made the right choice and that is fine.’’ She used to send me news of everyone. Once I told my father on the phone: “Why don’t you ever write to me?” He replied: “If I were to write to you, I would be tempted to say: ‘Why did you leave? Why did you not stay?’ So I do not want to make you suffer more.’’ I thought that it was love on his part, so I did not pretend more than this.

When I was in the focolare in Turkey, I received a birthday card from my father who wrote: “*Best wishes! Dad*.” It seemed like a miracle for me, and I thanked God for that birthday card. A few days later, my father died of a heart attack. I felt it was God’s love for him that allowed him to reach the point of fully accepting [my choice]

Monica Mondo: What does it mean: ‘’I was in focolare in Turkey’’? What does it mean ‘’to be in focolare’’?

What it means ‘’to be in the focolare’’

Maria Voce: To be in the focolare means to answer God’s call and to live the vocation of giving one’s life for this plan of unity, for this charism of unity. That was my vocation.

Monica Mondo: But what is a focolare; is it a house?

Maria Voce: Yes, it is a group of people who live together, whom God calls to the same vocation, and who are ready to give their life for one another, every moment, in order to be the Work of Mary. What was Mary’s greatest work? Her greatest work was giving Jesus to the world. The men and women focolarini want to relive Mary in this way, that is, to be able to have among them the living presence of Jesus through reciprocal love.

Monica Mondo: Here we could use a word that is the least fashionable today, the word ‘’virginity’’. Can we use this term as something to propose to young people today?

Virginity: a word no longer fashionable today

Maria Voce: Yes, we can! We must, I think, but the word does not depend on us because the virtue of virginity is born from a calling; it is an answer to a calling. Out of love, Jesus calls someone through his special love. Jesus loves everyone, and certainly does not love less the person who marries. But out of love, Jesus may show a special kind of love and plan for someone whom He calls to an infinite love, which is everttgubg. So when God calls with this love, the answer cannot but be a total love.

Monica Mondo: So this choice is not impossible or inhuman.

Maria Voce: No, on the contrary, it is a response of love! If a choice is deemed impossible and inhuman, then it would also be impossible and inhuman to for you to say yes to a young man who proposes marriage, because that is a measure of love. It is also a human love taken to its nth degree, a love that excludes other options.

After all, that is what virginity is. The other day, a young man told me: it means living decentralized, that is, to move the centre from one’s self into another, into God though, not into anyone else. Because if we transfer [our centre] into any another kind of person, in a sense it is always for our own self, even if it is transferred to a spouse, a family, ia profession or a dream…

Monica Mondo: Are you telling me that this idea of virginity – we can give it another name, the Church also uses the word ‘’chastity’’ – is not only valid for religious but also for those who choose married life, for example?

Maria Voce: Yes, we must be virgins at heart in order to live marriage well. The breakdown of many marriages is due to the lack of this virginity of the heart.

Monica Mondo: How did you meet Chiara? What was your relationship with her?

Maria Voce: I met her right at the start, after meeting the group of university students. One day I went to Mass with them at the church of Santa Maria in Rome, near Piazza Colonna. We had arranged to meet and at a certain point, Chiara came in. I did not know who she was, but I felt her presence made the whole assembly “one’’, all the people who were in the church. Then we met outside and simply greeted each other. The young people I had met introduced me to her, ‘’this is Mariella’’, that was my name then.

The relationship with Chiara Lubich

Monica Mondo: Then Chiara gave you another name, Emmaus; you have this practice in the Focolare Movement.

Maria Voce: It’s not the case for everyone.

Monica Mondo: It is a strange name; is it a place?

Maria Voce: Yes, the name Emmaus shows the desire and commitment to bring about the presence of Jesus even after his death and resurrection.

Monica Mondo: To journey with him.

Maria Voce: Yes, journeying together.

Monica Mondo: Like the two disciples at Emmaus the Gospel recounts, after His resurrection.

Look, Maria Voce, it is not easy to succeed a founder because you need to keep everyone together and recall them to the unity, which is characteristic of your ecclesial movement, your specific feature; we can use the word ‘’charism’’ here. It is also difficult not to idealise the person of the founder, in this case of Chiara Lubich, even if she will be canonised. The process has started …but not to idealise her. How can you make the changes that need to be made, looking at reality, without betraying the heritage of the people who began the movement?

