

DIALOGUE

A retreat with a difference

Veronique Khasa, a Muslim student of the Islamic Seminary of England describes her visit to the Focolare Centre for Unity in Welwyn Garden City in April 2017.

As Muslims, when meeting a person with a different set of beliefs, our minds often get overloaded with thoughts, such as; am I going to be welcomed? Will, I have a place to complete my daily prayers? How would our conversation take shape? What attire shall I put on? The list is endless.

God at the centre of our conversation

However, the most joyous part of meeting people of other faiths is that soon you realise that God becomes the hot topic of the conversation. God takes the centre of conversation because amongst believers it is the norm. It is uncommon for believers to talk about their careers, hobbies and family life, yet not mention God as the source of their livelihood. My visit to the Focolare Centre for Unity in Welwyn Garden felt like this because I was with brothers and sisters whose lifestyle was based on faith.

The Focolare Centre for Unity is a beautiful modern building yet it had a strong spiritual feel to it. I was told that it was originally a school which had become available when the Focolare were looking for a place to establish themselves after their long search. On hearing this I understood the spirituality of the place, it is dedicated to the service of God and the community at large.

A safe haven

When stepping into the environment of the Focolare, I felt as if I was walking into the family. Sheikh Shomali and his family, who have enjoyed a relationship with the Focolare for many years, had extended the relationship to me and other students of Hawza Ilmiyyah (The Islamic Seminary).

The retreat felt like a safe haven. To begin with we had a few speeches where the Focolare brothers and sisters begun by welcoming us, introducing the purpose of the Focolare Centre for Unity. We had a large group discussion as well as question and answer sessions, presentations and our own learning session for students of Hawza Ilmiyyah.

Over a warm meal, I discovered that the Focolare brothers and sisters were people of various life experi-

ences, talents, and professions. Italian is their common language. As a student who lives in the Hawza accommodation for full-time studies it was thrilling for me to meet sisters who live in the Focolare houses. Although both systems have a different purpose, still I could relate to them as living away from home, devoting themselves to God's call and the community, but most of all strengthening themselves to become better individuals.

Photo: Courtesy of Islam Today



Nurturing unity

There are many lessons that I've learned whilst spending my time with the Focolare. A family unit like theirs has great value in uniting different minorities in our society. For a friendship to grow it must be nurtured well, it has to be based on a variety of aspirations. Apart from the fact that we are all religious we all care about things such as peace in the world, education, and poverty.

Our retreat ended with a visit to Stanborough Park where we had a picnic. Sisters from the Hawza and the Focolare could not resist a boat ride pedalling across the lake. For me, this meant that we took our meeting one step further, by practising the love that we talked about behind closed doors. I guess that after talking the talk we walked the walk and I will certainly do it again. 🍷

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