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Focolare aiming to bridge political divide

BY MICHAEL SWAN
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The Toronto Focolare organization and its friends want to confront divisions within politics with ideals of unity and communion.

"Politics shouldn't have to be a disdained word," Liberal MPP Laura Albanese told a March 13 conference on "Politics for Unity" at York University's Glendon College.

The conference brought politicians on the left and right together before an audience of about 200 friends of Focolare, the Vatican-recognized ecumenical movement. New Democrat MPP Cheri Di Novo, ordained in the United Church of Canada, and Conservative Catholic school board chair Michael Del Grande shared the stage with Albanese and French Catholic school trustee Nathalie D'Andrea for a discussion about their own understanding of the purpose of politics. The conference was part of a global #Politics4Unity campaign Focolare is running on social media. The campaign continues on the Focolare web site politicsforunity.com.

It's quite natural for a Catholic ecumenical movement dedicated to a spirituality of unity to get involved in politics, said Jacques Maillot, one half of the leadership team for the Toronto Focolare.

"We hope to see that politics is the love of all loves, in the sense that you really have to be dedicated to your cause, to what you believe in," Maillot told *The Catholic Register*. "Every politician I believe would tell you they are dedicated to their cause, they want the good of the people whom they are serving. This is where maybe we are lost sometimes, where we don't see the service any more."

"Everybody has a dream or love in society. We dream for housing, we dream for success. But politicians gather together all these dreams and make it possible for the common good," said Focolare co-leader Julie Moon. "(Focolare founder) Chiara (Lubich's) message, which is unity, when brought into politics is really saying that even though we have different political opinions we can work for the common good through dialogue. Even though you might say this is something really vague, it means we're not excluded from the dialogue. As a



NDP MPP Cheri Di Novo speaks at the Politics for Unity conference March 13. (Photo by Michael Swan)

citizen I have that duty to build, to work for the common good."

The politicians urged people to see politics on a human scale, rather than in terms of an eternal clash played out in the media.

"Authentic relationships are at the basis of genuine politics," said D'Andrea.

Each of the politicians shared stories of when they worked with opposing parties toward a common goal. But even in the context of a conference about unity in politics, ideological differences were apparent.

Di Novo laid out her political ideals in terms of confronting and changing existing economic and political powers to create a more equal and just world.

"What's utopian is to imagine that things can continue as they are. Things must change," she said.

On the other end of the spectrum, Del Grande framed the question in terms of individual liberty and individual effort.

"It's more about self-sustainability around the world," he said. "When you don't have self-sustainability you have unrest."

Albanese gave the philosophical a wide berth as she spoke about identifying and solving problems.

"We don't have to go far to see imbalances we can work hard to improve," she said.

For politically minded Sandra Montagnier, a former volunteer on Toronto Councillor Pauline Fletch-

er's team, watching politicians speak amicably about how and why they are in politics is reason for hope. She was impressed the discussions remained practical.

"The Focolare offer a way of life that can be applied to anyone," said the friend of Toronto's community of full-time Focolarini. "It's more a realistic idea."

"It's not that we're trying to change politics," said conference master of ceremonies Rosanna Furgiuele.

The aim is to create an atmosphere or culture where people can express themselves politically without falling into categories or camps, choosing sides before finding solutions, said the York University professor of French literature. When people are allowed to articulate their ideals first, politics will be more open to faith, said Furgiuele.

The conference on politics is part of a new thrust in the Focolare movement toward a more visible public profile, said Moon. There have been Focolarini in Toronto since the first community of women was established in Canada's largest city in 1967, but they have been invisible to most of the city while the community concentrated on personal relationships.

"At the audience with the Pope during our general assembly this year (March 4), Pope Francis asked us to go out," Moon said. "And we are really working on it."

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