

PRESS RELEASE – 6th February 2021

POPE FRANCIS TO THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY OF THE FOCOLARE MOVEMENT: THE TIME AFTER THE FOUNDER, THE IMPORTANCE OF CRISES, CONSISTENCY AND REALISM IN LIVING THE SPIRITUALITY

This morning Pope Francis received in private audience the 362 participants of the General Assembly of the Focolare Movement, a representation of whom were present in the Paul VI Hall in the Vatican and with the majority connected via internet.

Welcoming them, he extended his greetings to all members of the Focolare Movement. He encouraged them to remain faithful to the original source of their charism while remaining in dialogue with new social and cultural situations. He invited them to beware of any self-absorption, to see every crisis as an opportunity to grow, to be witnesses of fraternal love that overcomes all barriers and to increasingly promote synodality. He concluded with an invitation to remain, in imitation of the foundress Chiara Lubich, attentive to the cry of abandonment of Christ on the cross, the heart of Christianity and of the charism of Focolare.

After the death of the founder – the Pope explained in his speech – the Movement is called to overcome the natural bewilderment and also a decrease in numbers. “Every charism is creative, it is not a statue in a museum, no, it is creative. It is a question of **remaining faithful to the original source, striving to rethink it and express it in dialogue with the new social and cultural situations**. It is firmly rooted, but the tree grows in dialogue with reality. This task of updating is all the more fruitful the more it is carried out by harmonizing creativity, wisdom, sensitivity to all and fidelity to the Church. Your spirituality, characterized by dialogue and openness to different cultural, social and religious contexts, can certainly encourage this process. Openness to others, whoever they may be, must always be cultivated: the Gospel is meant for everyone, but not by proselytism, no, it is meant for everyone, it is a leaven of new humanity in every place and time.”

The Pope warned against self-absorption “which never comes from the good spirit, is our hope for the whole Church: to beware of self-centredness, which always leads to defending the institution to the detriment of individuals, and which can also lead to justifying or covering up forms of abuse. ... Instead, it is better to be courageous and to face problems with *parrhesia* and truth, always following the indications of the Church. ... Self-celebration does no good service to the charism. No. Rather, it is a matter of welcoming each day with wonder - don't forget wonder always indicates the presence of God - the freely-given gift you have received by meeting your ideal of life and, with God's help, trying to correspond to it with faith, humility and courage, like the Virgin Mary after the Annunciation.”

He then went on to the second theme, emphasizing **the importance of crises which are an opportunity to grow**. A crisis “is a time of the Spirit, which arouses the need to update,

without becoming discouraged in the face of human complexity and its contradictions. ... It is the task of those responsible for governance, at all levels, to work to address in the best and most constructive way, communitarian and organizational crises; instead the spiritual crises of individuals, which involve the intimacy of the individual and the sphere of conscience, must be dealt with prudently by those who do not hold positions of governance, at all levels, within the Movement. ... The intermingling of the sphere of governance and the sphere of conscience gives rise to abuses of power and the other abuses we have witnessed, once the cauldron of these unpleasant problems has been uncovered."

To accomplish unity to which the Focolare is particularly called, the Pope indicates a twofold perspective: "With regard to acting outside the Movement and within it, I encourage you to be **witnesses of closeness with fraternal love that overcomes every barrier and reaches every human condition**. Overcome barriers, do not be afraid! It is the path of fraternal closeness, that transmits the presence of the Risen Christ to the men and women of our time, starting from the poor, the least, the discarded; working together with people of good will for the promotion of justice and peace." With regards to efforts within the Movement, he urged the Movement **increasingly to promote synodality** "so that all members, as depositories of the same charism, may be co-responsible for and participate in the life of the Work of Mary and its specific goals. Those who are responsible for governance are called to foster and implement transparent consultation not only within the governing bodies, but at all levels, by virtue of that logic of communion according to which all can place their gifts and opinions at the service of others, in truth and with freedom."

And he concluded by reminding the Movement to remain, in imitation of the foundress Chiara Lubich, always **listening to Christ's cry of abandonment on the cross** "which manifests the highest measure of love. The grace that comes from it is capable of arousing in us, weak and sinners as we are, generous and sometimes heroic responses; it is capable of transforming suffering and even tragedy into a source of light and hope for humanity. In this passing from death to life lies the heart of Christianity and also of your charism."

The meeting with Pope Francis was opened by Maria Voce, outgoing President of the Focolare Movement, who presented the new President Margaret Karram: "We are grateful to the Holy Spirit for having chosen her," she said, "in the joy of being able to entrust her now to your prayers and to your love, Holy Father, which will certainly be as deep and great as it has been for me during all these years."

The newly-elected President, who was moved, confided to the Pope that she did not like the word President: "I am a daughter of the Church and I want to be at her service and that of everyone." She expressed her gratitude for the Pope's words and actions, which "constantly stimulate us to join the whole People of God in going out to embrace the pain of humanity and to work so that, in our common home, all may look upon and treat each other as brothers and sisters". She thanked the Dicastery for the Laity, Family and Life for allowing this General Assembly to be conducted electronically.

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