
Focolare Movement. Margaret Karram: “We seek to bring human fraternity and peace where the cry of disunity is loudest”

“The cry of humanity that touches us in a special way is the cry that resounds where there is disunity. Disunity in the family, disunity between Churches and between peoples. In many cases disunity is the result of conflicts and wars. This is the very heart of our charism: to restore unity where it was shattered, and to bring greater harmony and peace to this world. Margaret Karram is the second president of the Focolare Movement following the passing of the founder Chiara Lubich. She succeeds Maria Voce and was elected in the General Assembly on January 31st. Arab, Christian-Catholic, born in Haifa, Holy Land, 59 years ago, she graduated in Judaism at the Hebrew University of Los Angeles, in the United States. She speaks Arabic, Hebrew, Italian and English fluently. Her curriculum vitae is a reflection of the richly varied and multifarious world of the Focolare Movement. Present in 182 nations worldwide, the Movement has over 100,000 active members and 1.5 million associates. These include people belonging to different Churches and Christian communities, members of the world's major religions, and men and women with no religious affiliation. **In his address to the Focolare Movement at the end of your General Assembly, the Pope encouraged you to be "witnesses of closeness with fraternal love that overcomes every barrier and reaches every human condition." What is the greatest challenge for you, as followers of Chiara?** The challenges are many and manifold. However, I think that closeness is the most important and the most demanding. The pandemic has changed all aspects of our lives, and in many ways. It has taught us how important it is to be close to people today, especially those who are suffering. Sorrow is often beyond consolation. Many people have lost their loved ones. There is greater poverty today. In his encyclical "Fratelli Tutti", Pope Francis urges us to be near to one another. One of Chiara's most inspiring quotes to me is: “love is something concrete, very concrete. It requires that we make ourselves one with others, which entails sacrifice, effort. *It calls on us all to transform ourselves from being selfish and pusillanimous, focused on our own interests, on our own concerns, into small everyday heroes who, day after day, are ready to serve our brothers and sisters, even offering our lives for them.*” **Many conflicts continued unabated despite the raging pandemic. Peace is very precarious. How can human fraternity be created? What is the source of true peace?** Also Chiara experienced the bombings when she was in Trent. She ran to the shelters. She walked through the rubble. She saw her house destroyed and people dying. She cried, wiped away tears and consoled. Chiara had seen the brutality and the cruelty of war. She experienced poverty and sought to solve the social problems of her city. Faced with the horror of war, Chiara embraced the challenge and, in addition to praying, opened her heart to the Gospel and with her first companions lived it out, starting from Jesus' testament: 'May they all be one'. I firmly believe that peace originates in the heart of each and every one of us. *Only if there is peace in our hearts are we able to practice it, to care for neighbour, to embrace the humanity all around us. Only in this way human fraternity and lasting peace can be established. If not, words are all it amounts to, and peace remains a utopian dream.* **You are Arab, Palestinian. What is the place of the Middle East in your heart? What is the vocation of the Holy Land for today's world?** The Middle East has a privileged place in my heart, since it is my homeland, and because of the many sorrows that these peoples have endured and continue enduring today. The Focolare centre was established in Jerusalem in 1977, the year Chiara was awarded the Templeton Prize for the Advancement of Religions. The intention of the Movement was to contribute to the dialogue between different people. We have had many opportunities to meet throughout the years. The meetings have helped us to get to know each other, to tear down many walls and see each other not as enemies but as people who share the same land, without preconceptions. This effort continues today. Many Jews and Muslims, along with Christians, have embraced the spirit of the charism. The vocation of the Holy Land is to be a constant reminder of the source of our Christian life. Owing to its very character and the scars of its

past, it also has the vocation of serving as a role model for the world, an example of the possibility of restoring unity in diversity. **The Focolare Movement is probably one of the very few expressions of the Church's charismatic nature whose President will always be a woman, in accordance with its statutes. Women are still struggling to find their place not only in the Church but also in society. What is the experience of the Focolare in this respect?** Such a question requires a lengthy answer. However, I must say that the issue of women is not just about women, as it involves the sound, fair and honest advancement of the whole of society. Pope Francis has repeatedly highlighted the importance of greater involvement of women in discernment and decision-making processes. I believe this is also happening inside the Church and in Vatican governance. *Chiara was a woman of God, a free, passionate and courageous woman.* She once said: 'women have the unique ability of knowing how to love and how to suffer. They know how to receive charity from heaven, the greatest charism of all: charity is the greatest of all charisms because it continues to exist even in the after life. Charity is what must be brought into the world.' **Even though you are numerous, yours is a silent presence. How would you define the 'people of Chiara' today and, thinking of the future, which feature should be increasingly distinctive of the Movement?** At Chiara's funeral, I remember a Buddhist monk saying: 'Chiara does not belong to you Christians alone. She and her vision are now the heritage of all humankind.' The Movement has indeed spread everywhere and among the members of different religions, to Christians of various denominations, and people with no religious affiliation. The fact of working in silence is not something I question. In fact the Movement is called the 'Work of Mary' because Mary acted in humanity through her silence. Chiara also used to say that the spirit of the Movement is not so much in doing things but in bearing witness through our lives. As to your question of how I would define the 'people of Chiara,' I shall answer with an image that Chiara herself gave of the Movement. It's a Middle-Age depiction of the Virgin Mary, whose mantle embraces castles and churches, artisans, monks, bishops and mothers, rich and poor. Something similar can be said of our Movement: its Works are like that mantle which enfolds the various parts of the Church and of humanity, who were blessed by God with the gift of becoming a family. It's a gift, a charism, namely to model the Movement on Mary in her motherly and unifying spirit.

M. Chiara Biagioni