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Memo to a divided church: Meet the Focolare

John L. Allen Jr. | Mar. 10, 2011 All Things Catholic

Not long ago, I was invited to address a Catholic organization in the United States that?s experiencing tensions with other sectors of the church. (I know, I know, who isn?t?) A couple of bishops also took part in the meeting. After my usual shtick about avoiding the trap of tribalism, someone asked if I saw any concrete signs of hope.

I was on the brink of answering when one of the bishops -- a guy known for being fairly middle of the road -- volunteered to tackle the question. He said if what we?re talking about is overcoming divisions, there?s a great resource to draw upon: Focolare, a Catholic movement whose spirituality is premised on unity.

I and maybe two or three other people in the room who had actually encountered Focolare over the years were enthusiastic, while everyone else just looked confused.

The story illustrates three points about Focolare (an Italian word meaning ?hearth?), a movement founded by Italian lay woman Chiara Lubich in 1943, which today has 140,000 core members and some two million affiliates in 182 nations:

- In a time of bitter divisions, Focolare is one of the few outfits with a track record of bringing people together.
- They have the trust of the bishops and of the Vatican -- no mean feat for a lay movement which includes members belonging to other Christian churches and even other religions, and whose rules require the president to be a woman.
- Focolare is little known in the United States, where the movements generally don?t command the high profile they enjoy in Europe.

This year may be an opportunity to put a dent in that last point, as 2011 marks the 50th anniversary of the arrival in the United States of the first *focolarini*. (In the States, *focolarini* usually refers only to core members, though elsewhere it means anyone who is part of the movement.)

There?s a new book out by two American members called *Focolare: Living a Spirituality of Unity in the United States*. In April, the international president of Focolare, 73-year-old Italian lawyer and lay woman Maria Voce, will travel to New York, Washington and Chicago to celebrate the anniversary.

Last Friday, I journeyed to Rocca di Papa on the outskirts of Rome, where the Focolare headquarters are located, for an interview with Maria Voce -- known by insiders as ?Emmaus.? (For the record, I am not a member of Focolare or any other movement or group.)

If Focolare is in a unique position to help Catholicism heal its internal wounds, that?s less a conscious aim than a natural byproduct of its ambition to advance the unity of the human family. In the ecumenical arena, scores of Anglicans, Orthodox, and so on, have joined Focolare without leaving their denominations. Focolare has long experience in inter-faith outreach, such as a dialogue with the American Society of Muslims founded by the late

Imam Warith Deen Mohammed. They?ve even tried their hand at overcoming polarization in political life, with their ?Movement for Unity in Politics? founded in 1996.

On a personal note, I?ve always found Focolare intriguing in part because one of Lubich?s first ?converts? was a journalist, Italian writer and political activist Igino Giordani. After being drawn into the nascent Focolare movement in the late 1940s, it?s said that Giordani was transformed from a *martello*, or ?hammer,? forever doing battle with his enemies, into a *mantello*, or ?mantle? -- a unifier and reconciler. If Focolare could convince a journalist to clean up his act, I?ve long thought, it can reach anybody.

In my experience, a large part of the reason the *focolarini* are able to build bridges has little to do with overt programs or structures of dialogue. It?s instead because of their personal qualities, rooted in the group?s spirituality -- they tend to be open, ego-free, and just relentlessly nice.

In fact, I would almost defy anyone to pick a fight with a *focolarino*. It?s a bit akin to that old Buddhist exercise of trying to knock down a stone wall by throwing flowers at it, i.e., an object lesson in the futility of aggression.

Here?s a random example: Traffic in Rome on a Friday afternoon during rush hour is mind-numbingly slow, and despite a heroic defiance of the rules of the road by my driver, I arrived 45 minutes late for my appointment at Rocca di Papa.

Instead of being ticked off, a receiving committee of *focolarini* seemed delighted I showed up at all. When I apologized to Maria Voce, she told me she knows all about Roman gridlock -- when she went to the Vatican for her first audience with the pope, she said, she was a full hour late!

Knowing that I had an appointment back in downtown Rome, the *focolarini* wordlessly forgot about my promises to stick around to meet other members and whisked me out to my car the moment the interview was over. No one seemed insulted, irritated, or disappointed -- in order, the reactions I would have expected in virtually any other Roman venue.
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It?s a small episode, but it illustrates a bigger point: These folks are experts in the fine art of putting people at ease. I?ve never had a conversation with a *focolarino* in which I didn?t come away feeling I had made a friend, and that spirit of friendship is the *sine qua non* of any effort to promote unity -- either inside the church or in the wider world.

