

# Softly, softly

Maria Voce heads up an organisation involving millions of people around the world, and is one of the most powerful women in the Church. But there was no sign of that immense influence as the unassuming, enigmatic figure spoke to Elena Curti about her movement, Focolare

**T**ranslating an interview in Italian with Maria Voce, the president of Focolare, presents a dilemma. How, for instance, should one express what she has to say about the recent international gathering of bishops at her organisation's Centre for Unity in Welwyn Garden City? It could be described as happening because they wanted "to learn to love each other". But English has only one word for "love" whereas Italian has not only "amore", often used in the context of eroticism and romance, but also "voler bene" (literally to want good for the other). The latter is the term used by Maria Voce for the bishops; it describes love of family, friends and neighbours. It is this kind of love that is central to the Focolare movement's charism.

Focolare has long been highly regarded both within and without the universal Church for its work helping to forge bonds of friendship between religions and cultures, and its ecumenical meeting last month, attended by 40 bishops from more than 18 countries, was part of that charism. They heard an address from the Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, at Lambeth Palace, gathered for Mass at Westminster Cathedral and signed "a pact of mutual love" at St Alban's Cathedral.

Voce, a 74-year-old former lawyer from Calabria in southern Italy, addressed the meeting and used the trip – her first to Britain – to meet British members. There are about 60 people in Focolare communities, each of whom has made a private vow, and a further 1,000 associate members living independently. Members come from all walks of life and are involved in a variety of projects designed to help people grow in friendship. Worldwide, the figures are 140,000 and two million respectively. While the movement is Catholic-led, it has members of other denominations, different faiths and even non-believers among its supporters.

The Focolarini invited *The Tablet* to meet their president at a women's community house in south London. It's a detached Edwardian villa on a busy road, well appointed and so

tidy it doesn't appear lived in. "Focolare" means hearth in Italian and a distinctive warmth and cheeriness characterises the Focolarini.

Maria Voce was elected in 2008 after the death of the movement's founder, Chiara Lubich. She cuts a similar figure to Lubich in her later years, neatly dressed and petite with short silver hair. Maria – as she likes to be called – is modest, courteous and slightly nervous as she sits, hands joined, perched at the edge of her seat.

The bishops, she explains, come to the ecumenical meeting in a different location every year to deepen their bonds of friendship. Others can help them discuss specific subjects, but the priority is to discover a rapport beyond their differences. She gives as example the fall of the Berlin Wall, asking why it took so long for East and West Germany to learn to work together. "Even though they were a single nation they lacked the experi-

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ence of living a common life, this reciprocal understanding. We are working for the moment when the walls between the Churches fall so that Christians – including bishops – will know that it is possible to live together and understand each other in spite of their differences."

From 1978, Maria lived for 10 years in the Focolare Centre in Istanbul. Her dialogue with Muslims there, she says, did not begin as a "project" but as personal encounters and an acceptance that Jesus was present in her dialogue partner. Some critics have suggested that Focolare's approach risks seeing Christianity to be simply one faith among



others. Maria rejects this. "Once I spoke in a Buddhist university and I spoke of the Church," she says. "I spoke of Christ. These Buddhist monks wanted to hear this. They didn't want to hear anything else. But if one presents one's own faith with respect and care there is no danger of syncretism. I am sure in my own faith but would not seek to impose my faith on others."

This month, an interfaith gathering will be held to mark the twenty-fifth anniversary of John Paul II's historic interfaith assembly at Assisi. Like the first one, it will be held in St Francis' home town, and Maria says she will probably attend. She sees great value in the gathering but is uninterested in the debate over whether the different faith leaders should pray together. What matters to her is the fear of religion engendered by the 9/11 attacks on the United States, which has continued to reverberate 10 years on. She maintains that the atrocities had nothing to do with religion but goes further, expressing the view that there is no negative sentiment in religion.

So what about the so-called martyrdom of suicide bombers? "You have to ask yourself: 'How did they arrive at this point, who formed them, what convinced them to commit this folly?' Given the manifold reasons that have led them to do this, it has been easy to blame religion." She is very much against France's ban on Muslim women wearing the burka, and is concerned that a ban has also been proposed in Italy. Measures like this, dictated by fear, are never positive, she argues.