Succeeding a founder

Maria Voce: I always tell myself: I must not think of what Chiara said or did, rather what she would say, what she would do, that yes, because the inspiration is in the charism that is eternal, while people pass away. Chiara too lived in her own day and of course, she responded to the needs of her time. She was conditioned by the situations of her times like other human beings, like all the people in this world. But she had a charism and she lived it fully during her time, and she left the charism to us, she passed it on. Therefore, we too have the same charism that she gave us, logically by being united to the source. But today, with today’s challenges, what would Chiara do? What would she say? This is what guides me in all I do.

Monica Mondo: Do people understand this?

Maria Voce Yes, I think so because they are aware that it is not a matter of repeating things, in fact, there are many things happening in the Movement that perhaps were not there in Chiara’s time.

Monica Mondo: How are the Movements seen today? There were times that were not so easy.

The ecclesial movements in the Church today

Maria Voce: I think that by now, at least for the bigger and more accredited movements, there are no more problems like before. I think the Church has welcomed the richness brought by these new charisms, which can give new vitality to all the realities of the Church.

Monica Mondo: I wanted to ask you, there are also many bishops, cardinals too, who are focolarini…

Maria Voce: In a wider sense.

Monica Mondo: What does in a wider sense mean? What relationship do you have with them? Are there people born from your spirituality?

Maria Voce: There are people who are born from our spirituality who become priests, then bishops and continue to live this spirituality. The relationship cannot be juridical with bishops because of course they are bound to the Church. It is a spiritual bond with the bishops, but it is a very close one, like brothers who live the same spirituality.

Monica Mondo: I wanted to ask you, first, if the atmosphere among the ecclesial movements has changed.

Maria Voce: Yes, definitely.

Monica Mondo: There was a kind of competition before.

Maria Voce: Certainly, but it is normal, like when children are born, they can cause upset with the other siblings.

Monica Mondo: This does not happen anymore?

Maria Voce: I think it does not happen at all anymore.

Monica Mondo: Above all, Maria Voce, are the Movements still fashionable? There was a time in history that Pope John Paul II declared: ‘’This is the breath of the Spirit.’’ Now sometimes we see a repetition, or we notice some divisions or even some weakness. Is it so or is it only something we see from the outside?

Maria Voce: Perhaps it is still there, but I believe the Movements are still in vogue because they have some characteristics that are favourable to Christian life. For example, the fact of coming together, being radical, going against the flow, not repeating what others do but coming up with something new. This comes from the breath of the Spirit that perhaps will be shown in different ways at different times.

But I believe that the Movements still have much to say and to do.

Monica Mondo: Especially for the young, there is really a need; the problem is how to catch them.

Maria Voce: Yes. You can see this more with young people since we see more young people in the big movements. But I think it is not only for the young. If we think of families, for example and how much the Movements do for the health of the family, to bring ahead Christian life in families, because it is from Christian life in the families that vocations to religious life or other vocations arise.

Monica Mondo: Fewer and fewer!

Maria Voce: Fewer and perhaps to other vocations.

Monica Mondo: Meaning?

Maria Voce: I think it is because the family is no longer what it was. I think that my vocation – I said it earlier – I was certainly thinking of forming a family. My vocation would not be what it is now without the family I had, a strong one, based on reciprocal love, on sacrifice…

Monica Mondo: But it is a meeting that brings about change, isn’t it? That turns your life in a new direction.

Maria Voce: Yes, of course.

Monica Mondo: So the problem is to arrange meetings that can help young people to see reality from another viewpoint.

Maria Voce: That’s it, we can say, our presumption – if we want to use that word - is to enable people in general and young people in particular, to meet the living Jesus, because if this happens, there will be no problem.

Monica Mondo: What does ‘’the living Jesus’’ mean?

Maria Voce: The ‘’living Jesus’’ means Jesus who lives among us because of the reciprocal love, and who understands young people today.

Monica Mondo: You mean, who is still visible through his witnesses?

Maria Voce: Yes, who is still visible, and can still be seen and heard, yes.

Monica Mondo: Among the key figures in [the Movement] was Igino Giordani, who was an intellectual and a prominent politician. Why is it important for Catholics to get involved in politics?

Catholics and politics

Maria Voce: To bring the values that Catholics have.

Monica Mondo: Lately, it has not happened much.

Maria Voce: it has not happened much, and unfortunately, it is not enough to say that Catholics must get involved in politics. First, they must be authentic Catholics, who really base politics on the values given by the Catholic faith, in its essence, that is, the values of the common good, solidarity, the importance of starting with the least, not forgetting the peripheries, not creating division or fences between ethnicities... All these values are the fruits of living the Catholic faith.