None of this, of course, is to suggest that Focolare is immune to criticism. From the Catholic right, some traditionalists see Focolare as a Trojan horse for syncretism and religious relativism; from the left, some progressives regard Focolare as overly obeisant to the hierarchy and unwilling to spend its capital on church reform. Like many of the new movements, Focolare has been dogged by complaints from ex-members about excessive secrecy and control. The 1995 book *The Pope?s Armada*, by ex-*focolarino* Gordon Urquhart, details those charges.

Those topics are fair matters for debate, and no doubt Focolare will never be everybody?s cup of tea. Yet it?s hard to escape the impression that whatever its defects, Focolare remains a valuable resource for the über-challenge facing Catholicism today: Figuring out how the church can harness its resources to face the new questions of the 21st century, rather than being forever consumed by its internal battles.
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The following is a transcript of my interview with Maria Voce, which took place in Italian.
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***NCR*: This year marks the 50th anniversary of the arrival of Focolare in the United States. What?s your perspective on the Focolare experience in America?**

I suppose I?ll discover it when I?m there. In general, when I take a trip, I prefer not to form too many ideas in advance because they would just be prejudices. I don?t know America well. It will be my first visit, and I don?t know much about it. I also don?t know many Americans, so I really can?t claim to have much insight. I believe I have to go with an open mind, in order to see what?s happened so far and where we can go from here.

Certainly, fifty years is an important milestone. It?s important in the life of a single person, and also in a movement. In these fifty years, since the first *focolarini* arrived in New York, Chiara Lubich visited America seven times. Every time, she experienced something that made her see how open America is -- it?s a country ready to welcome something new.

Sometimes maybe too ready!

Maybe, but when Chiara was there, she was happy to see that it was also ready to welcome the novelty she was carrying. Every time she was there, she saw the possibility for new paths, new contacts with the various communities present in America. She made contacts with the Muslims, especially the African-American Muslims, and every time there was a step forward.

I believe this anniversary is an occasion for celebrating what God has done through the movement over these 50 years, and for looking to the future with hope. I would say we can look forward with hope because the roots are solid. After fifty years, one can say that by now what?s been done won?t waver. Beyond that, I?m not sure what the concrete prospects for the future will be. We have to see.

The United States is indeed a very open society, but also a very divided one. That?s true of the country generally, and also of the church. Can you talk about the experience of the Focolare in trying to promote unity in the church?

Unity is our aim, it?s the reason why the Focolare exists. Of course, unity isn?t just the aim of the Focolare movement, it?s the aim of the church. We could also say it?s really the aim of humanity, because God wanted to make humanity a single family with a single father. But obviously we?re well aware that despite the fact everyone wants unity, very few seem to know how to achieve it!

We don?t claim to be among those few experts who know how to do it, but certainly part of the charism that God gave to Chiara is to help discover the importance of relationships among people, and in particular relationships of reciprocity in love. Chiara always said that when she read in the gospels Jesus? prayer ?that they may all be one,? she felt called to that idea. She felt almost as if she had entered into the heart of the gospel and found all the words of the gospel in the roots of a single reality, the reality of love.

Unity is our aim, and the spirituality that flows out of it is expressed in many ways. It?s expressed in the choice of God as the ideal for one?s life; in a loving response to the God who loves us; in understanding that love of God isn?t real if it doesn?t flow into love of others; in working to promote love of others, so that it becomes reciprocal; in bearing whatever difficulty comes along for the sake of the love of other, whatever pain. These are the points, the pillars, of a spirituality that allows us to have an experience of communion ? of relationships, of friendships, at every level.

Naturally, all this is true in the church as well. Of course, there are divisions everywhere. There are divisions in the family, in the society, everywhere. Human beings may be made for relationships, but there?s also always a drive to affirm ourselves, to close in on ourselves, to defend ourselves from others, to be afraid of diversity. We can reject the idea of putting ourselves on the same level as others, or at the service of others. That?s something we see everywhere. That doesn?t stop us, however ? it pushes us forward in the charism of unity God has given us.

We?ve tried to play that role, for example, among the ecclesial movements. Recently I made a trip to the Holy Land, and at a certain point we organized a meeting for the leaders of different movements in the Holy Land. Those movements have the best intentions in the world ? they?re ecclesial movements, with good aims in mind ? but they didn?t know one another. They didn?t have relationships with one another. When we invited them to come together, and gave them a chance to share their ideas and their experiences, they were very happy. They asked us to keep doing this ? they told us, ?You?re the only ones who have brought us together. This is your gift.? I think there are many gifts in the church, and this is ours.

