

PRESS RELEASE – 22<sup>nd</sup> September, 2021

## **BISHOPS FRIENDS OF THE FOCOLARE: THE COURAGE OF UNITY AMONG THE CHURCHES IN A DIVIDED WORLD**

**Synodality, ecumenism and peace are the themes that will engage 170 Bishops from 44 countries of the world and from 70 Churches and ecclesial communities who will meet from 23<sup>rd</sup>-25<sup>th</sup> September in Castel Gandolfo (Rome). Pope Francis will receive them in audience on 25<sup>th</sup> September.**

**“Dare to be one. The courage of unity in a divided world”** is the title of the next international conference of Bishops of different Christian Churches who are friends of the Focolare. The title aptly expresses the urgency that Bishops feel in these times when the pandemic has aggravated rifts, violence and old and new forms of loneliness all over the world. “To this we add the unjust distribution of wealth and poverty, the dramatic gap between freedom and oppression, the growing threats to the natural environment. All this prompted us to passionately formulate this appeal: “Dare to be one!”. We address it to ourselves and to our fellow Bishops so that it can be taken on in our respective Churches and communities”. This is how Bishop Christian Krause, former President of the Lutheran World Federation, one of the initiators of this event, summarized the significance of the conference.

Mgr. Brendan Leahy, Catholic Bishop of Limerick (Ireland) who is the coordinator, explained, “This event is promoted by the worldwide network of Bishops of various Churches that are friends of the Focolare and who have been meeting regularly for 38 years to deepen their communion on the basis of the spirituality of the unity of the Focolare. The goal is to be united in Christ and if there is the presence of Jesus among us, the journey towards unity is assured”.

The meeting will have a blended mode: 10 Bishops will be physically present in Castel Gandolfo (Rome), while 170 will follow the conference online, alone or in small groups, in compliance with health rules. On 25<sup>th</sup> September they will be received in audience by Pope Francis, who, via streaming, will be able to communicate with all the participants, also those connected from afar.

**The following will intervene in the Conference:** Margaret Karram, President of the Focolare Movement and Jesús Morán, Co-President of the Movement; Nelson Luiz Leite Campos, Bishop Emeritus of the Methodist Church in Brazil; Stefan Tobler, Reformed theologian, Professor of Evangelical Theology at the Lucian Blaga University of Sibiu (Romania); Piero Coda, Catholic theologian, member of the Joint International Commission for theological dialogue between the Catholic Church and the Orthodox Church, lecturer at the Sophia University Institute in Loppiano (Italy).

**The programme** will offer insights into the spirituality of unity of Chiara Lubich, testimonies of life offered by Bishops of different Churches inspired by the Word of God, the mystery of Jesus Crucified, abandoned and risen, the charism of unity and its incarnation in the wounds of contemporary humanity. The central moment and certainly the most characteristic of the conferences of the Bishops who are friends of the Focolare is the “Pact of mutual love”. It is a solemn commitment to love one

another on the basis of the invitation that Jesus makes in the “new commandment” (cf. *Jn.* 15:17). The Bishops will therefore undertake both to share the gifts offered by the Church of the others and to share their pains and joys, feeling them as their own in order to make the process of unity between the Churches ever closer and visible.

**Bishops friends of the Focolare: from the 1980s to today**

In 1982 Klaus Hemmerle, Catholic Bishop of Aachen (Germany) began promoting meetings of Bishops belonging to different Churches. Since the 1960s, many Bishops, who made the spirituality of the Focolare their own, were committed to walking together towards unity and promoting it at all levels. The words of the then Pope John Paul II to a group of Catholic Bishops friends of the Focolare on the occasion of an audience, represented a further encouragement to the organization of periodic meetings with Bishops of different Churches. Today these gatherings take place periodically in places that are symbolic of ecumenical dialogue. An itinerary that is not only spiritual, but also a concrete opportunity for the Bishops to get to know and welcome one another, offering each one the opportunity to experience the Christian life of the various Churches.

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