Monica Mondo: These would have been the fruit of an identity – that has been much discussed – of a Europe that seems to have forgotten its history

Maria Voce: Sure.

Monica Mondo: And is inclined to erase it…

Maria Voce: Yes, but what is actually the fruit of Europe’s forgetfulness? The fruit is that Europe no longer means anything to anybody. Let us say it frankly. Did Europe decide to cut with its Christian roots? Does it want to cut off its Christian roots? Then do it, it will disappear, Europe will disappear, and the very concept of Europe will disappear.

Monica Mondo: Somebody people explain it saying that Europe is, above all, about human rights, that were born in the context of the French revolution, not from Christianity. This is of course debatable since the values of the human person…

Maria Voce: The French Revolution! And where did that come from?

Monica Mondo: but in extending these rights up to the limit, my right ends up damaging the community…

Maria Voce: This is not Catholic!

Monica Mondo: … it hurts the weak…

Maria Voce: It is unchristian!

Monica Mondo: …it damages life, for example, it brings about dehumanization.

Maria Voce: Absolutely, absolutely. Thus, not only is it not Catholic; it is not even Christian, and not even human. Rightly, you mention dehumanization. This is the reason why it cannot go ahead in this way, this is why Europe must – we think – gain a new appreciation of its Christian roots, and this is why in the Movement there is…

Monica Mondo: Are there people who still engage in politics? It is difficult to position oneself at a time when parties are falling apart.

Maria Voce: Yes, above all, it is difficult for the young to take interest in it, instead…

Monica Mondo: Where can you go to be able to defend some …, whom do you side with?

Maria Voce: It is enough not to be on any particular side, but, just to defend values without taking any side. In fact, we are not for partisan politics; we are for a transversal politics.

Monica Mondo: The keyword of the focolarini is ‘’love’’, and another is ‘’dialogue’’. Often these terms, especially lately, have become slogans, nice catch phrases and so have lost their value. What does dialogue really mean?

What dialogue means

Maria Voce: It means to put oneself before others as equals, as a brother or sister because he or she is a child of God. The other person is a child of God and therefore an equal, absolutely equal, and so we should accept him or her for what he or she can give, certain that he/she can give us something, not only that we can give something to him/her but also the other person can give us something.

Monica Mondo: Is it possible to dialogue with everyone, even with those, for example, who consider you an infidel?

Maria Voce: It takes two to dialogue, who want to dialogue. Therefore, from the very start, we say that dialogue can begin with everyone, and then it can go ahead if the other person responds.

Monica Mondo: It is clear why I am asking you this; I am asking what type of dialogue is possible with Islam today? I am asking you since you lived in Istanbul for ten years, I think, so you know that world well.

Maria Voce: At least the one in Turkey because Islam – as you know – is not the same everywhere. However, I would say something else.

I always say this. We do not dialogue with Islam; we dialogue with people, of whatever creed they may be, whatever is their affiliation. We dialogue with people. Then by dialoguing with people, we also discover to what religion they belong, what their principles are and what inspires them. Then a dialogue begins in which there is mutual understanding, we try to understand one another, as much as possible of course. Certainly, I will never be able to understand the motives of a terrorist, but this does not hinder me from loving that person.

Monica Mondo: Even that?

Maria Voce: Oh, yes because ‘’Love your enemies’’ is part of the Gospel!

Monica Mondo: In fact, this is what some people living in Syria or Iraq, who are victims of terrible persecutions, have witnessed to in an almost scandalous way

Maria Voce: Sure.

Monica Mondo: But they do not stop loving.

Maria Voce: Sure, they do not stop loving. On one hand, the risk Christians take is that of martyrdom. This is the only risk they take, but it is a risk that is foreseen, and martyrdom can be of different kinds: it can be misunderstanding, it can be…

Monica Mondo: Chiara also had another side that is less known, a visionary, mystical side that is part of a long tradition of saints in the Church. Let me put it in layperson’s language, since today this sense of mystery has largely been lost. Chiara had a prophetic drive that became creativity, imagination, inventing things that then became concrete for many people, but they were foreseen. Do you still have this capacity to invent places and experiences to offer something new to humanity?

Is creativity and novelty still there?

Maria Voce: I think so, drawing from the charism, from Chiara’s charism. We do not have to create new things. We must renew the world with the charism that we have. In this sense, I think so, and I can say that in effect we are doing it, if I think…

Monica Mondo: Give us an example.

