

President Mary McAleese's address on the 10th anniversary of the Focolare Centre in Curryhills House, Prosperous

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Ladies and gentlemen, boys and girls, Focolare, friends.

It is good to be here. It is good to be here to celebrate a big birthday, a tenth birthday. A remarkable birthday actually, in a remarkable place and among wonderful people.

I was just thinking it is very cold out tonight, really cold. And it is the kind of night that if you were wandering abroad and if you were wandering the roads, if you weren't particularly well dressed, and even if you were well dressed, the place that would be most calling to you inside in your heart would be a hearth, a warm place. It would be tormenting you in fact, wouldn't it? Out in the cold, the image of it would be just tormenting you and your heart would be just pulling you and your body is pulling you towards the hearth, the heat, the warmth, the place that is home, the place where you feel comfortable, where you can take off your shoes and toast your feet and somebody might even make you a cup of tea. And that is what we are drawn to when we feel cold.

And that of course is Focolare. Focolare is about hearth, it is about home, about that place we are drawn to, the place that pulls us, the place where love is, the place where we are accepted, where nobody is wagging a finger where everybody smiles, no matter what we bring with us, no matter what baggage, no matter what brokenness, where there is a smile for us because that is a place where are loved. This is hearth, this is toasting feet, this is warm heart, this is comfort.

This is an embrace, and that is what this place is. It is place that radiates that, that witnesses that love, makes it real and plants it in the lives of those who live here and then offers it as a gift to the wider community and to our country.

So what you do here is just a huge, huge investment in all of us. For God knows we can never have enough love in our lives.

And tragically we all see what happens when love is sucked out of life and it is replaced by hatred or contempt or vengeance or bitterness or cynicism – there is a lot of that around. So there are an awful lot of spaces to be mopped up or places to be mopped up and transcended by love and somebody has got to make a start.

And you have made such a wonderful contribution in the work that you have done here making, if you like planting the flag of love and doing it at a time in Ireland, it was ten years ago when this house came into being and of course the Focolare's journey, Lieta's journey goes much, much further back. And it goes right back into the heart of the troubles here when this country became really the talking point of the world, not for love, but for its opposite and for its failure, its constant daily failure to be able to transcend the fragmentations and the differences with this

healing thing called love.

A country that was notoriously Christian going back now centuries.

We had a job to do to vindicate our own credibility as a people of love, as a people who could be love centred and so when I think of that early journey of Focolare in Ireland, it was planting a seed in really pretty hard ground and it took some courage to do that and it took great faith to do that and it was done and here the evidence is in that when we look at what has been established, how rooted it is, how grounded it is and how grown it is, how big it has become, how extended its reach.

And also how loved it is, even by people who might not come here. I'm here for the first time but it is a name I love. I think there are many, many people who get a great sense of comfort just because you are here because you are doing what you are doing, and the why you are doing it is important and the how you do it, also very, very important. Making love real, making it a lived reality.

And I want to thank you for that because the investment in that, particularly through these difficult times into these more, dare I use the word prosperous times, sorry for the pun. (I do this all the time. It is a pain in the neck!)

But in these better times, we don't get the bridge to better times, the bridge to better times is always the people who believe and who hope and who work for the better times. The people who don't give into the council of despair, the people who have a rooted, deep grounded faith and they are determined that it is going to be vindicated through their lives. Just one life at a time, as Chiara said, just one heart at a time. And then let what happens happen and we can see here the great vindication.

So I must say a very big thank you to each and every one of you for, that vindication and for that investment in all of us and to assure you that what you do up here at home with one another, making that hearth and home for so many and reaching out so generously to this new Ireland, including everybody in it, because we are now a very complicated Ireland. If we were complicated before we are even more complicated now. Just when you thought it couldn't get more complicated!

And we are at such a remarkable and wonderful time in our lives and people who were once so homogenous now grown so heterogeneous. People who once emigrated, now staying home and seeing and feeling the worth and the value of their genius, working at home. And now working with nations from all around the world, friends, neighbours, colleagues. Now working with each other and through each other. So many nations, so many languages, so many faiths, so many different perspectives.

In a way it was exactly what we needed because when we were so homogenous, we focussed on small differences and boy did we laird them. We lairded them!

