

Remembering Focolare collaborator Valeria Ronchetti

Stars of a constellation

Caterina Ruggiu

Valeria (Vale) Ronchetti was one of Chiara Lubich's early companions in the Focolare Movement. Caterina Ruggiu, author of a recent biography on Ronchetti's life¹, recounts previously unpublished details of her life and speaks about the task entrusted to Vale in accompanying religious and consecrated women who adhered to the Focolare spirituality of unity.

It is ten years since Vale left us on August 26, 2012 and difficult to summarize in a biography the rich and varied aspects of her life as a key figure in the Focolare Movement's early development, even if many have been requesting an account of her life for a number of years now.

Follow God: He is the One who carries us forward!

I had the privilege and pleasure of interviewing Vale several times. Our conversations were never trivial in nature and I could not help but be fascinated by her extraordinary inner strength which came from a crystal clear faith in the charism of unity. Her light and energy never lessened over time and I was reminded of a lifelong athlete. She once spoke of her youth, of her passion for sports, horseback riding and visual arts like painting and sculpture. "Yet all of it seemed as nothing to me to be", she explained. "Although I was studying and involved in many beautiful activities that I loved, I felt a uselessness in everything I did, as if in the end everything finishes and you die". But then came a turning point in her young life: "God did not wait: he showed himself with such a strong, irresistible light ...". Then, as if to further emphasize the depth of this experience, she said: "It is not a virtue to follow God. He is the One who carries us forward!"

She was referring to an April 1944 encounter between herself, her sister Angelella and Silvia Lubich - who would later take the name Chiara - where Chiara proposed an ideal of life with limitless horizons. It marked the beginning of an extraordinary adventure that over years would lead them to many parts of the world to bear witness to the ideal they had discovered under the bombs of the Second World War.

On one occasion I asked her what she had learned from Chiara Lubich in those first encounters. Her answer was lightning fast and surprising. "I learned to live like ... the stars! Why not live like the stars, each moving in their orbit yet not bumping into one another, but making up a splendid constellation? Why not live 'on earth as it is in heaven' ourselves? In this way we will become light and flames."

Ronchetti was nineteen when she met the twenty-three-year-old Lubich. Over time, as the work 'written in heaven' slowly revealed itself, the foundress would entrust a number of responsibilities to Vale, certain that they would be fully understood and brought forward. In 2009, as Vale's health was declining, she recalled how the first focolarine had been so struck by this new light that they had forgotten to look at themselves. And as if for emphasis, to seal what had been the reason for her life, she continued: "The light was more beautiful and more dazzling".

Women religious and the Focolare Movement

A task which was entrusted to Vale for thirty years and a key aspect of the development of the Work of Mary was to keep in contact with the thousands of sisters from many different congregations throughout the world. She had a briefcase that she always kept with her and one day she opened it and showed me its contents – a thick package of well-organized letters. She said to me, "This is the daily correspondence. They write and I answer. I reply to all of them with a quick turnaround of the mail. This is how the International Secretariat of Religious was born – born from life without us even realizing it at the time. It is this agility at the Focolare international center that keeps everyone connected and in communion with one another".

Since the beginning of the Focolare Movement, men and women religious have been present. When the first community of the Movement was spreading in Trent (Italy), there were people of all ages and vocations. During the summer 'Mariapolis' gatherings in the Dolomite mountains it was common for religious of different institutes to attend and participate with the approval of their superiors. Seeing professionals, laborers, men and women religious, young people, families and even children all meeting each evening together in the church, exchanging impressions in the courtyard, and sharing joys and sorrows with no regard for differences in age, origin or vocation was a strong witness of unity for them. A vision of a Christian society was being formulated in which various vocations not only coexisted, but the diversity of gifts gave value to one another. In the City of Mary, the Mariapolis, everyone had the right to be citizens.

Later as various branches of the Focolare came to life, that of the consecrated women developed more as well. A number of religious emerged with the desire to share together in moments of fraternal communion. Chiara Lubich entrusted the steps of this delicate journey of communion "between charisms" to her early companions, beginning with Bruna Tomasi and later to Vale in 1970.

On Tiptoe

A whole volume or more would be needed just to write about the part of Vale's "journey" from 1970 to 2002. It was an intense thirty-year period filled with surprises of the Spirit.

Vale began this adventure together with women religious during a tumultuous and challenging post-Conciliar period for religious life. As an invited journalist, I had the opportunity to participate in various international conferences for consecrated women at the Mariapolis Center of Castelgandolfo. I especially remember a 1991 gathering with seven hundred religious where even the sheer variety of habits and dress seemed to outwardly manifest the Word that their founders each incarnated. It was a kind of Gospel mosaic reflected in time and space.

To better understand, I asked Vale what had been her and the Focolare's role in all this encounter between religious who came from different charisms. She replied that the Movement had limited itself to witnessing to its communitarian spirituality. "Moreover," she told me, "how can we think of the unity called for by Jesus without the contribution of consecrated people? The Focolare spirituality focuses on unity as Jesus gave it to us as his own testament and in the abandonment he experienced on the cross. Every other charism is found, in a certain way, there. For this reason many religious were part of the Movement from the beginning. They felt that their own spiritualities perfectly harmonized with that of unity".

Vale showed profound respect towards the sisters and the charisms of the founders represented. I remember seeing her with novices of a small congregation that arose in Africa, or another with Mother Teresa of Calcutta on the occasion of the Synod of Bishops on consecrated life in October 1994, where she participated on Chiara Lubich's behalf. Each time her attitude was identical. It spoke of one who found herself before a "masterpiece of God" in each one. It meant approaching "on tiptoe", as she often loved to repeat.

"Everything is already redeemed"

Beginning in 2002, Vale was entrusted by the Movement with closely following the ex-communist countries of Eastern Europe. There were numerous meetings and trips. Fellow collaborator, Aster Eterovic, said: "Vale knew how to gain people's trust through the sincere and heartfelt esteem she showed them. She communicated it in her way of speaking and even through her dignified way of dressing, regardless of the occasion. And she never made comparisons, not even regarding the natural world we saw during our travels. Every person, every people, every aspect of nature was unique and unrepeatable for Vale."

Here, too, as throughout her life, she sometimes came out with surprising comments or unexpected solutions to the most varied situations. Here are three examples: "What do the stars do to give light? They eat the darkness . . ."; "People are generally more unhappy than they are mean."; and: "Everything is already redeemed!"

¹ Cf. C. Ruggiu, *Lanciati all'infinito. La storia di Vale Ronchetti, pioniera dei Focolari* (Launched towards the infinite. The story of Vale Ronchetti, pioneer of the Focolare), Città Nuova press, Rome 2021.