Maria Voce: Some examples: the focolarini who decide to spend their vacation to …, not focolarini, people who belong to the Movement, of any vocation, who decide to spend their vacation witnessing to the Gospel in Amazonia or who go to a little town of the Movement to build a school for poor children in the vicinity. There are many of these projects being done today.

Monica Mondo: What are these little towns?

The little towns/permanent Mariapolises

Maria Voce: The little towns are places where all the people who reside there, live the spirituality of the Movement although they have different vocations, diverse situations. There are families, youth, priests, and lay people. These places are small models of a society that has chosen to build up its society based on the Gospel and its values.

Monica Mondo: Putting everything in common.

Maria Voce: Putting everything in common, living for one another, loving one another reciprocally.

Monica Mondo: One thing more, Maria Voce, as a corollary to what we discussed before. You talk of witnessing the Gospel in faraway lands. How do you distinguish between witness, evangelization and dialogue? We said before that with a [non-Christian] person, I can meet him or her, love that person, decide to do things together, but as a Christian, I must bring Jesus Christ…

Witness and dialogue

Maria Voce: Sure.

Monica Mondo: … also to that person, without imposing or being combative. However, it is a balance that is difficult to maintain.

Maria Voce: It is difficult but not impossible. It is the ‘’respectful proclamation’’ of which Pope John Paul II talked about. We must proclaim Christ, but primarily with our life. Words are also necessary but they should arise from the other person’s desire to know what lies beneath our life. If our life truly gives witness to Christ, eventually the other person will want to know about the root it springs from.

Monica Mondo: I think it was Saint Francis of Assisi who told his friars: ‘’Give witness to Jesus Christ with your life and if necessary with words.’’ Is it right? Did he say that?

Maria Voce: Yes, but we too experience this.

Monica Mondo: And this possibility of unity, which is one of your keywords…, on Chiara Lubich’s tomb is written: ‘’that all may be one’’, which is a word from the Gospel. How do you make this unity out of the individualisms that are dominant today?

Maria Voce: Surely. The unity we are talking about is, precisely, the unity of which the Gospel speaks, and that is, unity in God, where each one recognizes himself or herself as a brother or sister of the other. So in a certain way, without this basis for all, we cannot speak of unity, but rather of mutual understanding, to accept compromise in order to reach a certain mutual understanding. But genuine unity comes from God and is in God. Also for us, this is always valid.

We can experience this kind of unity also with people who do not share our faith or viewpoint, but who, like us, are ready to lose their self, their personality to unite with us for a greater ideal, which is that of being brothers and sisters».

Monica Mondo: Maria Voce, are Catholics not hiding too much? Has the liquid society, so often mentioned in this neologism by Bauman, dissolved Catholics [so to speak] making them unrecognizable sometimes and therefore useless or [easily] used?

Catholics being more influential

Maria Voce: ...for any purpose.

Maria Voce: Yes, yes. I really think there is this danger. I think that Catholics should be more influential. They can be; they must recover their genuine Catholic faith, the meeting with Jesus that transforms your life, and show it. However, I think that everyone would want that. Perhaps one of the fruits of the Movement is really that of reviving this desire present in all Catholics, surely, because God gave it to us at baptism.

Monica Mondo: But sometimes baptism is something that one carries around…

Maria Voce: … forgotten.

Monica Mondo: That must be rediscovered…

Maria Voce: As if we no longer know what baptism is for. So we must revive the desire, the Christian DNA that a Christian acquires through baptism. I think it is one of the tasks of the Movement, which generally we are able to do.

Monica Mondo: You still have the attitude of a lawyer!

What cause to defend?

Maria Voce: Oh, yes?

Monica Mondo: If you were to defend a cause today, to what would you dedicate yourself with the greatest passion?

Maria Voce: I would dedicate myself, I hope, always with the greatest passion, to universal brotherhood.

Monica Mondo: it is a cause.

Maria Voce: To live for universal brotherhood. It is a great cause but we do it in the present moment with the brother or sister beside us; we can build it step by step, we cannot expect to build it all at once.

Monica Mondo: And it cannot be done only with speeches.

Maria Voce: It cannot be done with speeches, but through life.

Monica Mondo: Can you suggest some music that you love most, which says something about you? So we close this conversation with that tune.

Maria Voce: For example, our song about Mary or even the Ave Maria, if you wish, any song dedicated to Mary, I feel that it truly expresses also what I wish to be now.

Monica Mondo: Thank you, Maria Voce.

Maria Voce: Thank you.