Now we have people living in our midst who have come from very, very different traditions and

we are called to stretch ourselves and we are called to make Ireland a hearth and a home for them, to be their friends, to be their neighbours. Because we have been the people who went, whether it was to America, to England or Canada, and we went as emigrants and we also know the pain of loss, of loneliness of dislocation, of disconnection of family, of heritage and culture and we know how much it meant to us when somebody smiled or reached out a hand and said "Don't worry, I know you're feeling lost and lonely. Come on sure I'll help you. I'm here a while. I know the ropes. Let me make you comfortable here." How important that was for all our people. And now we are called to do that here and we are called to embrace all God's family in a very, very new way, in a very fresh way.

We are now challenged and we need leadership in that challenge and you are giving us phenomenal leadership, wonderful leadership, outreaching, looking for all those places, looking for all those people who need the embrace, who will welcome the embrace, not waiting to be asked, out there, actively, passionately, doing. I want to thank you for that.

You've done a wonderful job on this place. I don't know what it was like before. I kind of suspect that you have had two major events now. I know that when Chiara came there was a sudden rush of blood to everyone's head. I know that because my brother told me that he was here helping to do things and he was helping to put pictures up. And I felt like saying to people "Do not put me near a picture that he put up." He is (....) you know. I remember how handy he was, or he wasn't. Mind you since then his wife could have taught him to be much handier.

Like all my brothers, when he left home the most complicated thing he could make was a black current jam sandwich, and a mess as well to accompany it. But remarkably as soon as they got married, they all became incredibly house proud and (...) cooks. (.....)

I also know my kids have told me when I visited my daughter's school in Dublin, shortly after I was elected I got invited from the Loreto nuns on Stephen's Green to go and visit the school and I was made very welcome by an audience like this, happy smiling faces, bar two. They were my daughters. They weren't a bit happy. And I could see, I could feel the piercing, kind of almost getting very close to "I don't like you very much." And I knew what they were thinking to themselves was "God I wish it was somebody else's mother. Why does it have to be our Mammy up there?"

Afterwards when they came home, I was kind of hoping that I hadn't entirely mortified them and disgraced them so I said to them after "Well how did it go? Did it go alright? Were you happy enough?" And they said "Yes, you were alright. All you had to do was swan in in your good suit, you should have been here yesterday, you should have been in the school yesterday. That's when all the work was done! The real work of course. That's when all the other parents distinguished themselves at the real work. And my daughter said "one of the things I've discovered Mummy in your presidency is that having the president visit your school is far worse than having your mother visit your bedroom! If I arrived into my girls bedroom like this at five o'clock I'd be so pleased, so proud, you have done such a wonderful job in preparing a great welcome for Chiara when she came here and I hope that memory... clearly it has stayed with her from those lovely words that she wrote, that they will stay with her.

And she must have been so proud that that simple idea of hers that could have been stillborn you know. It is an idea that unless somebody else said "That is a very good idea Chiara. I think we could do that." Because it is always going to be, at the end of the day it was always going to the credibility of the idea, the integrity of the idea really was going to be tested out in that market place, everywhere she went, everybody she suggested it to.

If people said "No I don't think so," that would have been the end of it and to see how that idea, that simple, beautiful idea of making a space in life for love to grow, to share, to share in this way, that simple beautiful idea that was taken up by so many and went far beyond the shores of our own country.

I hope that when she came here that she got a great and deep rooted sense of the goodness of Irish people and the goodness of our Irish citizens, whether they are Irish or whether they are not. The goodness of the people here and how they responded to her beautiful lovely idea. And how they are now part of her worldwide family because I know the idea has travelled the world far, far, far and wide.

That is the great thing about a good idea and we need those good ideas to travel far and wide because bad ideas travel far and wide too and they do damage. They do hideous, horrible damage and they break hearts, and they break lives. And what is our antidote, what is our answer? Is it to throw up our hands in despair and say "What can we do? We are just too small?" We can't beat these horrible ideas.

No , we come up with good ideas. We come up with good ideas that are founded on love and with determination and with commitment and in community, but starting first of all with the individual human heart, we start climbing that mountain, that overcomes and transcends the worst of human nature. It can be slow and we restore faith in the best of human nature and we restore faith in the divine and also we restore faith in love. And that is what you are doing here.

So thank you. It is a wonderful vocation you have. A very special vocation. I hope it is filling you up, fulfilling you and I hope please God, that for the next part of this journey, the house ten years now have had some fairly exciting times, wonderfully exciting times, and I really hope that the best is yet to come.

Go raibh mille maith agaibh!