

## **Maria Voce: «We must start by sharing»**

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**Charlie Hebdo and Belgium, and also Syria and Nigeria, are not fronts of a war between Europe and Islam, but, indeed “ an alliance, a dialogue are needed....”. Do you agree with Mogherini’s statement?**

Certainly - answers Maria Voce, president of the Focolare Movement – and even I think that these attacks hurt Muslims as much as they hurt us.

**Dialogue with Islam is suggested, but eventually one manages to dialogue only with some of the Muslims. Isn’t this equivocal?**

It is evident that Islamic fundamentalists do not want dialogue, but we have fundamentalists even in the West. This is why we, focolarini, aim at that dialogue which is built on the sharing of everyday life. This dialogue is not generated by an immediate confrontation of ideas, because essentially it starts by getting to know the other person, and not, for example, by getting to know his religion. In this way, one is able to discover that bond of brotherhood that binds all human beings, and it is the only starting point that leads one to understand the other person’s faith and respect it fully. Thus, dialogue becomes truly constructive and is not limited to a non-belligerent coexistence that hinders people from building their common future together. It is only through this dialogue that we discover that all of us have something to donate to the other and to note that diversity does not necessarily cause opposition but that it can be a source of mutual enrichment.

**Does this type of dialogue work in a “fragmented third world war”?**

This type of dialogue worked in that African city that welcomed refugees without any fear of the opposite faction, and then it was defended by them; it works in Algeria where the members of our Movement are mostly Muslims; it works in the Holy Land where people of the three religions pray together for peace and build bridges between their communities; it works in Italy where Muslims and Christians work together to promote family values; it has worked in Austria, where thanks to established relationships, clashes and social unrest have been avoided; it works in Macedonia where an inter-ethnic and inter-linguistic nursery school has been set up by Skopje’s Faculty of Pedagogy... Problems are confronted with a very decisive spirit, and when the spirit is strengthened by a spirituality, one does not only value the good things of others, and discovers and highlights God’s gifts in every religious tradition, but also contributes towards their progress.

**But then see what happened in Nigeria and Cameroon...**

Those who believe in dialogue have their doubts as well and feel disheartened; those who believe in dialogue call for action to stop these massacres, not by violence but by educating for peace. Last

September we organized a seminar about dialogue for peace that proved to be a very fruitful experience of the Focolare; and this took place precisely in Jos, Nigeria.

**Young people can be very enthusiastic about this dialogue but they can also be exposed to big risks. What would you have said to Greta and Vanessa if you have met them?**

I would have said “Welcome back!” I would thank God with them for such a happy ending. Young people tend to be very enthusiastic and also to risk. But I would like to add something else: even the guys who fight in Isis might have originally been pushed to do so by some sort of ideal, but then they were manipulated. We should not endanger our own life, and an experience of international solidarity has to be accompanied by planning and caution, but one may risk when great values are at stake, and frequently this is what happens. This is what doctors fighting Ebola in Africa are doing.

**We go back to Europe in flames: what relation is there between dialogue and freedom of opinion?**

The murderous attacks in Paris were horrible but freedom has a limit, and this limit is the common good, the welfare of humanity. This has been said by the Pope, who never misses the chance to promote warmth, empathy, listening fully to others, the pursuit of greater love. He urges us also not to make concessions on our identity as Christians so that we can prepare ourselves for this dialogue. We can dialogue only if we are truly Christian. Our dialogue has to start from the awareness that every encounter can be an opportunity to offer our Christian values to others. We offer them with gentleness and respect, without imposing them: they are a treasure and others have the right to share in it.

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