

A flame alive in a well-known New York neighborhood

Harlem Outreach Project

In August 2020, the New York City men's focolare center moved slightly north to an apartment in Harlem. Little did they imagine that such a move would change their lives in just a matter of months. Hans Jurt, a Swiss focolarino living in the USA since 2015, shares his story.

Hans Jurt

Shortly after moving our focolare center to Harlem, a predominantly African American and Latino American region of New York city, the reality of inequality, both racial and between rich and poor, became a daily experience for us. Hence the drive to commit ourselves to overcoming discrimination which is still a great challenge in the United States.

In 2020, after the killing of an African-American by police that shocked the entire nation, a group of people from the Focolare Movement, representing diverse colors and backgrounds, began organizing training meetings via Zoom. The goal was to help foster greater awareness among members and friends of the Movement as to our own attitudes, not infrequently reflective of involuntary racial discrimination and implicit prejudices. These Zoom conversations continue to this day and foster greater openness and respect.

Commitment in a multicultural parish

Although there are several Catholic churches within a two-miles radius, we chose to orient our own parish attendance and activities to the more modest, poorer parish, that was also known for its renowned gospel choir. Father Joseph, who hails originally from Burkina Faso, is a humble and active pastor seeking to unite the three vibrant communities composing the majority of parish members: English-speaking African-Americans and whites, Spanish-speaking Latinos and French-speaking West African immigrants. We offered to help prepare food parcels and distribute them on Saturdays. We all are lectors, we help in the music ministry, while one of us plays the trombone in the Sunday gospel choir. Through this volunteer work we have come to meet many people from the most diverse walks of life.

A gift and a lesson for us

We frequently encounter people in need materially, such as the homeless woman who sat on a chair 24 hours a day on the same street that we live. Since one of us began to approach

her and open a conversation, little by little she started to open up and share something of the tremendous difficulty in which she found herself.

Having come to New York in search of new opportunities after failed marriages, she was robbed of all her money and documents. Thus, she could not leave the city and was forced to remain on the streets. It was December and we offered her lodging for a day or two during days of extreme cold, or at least if instead she would just like the opportunity for a hot meal. She gently declined the offer.

Throughout the winter, we continued to see her. One day she asked us to buy her a coffee at a nearby place, and then accepted a muffin with the coffee, too. A relationship of trust was slowly established. While we were there with her, we met other people in need, too, and ended up buying food for them as well.

On a particularly cold, snowy and icy day, the woman agreed to take shelter in a lower level of our building that also had a bathroom and separate entrance. In order not to disturb us, she carefully remained only in that section of the building. In doing so, she gave us a simple lesson on how to respect others.

Meanwhile, we also managed to repair her cell phone so she could contact her family. We also helped her contact her embassy and within two weeks she received a temporary passport. Her spirits were lifted when she found out that her son was willing to welcome her into his home. After a further three weeks, she could obtain the necessary documents and a flight ticket.

With relief and new hope, she left for her country to join her family. The moment of farewell at the airport was moving. The gratitude was not only on her part, but perhaps even more ours. We felt that we had received much more than we had given.

Love is contagious

During various Focolare Movement meetings, we were asked to share our experience of living in Harlem. Some people were so touched that they wanted to financially support our efforts on behalf of these people in need around us. This unexpected monetary providence, and positive reaction of the community, were for us an invitation to continue to bring hope and light, starting with those closest to us. But how?

One evening at dinner in our focolare center, our parish priest shared the joys in the parish, but also the challenges and needs. There were immigrants in need of assistance, English lessons to teach, high school preparation courses to offer, and a need for greater involvement of youth.

Soon after, we saw two friends. One works at an organization for the homeless and the other as a Spanish court translator. After hearing of our conversation with the parish priest, they also made themselves available to help.

At the end of August, we met with the parish priest and the president of the Parish Council to offer and implement a few ideas:

- offer English lessons to parishioners and non-parishioners;
- translate documents (school transcripts, newspaper articles, affidavits, immigration information, resumes, etc.);
- inform people about their rights and the availability of resources;
- organize seminars on immigration.

Rather than a simple kind of philanthropic project, we wanted this small initiative to be an opportunity for each person to also give back to the community using their talents. We remembered Pope Francis' words for the 2021 World Day of the Poor: "It is critical, therefore, to generate *development processes* in which the abilities of all are valued, so that complementarity of skills and diversity of roles can lead to a common resource of mutual participation."

People from other movements and organizations also offered their expertise for this initiative and parishioners themselves perceived our Movement's underlying message of unity without the need to even speak more explicitly.

We never thought that it would be possible for such a project to go ahead, given each of our many and varied commitments. But on the contrary, in dedicating time and energy to our brothers and sisters most in need, we ourselves found more time, energy, and fullness in our lives. The local community of the Movement, together with these other friends of ours, has become increasingly involved in this service to people in need.

We continue to ask God to guide us as His instruments, so that the tears of so many of our neighbors - our brothers and sisters - may be transformed into cries of joy.