Part of what you?re saying, it seems, is that before getting to structures and programs of unity, the first step is friendship.

Yes, friendship rooted in love. The important thing, it seems to me, is to realize that all the groups and movements and various currents in the church have something important to say and to offer. That?s the discovery we always make when we get to know one another better. Everyone has a gift to offer the others ? assuming, of course, the others are willing to receive it. That?s the discovery we have to make, that there?s something to receive from everyone, and at the same time we too have a gift to offer, and we have to be able to give it. It?s about friendship in a spirit of listening, of understanding, of maximum openness. That?s true inside the church, but also outside it, because obviously the institutional church can?t penetrate all the sectors of life. As a lay movement, we can go lots of places the institutional church can?t.

It may seem paradoxical to lift up a new movement as an agent of unity, since in recent history there have been lots of tensions not only among the movements, but also between the movements and the traditional pastoral structures of the church. Some see the movements as divisive, not unifying. Do you think those tensions have been largely overcome?

Yes, I do. They?ve been more or less overcome, though it always depends on the persons with whom you?re interacting. Logically, a movement is an abstract entity, which is always made up of individual persons who live it out, and they can always be more or less open, more or less able to collaborate with others. Of course, what counts isn?t really the movement in itself ? it?s the charism for which God inspired the movement, and which should promote a spirit of communion.

It?s often said that the new movements aren?t as well known in America as in Europe in part because our parishes are comparatively more active, especially in terms of young people. If that?s so, do you have any thoughts on how American Catholics can get to know the Focolare?

I think that too is something I?ll have to discover when we?re there. However, I have to say that this is something I?ve heard a lot recently, including on some other trips I?ve made, which is the need for visibility. But, I think it?s still always true that people will know you through your good works. In other words, visibility comes from what you do. As Jesus said, ?By their works you shall know them.?

I believe that perhaps in America our attention to the parishes, to what we might call the ?organization? of the church in America ? beginning with our own effort to understand all the good these institutions do ? can also help us be understood and better accepted. The institutional church has its value, and we need to find ways to work together. However, the charismatic dimension of the church also deserves to be known, and so the goal is a reciprocal contact and understanding.

Even in Italy, you know, it?s not like the movements have always been well received! There have been problems and so on ? in Italy, in Europe, wherever, something new can always create a little bit of fear.

Because American Catholics often don?t know the movements well, they often view them through the lens of stereotypes. One such image is that the new movements are quite ?conservative." My sense of the Focolare is that both ?liberals? and ?conservatives? can feel at home. What?s the secret?

That?s absolutely our experience, in part because we believe that everyone has to hear the voice of God speaking inside themselves, and it?s not our job to be the other person?s conscience. That means you have to respect everyone?s freedom. It also means understanding that even on these matters [i.e., politics], everyone has something to offer, everyone has something to teach, through their own ideas and preferences. It?s only by putting all those contributions together that it?s possible to arrive at an idea that transcends individual perspectives and moves us closer to a definitive ?good.? Absolutely, we don?t place any barriers on this sort of thing.

I?ve sometimes said there are many ?tribes? in today?s church, from neo-con Catholics to reform Catholics to traditionalist Catholics to peace-and-justice Catholics and on and on. What we don?t seem to have, however, is a common space where all these tribes come together.

I think so too, and it?s something we have to work on. The need for unity is clearly a ?sign of the times.?

To use a more poetic image, I sometimes think we?ve got lots of flowers in the church ? what we?re missing is a garden.

It?s interesting, because you know Chiara always said that the church itself is a garden.

Sure, but that?s an ecclesiological point. Sociologically, the garden still has to be built.

Sociologically, yes. The point is that inside the garden, we have to have the capacity to cultivate, and to admire, all the flowers ? not just our own.

Two questions of a more personal nature. First of all, you?re the successor of someone many people regarded as a living saint. That must be a terrible burden sometimes. How do you handle it?

When I became aware of what was going to happen in the assembly that elected me, because the votes had begun to concentrate on my name fairly rapidly, I was terribly afraid. I thought I wouldn?t have any idea what to do. But, I also remembered I had given my life to God, I had put my life in God?s hands, which meant that God could ask me anything. So, I said, ?If you want this, I can?t say no.?

Then I went to Chiara ? in the sense of going to the chapel, in prayer ? and I said, ?Is it possible you could ask something like this from me? I always followed you, and you would ask something like this?? I clearly heard her saying to me, ?What did I present to you as the ideal for your life? It was the same as mine, which is Jesus, who in his greatest pain, his greatest sense of abandonment, said yes to the Father. Now, do you want to say no?? So, I felt like I simply couldn?t say no.

