

## “Peace in the Holy Land will come from reconciliation and dialogue”

By Andrea Gagliarducci, Vatican City, Thursday, 7<sup>th</sup> November, 2024 (ACI Press), unofficial translation.

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Ten years have passed since **Margaret Karram** was involved in the Prayer for Peace desired by Pope Francis, in the Vatican Gardens with the participation of the then Israeli President Ariel Sharon, the Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas and the Patriarch of Constantinople Bartholomew I. Now, **Karram, an Arab Christian from Haifa**, is the President of the Focolare Movement and in that capacity, participated in Rome at the two stages of the Synod of Bishops on “**Communion, Mission and Participation**”. She is a daughter of the Holy Land who watches events with concern and attention. She is convinced that peace is built through personal relationships, step by step, politics is not enough.

**Ten years have passed since the Prayer in the Vatican Gardens. How did you come to be part of that historical event?**

Let me begin with a bit of context. I had lived in Jerusalem for 24 years and in May of 2014, Pope Francis visited the Holy Land together with Patriarch Bartholomew. But in March of that year, I had already moved to Italy to work at the International Centre of the Focolare Movement. It was a difficult change with which I was coming to terms.

**Why?**

In Jerusalem, I felt I was living my vocation to the fullest. I was in the Holy City, a city unfortunately divided, but where Jesus died and rose again. There, in the midst of conflict, of people's pain, of the wall that was being built, I felt that my vocation in the Focolare Movement was in full bloom. My life had a definite meaning. I was working with other focolarini and international organizations to promote dialogue and peace and educate Christian communities to live together more peacefully.

**So a very active life...**

I accept change as a call from God. It was beautiful to go to the place where Chiara Lubich, the founder of our Movement, had lived and to be close to some of Chiara's first companions, because ten years ago many of them were still alive. Yet, I didn't feel fully in the right place. I missed the adrenaline of life in Jerusalem that helped me to live the Gospel every day. Because in Jerusalem there was the challenge of continuing to believe, of continuing to testify that it is possible to live for unity, despite all the difficulties.

## **What was different in the International Centre?**

You didn't hear the ambulances all the time, you didn't see the soldiers on the streets. I had an irrational fear that my radical commitment to living the Gospel might waver. It was in this context that I heard the news of the invocation for peace in the Holy Land and that the Pope had invited the two Presidents, Palestinian and Israeli to participate. They were looking for someone who spoke Arabic and who could read a passage in that moment of prayer.

## **So you decided to participate?**

I really didn't know whether to accept this invitation or not. I was caught in an inner turmoil that wouldn't give me peace. I went to the chapel and asked God what I should do. I opened the readings of the day and I found Acts 23:10-11, where it says: “Keep up your courage! For just as you have testified for me in Jerusalem, so you must bear witness also in Rome.”

## **That must have felt like a clear message...**

It gave me courage. It told me that, even though I felt out of place, I had an opportunity to bear witness to Jesus. And so I agreed to participate in the invocation, and I read, the prayer of Saint Francis in Arabic, with those words, “Where there is hatred, let me sow love” full of meaning. It was a very strong moment, in front of Pope Francis, Patriarch Bartholomew and many Israelis and Palestinians, including Jewish and Muslim religious leaders. Reading that prayer, I brought the cry for justice and mercy there. So I read that prayer with deep emotion.

## **Ten years later, would that invocation still make sense?**

It was a beautiful moment, even if you could feel the tension. Some spoke off the cuff, setting aside their written text. I could feel tension and rancour. However, I know that from above, God sees a beautiful embroidery while we only see the knots. Then, after the invocation, the war in Gaza broke out. Ten years later the situation has not improved. So we might wonder: what fruit did this prayer bring? Did it do any good? But I can still see the olive tree planted in the Vatican gardens and for me it is the symbol of that day. In fact, to bear fruit, the roots must go deep into the ground, penetrate the mud, overcome the darkness and take root in a reality of pain. This is my hope.

## **So what good is prayer?**

I'll answer with the words of Cardinal Pizzaballa, now Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem, who was then the Custodian of the Franciscans in the Holy Land and who, after the prayer, following the outbreak of the war in Gaza, was asked the same question: “Prayer does not produce. Prayer generates. It does not replace the work of man, but illuminates it. It does not exempt from the path but indicates it. And in this sense, the meeting in Rome was and remains a powerful and strong, binding sign. It is the image to which we can refer and that gives hope to those who do not resign themselves to the sad reality of our days.” I make these words my own and I know that we must continue not only to pray, but to work for peace and to educate for peace.

