

Virtual meeting of 181 bishops of various Churches

“Dare to be One”

Compiled by Elisa Zuin

With 181 participants from 70 Churches and 45 countries, the ecumenical meeting of Bishop friends of the Focolare Movement, from September 23 – 25, 2021, proved to be a hope-filled event marked by a new openness during a time of change for ecclesial and ecumenical structures. No longer are countries with a long Christian tradition – and the origin of historical divisions – at the forefront of ecclesial developments. Instead, it is now countries in Latin America, Africa and Asia where Pentecostalism is very much on the rise.

At the urging of Bishop Christian Krause, former president of the Lutheran World Federation, the Focolare Movement supported the bishops' commitment to widen the meeting circle of "bishops of various Churches" (now in their 39th encounter) beyond Europe and the Middle East to contribute to healing the wounds of a divided world.

Although the event in Rome was initially scheduled to be in-person, the Covid-19 crisis brought about another type of meeting, in some ways more suited to the limited possibilities of bishops located in remoter parts of the world. 12 bishops were physically present at the Mariapolis Center in Castel Gandolfo but because of the wonders of technology, the world became, albeit virtually, a common home where representatives from 70 Churches met via zoom. It turned out to be not so much a series of meetings but rather an opportunity to grow together as a "family", a family rooted in Christ beyond theological differences, nationality, or culture. While many of the bishops participated individually on the screen, it was moving to also see small groups gathered regionally in Pakistan, Uganda, Romania, Sweden, in Ottmaring in Germany and in Welwyn Garden City in England. The theme for the conference was ‘"Dare to be One". *The gift of unity in a divided world*’ but this was not simply the title but the experience and the reality of the encounter.

Experiences from various parts of the world

Moments of prayer and presentations of experiences were interspersed with *break-out rooms* and plenary sessions. The life of the Word of God in the spirituality of the Focolare was explored. A passage of Chiara Lubich, was read by Anglican focolarina, Sarah Finch, and further enriched by interventions given by Lutheran bishop Dr. Matti Repo, Dr. Mervat Kelly, a Syriac Orthodox focolarina, and Dr. Sandra Ferreira, a Catholic focolarina.

Bishops shared their own personal, lived experiences that gave witness to their commitments to foster unity among different Churches: from the Czech Republic to the Philippines, from Sweden to South Africa and from Peru to Syria. This strengthened the conviction that it is worth "daring", worth trusting to be one in Christ to respond to the cry of a world yearning for unity. The key: Jesus Crucified and Forsaken who "generates" the Church. In him, together, we succeed in releasing the "fragrance of Christ" in our troubled world.

Encouragement from Church Leaders

The Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople, Bartholomew, gave hope and encouragement in his message to the participants: "Throughout the course of history, the boat of Jesus' disciples deals with headwinds and storms. Even among these very disciples, opposition, enmity and persecution were often unleashed and are still being unleashed at times today. [...] Jesus walks on the waters as he goes towards the disciples [...]: "Courage, it is I, do not be afraid". [...] if we have courage then we will not be afraid to enter into dialogue with one another, because we are all of Christ".

Anglican primate, Archbishop Justin Welby, expressed hopes that "daring to be one will touch the lives of many Christians, encouraging them, too, to grow in mutual communion. [...] The world has never needed Christian unity as much as it does today. In times of environmental crisis and global pandemic, not to mention the many economic and political challenges facing the world, it is increasingly clear that no one is safe until everyone is safe and that our actions really do affect each other. Unity among Christians can be the cement that consolidates the solidarity of human beings, to become, therefore, the foundation of lasting solutions."

Cardinal Kurt Koch, president of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, explained that "it is part of the mission of Bishops to be at the service of unity but not only of the unity of their own Church, but of the unity of all those who have been baptized in the name of the Triune God. [...] To aim to be one with one's brother means to become a living flame, a lantern, a source of light that attracts whoever is next to us. This is the true meaning of this encounter: to bring that light out into the world".

The meeting with Pope Francis

The culmination of the meeting was the audience granted by Pope Francis. Noting the "affinity" between the Focolare Movement's charism of unity and the ministry of bishops, Francis commented: "[We] are at the service not of an external unity, of a "uniformity": no, but of the *mystery of communion* that is the Church *in Christ and in the Holy Spirit*, the Church as a living Body, as a people journeying in history and at the same time beyond history. Referring to unity as God's 'dream', he continued: " It is his plan to reconcile and harmonize everything and everyone in Christ (cf. Eph 1:10; Col 1:20). This is also the "dream" of *fraternity*, to which I dedicated the Encyclical *Fratelli Tutti*. In the face of "dark clouds over a closed world", where many dreams of unity are shattered, where "a plan for everyone" is lacking and globalization is drifting "without a shared roadmap", where the scourge of the pandemic risks exacerbating inequalities, the Spirit calls us to have the boldness – the *parrhesia* – to be one, as the title of your meeting says: Dare to be one. Starting from the awareness that unity is a *gift* – that is the other part of the title."

Creating a network of living cells

In a pre-recorded video filmed in the catacombs of Priscilla, people from various Churches gathered around the altar of the small chapel and recited a prayer of the early Christians together. They expressed their solidarity by sharing bread and asking for the gift of unity. That gesture was an anticipation of the "covenant" of mutual love renewed in every meeting of bishops who are friends of the Focolare, with the awareness that, if the new commandment is put into practice, Jesus can fulfill his promise: "Where two or three are gathered in my name, there I am in their midst" (Mt 18:20). "We want Jesus to be able to give us this gift" - said Mgr. Brendan Leahy of Ireland - "and for this reason we would like to promise him that we will continue to live in love for one another, to love the diocese and the community of the other as I love mine, to love the Church of the other as I love my own."

Focolare co-president, Jesús Morán, noted that "Yes, our unity, the unity of all Christians could be a decisive contribution to the transformation of the world. This is an ethical imperative that cannot be postponed."

In her concluding speech, Focolare president, Margaret Karram, took up the desire expressed by many of the participants "to create a great network that helps us to connect, to be living cells united in the name of Jesus. Who knows how many initiatives may be born to renew the life of our Churches in the one Church of Christ!". She invited everyone, each in his own language, to unite in asking God the Father to illuminate the path to be followed by reciting the Our Father together. Like a symphony rising to heaven, the hearts and minds of each one was consumed in one, sealing the covenant of unity which had been made and it was moving to also hear the president herself pronouncing the prayer in her native Arabic tongue.

There was a shared sense of joy in having lived together an event that had exceeded all expectations, instilling a new "boldness" by walking together and becoming ever more anchored in Jesus. It was a drawing from the water of the Gospel that flows through the charism of Chiara Lubich for the good of the Church and in service to humanity.

Lutheran bishop Christian Krause's words were powerful: "Dare to be one! We address it to ourselves and to our fellow bishops so that they may do so precisely in their respective Churches and Communities". He invited everyone "to open their doors to sharing the charism of unity and the Eucharistic hospitality of the children of God. Therefore, once again: *Dare to be one!*"