After that, I felt a great peace in my soul, because I felt that Chiara had left us a great spirit of communion. For that reason, I knew I wouldn?t be alone. She felt this spirit, and she transmitted it to the entire movement. I knew everyone would feel committed to carrying forward what Chiara had begun, striving to carry it across all the borders and to build it up ever more. I felt like I wasn?t alone, but I would be sustained by this great communion in the movement. That gave me a feeling, and it still gives me a feeling, of having the grace to go forward.

I don?t try to imitate Chiara, because Chiara was inimitable. She was unique, for sure. I look to her, logically,

not in order to copy her, but to draw inspiration.

You must feel a bit of sympathy for Pope Benedict XVI, since he too had to follow a larger-than-life figure.

Yes, and I believe he too probably draws on this idea that in the end, the communion in the church will help him ? even in those moments when it?s a little bit more difficult to experience that sense of communion, and he?s felt the consequences. That can happen to me too from time to time.

Your statutes require the president to be a woman. Why is that?

The logic comes from the inspiration of Chiara. Remember that she gave Focolare the name ?The Work of Mary.? It?s the work of Mary not in the sense of a devotion to Mary, but in the sense of bringing Jesus to the world, and Chiara wanted the Focolare to have the same objective ? to carry, through the experience of reciprocal love, the living presence of Jesus. It?s an essentially Marian work. As such, Chiara felt the president should be a woman, even if she didn?t always feel that so clearly. It was an idea that grew within her, based on the Marian function of the work. It was John Paul II who confirmed it.

When Lubich asked John Paul about it, didn?t he say, ?Why not??

He also said *magari*! [an Italian expression roughly meaning, ?And how?!] That?s more than, ?Why not?? It expressed his desire to approve it. I believe it?s essentially a way of expressing this Marian character of the work. But, the woman who acts as the sign of unity in the Focolare is assisted by a council which is made up of equal numbers of men and women, precisely to ensure their equality.

Do you feel a sense of responsibility for promoting the role of women in the church?

It?s not so much that I feel a sense of responsibility, at least not meaning that I experience it as a burden. But I do think the Work of Mary has this role to play, the possibility to show that at bottom what counts isn?t so much the ministries we perform, or the power we hold, as the love we exhibit. Love has to have the first place in the church ? for both women and men, obviously. Precisely because, at least in the Catholic church, women can?t have ordained ministries or power, we?re more able to demonstrate that primacy of love. I think that?s a value for the church, and I think the church is discovering it. I?ve also seen that the men in the Focolare are happy with this emphasis, they?re grateful for it, because they too want to see light shed on this primacy of love. They themselves feel responsible for carrying it forward.

This interview will appear before your trip to the United States. Is there anything you want to say to American Catholics before you arrive?

Only that I?m grateful to have the opportunity to get to know them! I want to get to know this great country, and its people. I lived for many years with a Focolare member from Chicago, and I always admired her sincerity, her simplicity, her sense of discovery, which for me represented America! I?m coming with the desire to experience all those gifts, particularly among American Catholics, but not just the Catholics. I also come with the hope that Americans can come to know, and to appreciate, the gift carried by the Focolare movement, which I hope can help us to establish relationships of true love, of collaboration, of deep understanding, in order to help America move forward in God?s plan ? because I don?t think America has yet accomplished everything God has in mind for it!

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Here?s a run-down of Maria Voce?s public events in the United States.

- April 3: Voce and Giancarlo Faletti (co-president of Focolare) take part in a 2:00 PM Solemn Mass at St. Patrick?s Cathedral in New York, celebrated by Archbishop Timothy Dolan.
- April 5: Voce speaks at the Fordham University Law School (McNally Amphitheatre) on ?The Spirituality of Unity: A Gift for Our Times,? at the conclusion of a conference marking Focolare?s 50th anniversary.
- April 7: Voce and Faletti particiate in an intereligious and multicultural meeting at the Catholic University of America in Washington. D.C., at 7:00 pm, titled ?Out of Many, One.?
- April 9: Voce and Faletti take part in a celebration of the life of Chiara Luce Badano, the first member of Focolare to be beatified, for children and young people at North Riverside Village Hall in Chicago at 5:30 pm.
- April 11: Voce speaks on ?Spirituality and Trinitarian Theology in the Thought of Chiara Lubich? at the DePaul University Student Center in Chicago at 7:00 pm.

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