We move on to the issue of unity within the Catholic Church. Focolare includes both progressives and traditionalists among its members and Maria points out that the Church is one by definition and that Catholics have a model for reconciliation in Christ. "Certainly there are difficulties to resolve and the only way to resolve difficulties in unity is to be in the shadow of the Cross. There is no way to

make two one if each is not prepared to give their life for the other – it doesn't necessarily mean laying down one's life but being prepared to give up one's own ideas, in other words, to be ready to meet the other person where they are. Unity was given to us by Christ dying on the Cross ... so we don't believe it is possible to achieve unity without embracing this boundless love. This is true not just of the Church but for any sphere where differences exist."

We talk about the Austrian Priests' Initiative, the 400-strong group of priests demanding a range of church reforms. Maria is familiar with the case and has heard the same arguments between priests within Focolare in Italy, with some seeking reforms and others saying they should obey the Church's teaching. Maria says her approach is to listen and seek to understand why the priests want reforms while at the same time remaining faithful to her own Catholic identity – "and also maintaining fidelity to the Magisterium". Focolare supplies a Christian approach to reconciliation but steers clear of intervening in negotiations or compromise. Some might see this as a limitation, others as a strength.

We go through some of the issues on the liberal Catholic agenda, on most of which Maria seems indifferent: she is in favour of mandatory priestly celibacy, echoing Pope Benedict's description of it as a "treasure of the Church"; on women priests – "It doesn't interest me"; women deacons – "Maybe, but

it would not make me feel better. I am happy the way things are." Greater collegiality? Her eyes brighten and she nods: "Greater participation, listening more to everyone, yes!"

She is keen to stress that Focolare is a lay movement and behind her lack of interest in women's ordination one senses that she would not feel affirmed as a woman in the Church simply by being made a priest. She believes women can enrich the Church by bringing to it a "Marian dimension". She sees this as maternal and strong. "Women have always been seen as docile, obedient, submissive but that is not the real image of Mary. She was a woman who stood at the foot of the Cross while the men ran away, a woman who knew how to proclaim social justice and spoke of a God who cast despots from their thrones. Women have the particular role of bringing out the primacy of love, which was certainly in Christ's message."

So why are there so few women in positions of responsibility in the Church? "Not yet. I think there will be changes. Changes are already in progress. Things don't change in the Church from one day to the next."

That confidence and belief in the role of women is evident in Focolare, whose statutes stipulate that its president must be a lay woman. Certainly, Maria Voce is one of the most influential women in the Church. She took part in the 2008 Synod of Bishops on "The Word of God in the life and mission of the Church". In November 2009, Benedict

XVI appointed her as a consultor for the Pontifical Council for the Laity. In a private audience the following year, he commended the work of Focolare.

Maria explains that she administers the movement with a male co-president and a 40-strong elected council from the international headquarters at Rocca di Papa, outside Rome. In stressing Focolare's collegial nature, she is diffident about her leadership role. Surely being president means you are the "capo"? "For our spirituality we say that the capo is Jesus among us. In Matthew 18:20 it says, 'Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.' One person is not enough."

Maria's name within Focolare is "Emmaus". It was given to her by Chiara Lubich soon after she joined the movement in 1963. She says election to the presidency came as a huge shock, though it was probably less surprising to the assembly given her closeness to Lubich – the two women worked on revising the movement's general statutes for five years until their publication in 2007. After her election, Maria says she drew strength from the Focolarini's collective determination to realise Lubich's vision. "When she was no longer there, each of us felt, 'Now it is up to me to witness to the world that unity is possible, that it is possible to love in any situation, that it is possible to give one's life for another person.' Every one of us felt this, and it was a shared responsibility so I felt more serene."

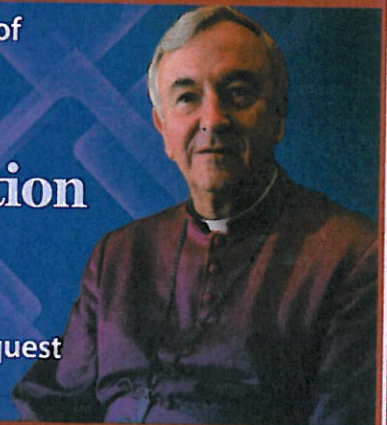
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