**The burning issue, in the conflict in the Holy Land and in all the conflicts of the world, is that of reconciliation. How can we live as brothers and sisters after having experienced the death and destruction we have caused each other? Forgiveness is a Christian theme. In your years in the Holy Land, did any acts of forgiveness give you hope?**

I think it is better to talk about reconciliation rather than forgiveness. Forgiveness is a very strong word and few are able to forgive, to feel free with the feeling of having had social, human and political justice. But, returning to the question, yes, I have seen many acts of reconciliation, very strong situations.

**Can you give us an example?**

For example, in the Holy Land there is an organization called “Parents Circle”. It brings together Israelis and Palestinians who have had a relative killed during the conflicts. It is an association of about 600 people and they work along lines of reconciliation. They meet, trying to see the other not as an enemy but as someone who can teach peace. And then, they get together to tell their stories. They are stories of great emotional impact, which they share by meeting also to be reconciled and to bring a different mentality, to reach a path of dialogue and peace.

**Were you personally involved in any situation?**

When I lived in Jerusalem, a neighbour invited some of us from the focolare to her house. She didn't know I was an Arab or a Christian. When she realized, she told me: “I've never had an Arab in my house”. I was with other focolarine and at that moment I thought I should leave. Then I understood that I had to be ready to take an inner step and not take her phrase as an offense to all my people, because it's easy to fall into the trap of thinking that a phrase like that means belittling, or worse, attacking, everything you believe in. So, instead, I began to talk to her, to tell her that I had studied Judaism and Jewish culture and that I believed in peace. And I saw this woman, little by little, let down her defences and understand that, if this is what I thought, there would be others like me who fought for peace. Thus a friendship was born between us.

**Maybe this is the best way to educate for peace?**

I am convinced that peace will not come from above, from the government and politicians. Peace will come from below, it will come from personal relationships with people, to be built one step at a time. In moments of tension, if I do not go beyond my feelings, I risk continuing to create hatred. It becomes a chain that cannot be broken. For me, I say this without hypocrisy, it cost me to take that step. In those moments you feel offended, humiliated and that you want to defend yourself.

**And how do you take that step, despite everything?**

It is a daily exercise. I am first and foremost a Christian and I put the Gospel at the centre of my life. Sometimes situations cause me pain, sometimes I feel helpless, but then, thanks to the

Gospel and the Charism of unity that I have chosen to live, I always tell myself that, if I have a role, I can do something. I lived the experience of the Synod in the same way.

### **Do you continue to follow the situation in the Holy Land?**

I often hear from my family, the Focolare community, and I convey to them the love of the Pope, who is very close to this situation. I try to make them feel that I'm living it with them, it is a concrete way of showing closeness.

### **Concretely, are there initiatives?**

The Focolare Movement is committed to distributing humanitarian aid, to fundraising. We work with the local Church to understand how to help people. The current conflict has not only caused damage in Gaza, but also in Israel and throughout the Palestinian Territory. There is a lack of work, because a lot of work was linked to tourism, to pilgrims. People who lived in the Territories and worked in Israel cannot enter the country, they had to suspend their work. We are working to provide job opportunities and to finance children's education. It is a concrete help. It does not solve the political situation, but it gives people dignity to continue living and not leave that land.

### **How do Christians in the Holy Land experience the situation?**

Christians, beyond the difficulties they are experiencing, feel the mission of being there. They are the small flock that maintains their Christianity. I am very struck by their faith, their perseverance.

### **You have lived the experience of the Synod. What can synodality bring to complex situations like that of the Holy Land?**

The assembly of these two years has truly been a laboratory, a gymnasium of listening. We are called to learn to put this deep listening into practice. Sometimes you listen with your ears, but not with your heart. The heart does not judge, does not expect anything from the other, it welcomes the other into itself. For me, the Synod was a very strong experience and I say this as someone accustomed to living with people of various nationalities and cultures.

### **What did the Synod achieve?**

It was an experience of listening in the heart of the Church. We have different vocations, we are men and women, we have different cultures, but in two years we have learned to be welcoming, to listen, not to impose our idea, but rather to be able to let go of our idea to understand what can come out of the group with which we are working, that can be of help to the Synod.

In particular, the experience of conversations in the Spirit was edifying. If this style can also be applied at a civil level, by companies or non-religious organizations, I believe it can be a path to peace. Because peace comes from a sincere dialogue between people, from welcoming others, with their history, culture and narrative. Only by allowing ourselves to be challenged by the pain

of others can we learn to dialogue with them. I believe that we can only find a path to peace with this type of attitude, even if maybe there will never be a perfect solution.

### **It is a pathway...**

Yes! We are called to bring this experience into our environments and to make people grow in this willingness to dialogue, not to be afraid of our differences and our disagreements. I am convinced that the fear of the other blocks us, and the more we are afraid, the more hatred grows in our hearts. Therefore it is a pathway and this synod that we have just concluded, if it is applied in our lives, could be a beacon of light that can give hope.