

PROFILE

Face2Face with Noreen Lockhart

What kind of family did you grow up in?

I'm the youngest of five children. My mother's family are Catholic, originally from the North of Ireland.

On my father's side, there were both Catholic and Presbyterian roots.

My parents were people of deep faith.

I have memories of praying together as a family but also of singing and making music together. Faith, music and fierce political debate were

key elements to family life and I feel grateful for all I received growing up.

Paul Gateshill catches up with Noreen Lockhart before she leaves GB for her new role in Oceania.

How did you encounter Focolare?

My brother had met the Focolare through a friend and had then decided to become a priest. He spent a year with the Focolare, as a seminarian at the Priest's School in Frascati, near Rome. My memory was that we used to tease him about the Focolare because it sounded a bit 'happy clappy'. When he returned,

family members who had visited him there said – 'you're going to see something different in him.' I can remember testing to see if he really was good or not, eg, if he would let me watch what I wanted on TV. I was fourteen.

He invited an Italian priest focolarino¹ to come and stay for a couple of weeks in our house. I was fascinated by this priest who did the dishes and celebrated Mass just on our normal table. I remember he did yoga. I loved the way he would stand on his head and I made him do it several times a day! Just before he left he bought us tickets for a Gen Verde concert². I really loved their music. I had never come across so many different nationalities and when I met them after the concert I saw the world opening up before me.

It all clicked when I went with some friends to my first Mariapolis³ in Manchester in 1976. I experienced there that God was near and wasn't just to do with going to church. I knew that already, but somehow God had a new relevance for my everyday life. I would say I found a vibrancy in my faith.

What made you give your life to God and live in the Focolare community?

I studied languages in Glasgow University. I shared flats with various friends. I remember it as a happy time. The Focolare community lived near the university. It became like a second home for me. There were many moments when I was really attracted to their life. They had something that I knew called out to the deepest part of me but at the same time I was enjoying life and I was determined not to make any decision about my future until I was twenty-three and had travelled and seen the world.



Photos (2): courtesy of Noreen Lockhart

¹ A diocesan priest living in a Focolare with other priests

² One of the Focolare's international music groups

³ The summer gathering of the Focolare within a local region

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But God speaks to us in different moments. I'm grateful for that because I don't have any regrets about making my life choice earlier than I'd planned!

In 1980 some of the young people from Scotland had decided to go to the Gen Fest in Rome. I couldn't go because I had exams. At the last minute because of a train strike, they had to travel overnight to London by minibus. I remember closing the door of the minibus and waving them goodbye. The next day I received a phone call to say there had been an accident. The minibus had rolled over a number of times on the M6 and some

of those in it had quite bad injuries. It was a miracle that no-one died. I realised then: 'I have only one life and what will I do with it?' At the time I was very attracted to someone at university – so it was a choice of thinking what does God want of me? After a few weeks I thought I really can't silence this voice in my head. The thing that came to me was to be generous with my life and have a heart that is open to all of humanity, and to be free to do that. I remember going to the Focolare and sharing this.

I was nineteen then and a couple of years later, in 1983, when I finished university, the Centre for Unity in Welwyn Garden City was just beginning and so I came to WGC to be part of the new Focolare community. Up to that point I probably had a very idealistic vision of what it meant to follow God. Life with the young people in Scotland had been full of music with concerts proclaiming this great ideal of unity and building a united world. Then, there I was in WGC with two focolarine⁴, one was Korean and the other from Thailand in a big building that had no heating. I was totally impractical. The heaviest thing I had ever carried was probably my French dictionary! Yet, I would describe that year as a time of putting down roots and I am eternally grateful to those I lived with. On the one hand it could

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seem that we had little in common eg love of music or even tastes in food but stronger than anything was the desire to love one another. There was a great sense of adventure in building the Centre for Unity in its earliest days and people would often come to help. I recall the young people from London coming for a weekend. When they left I felt a bit sad to see them go. But at the same time I was so sure that I was where God wanted me to be. His presence among the three of us in this enormous building was stronger than anything. I was discovering in a deeper way the call to follow God in my life, and I was happy.

I was in WGC for three years and then I went to Loppiano in 1986. On my return I lived in London for twenty-five years, before returning to WGC in 2013.

What has been your experience of living in the Focolare?

My experience of Focolare over all these years is one of journeying together – sometimes as mother to each other, or sister to one another, friend for each other, through thick and thin.

I do remember a definitive moment. It came from an experience of feeling a bit disgruntled and dissatisfied. There were four of us in the Focolare. For me the spark had gone out and when the spark goes out you can very quickly find yourself on a downward spiral which ends in beginning to judge the others. So the atmosphere in the house changes and although someone can say, 'Are you OK?' and you can reply 'yes, I'm fine.' On the outside everything is fine, but deep inside yourself you know you're not.

One morning after a moment of meditation together, I was sharing with the others. I confessed I was a bit unhappy and someone else chimed in that they weren't too happy either. It is so often easy to try to make someone else responsible for how you feel. It was a very strong moment.

I'm still grateful to the person who responded to what I'd said because what she didn't do was say, 'you'll be fine.' Instead she said: 'This is a defining moment for our Focolare where we need to ask ourselves if we really are ready to give our lives for one another knowing that we are all imperfect and we are all in this together. We always have a choice in life – we can either stand on the outside and observe or we can put ourselves in the mix with all our imperfections.' In that moment I experienced a huge freedom. A freedom to start again and a freedom to realise that I wasn't being judged.

You have always had a sense of social justice. Where did that come from?

I think politics runs in the family blood. My grandfather was a Labour MP and entered Parliament just after the War during the formation of the NHS. My mother told great stories of their house being used as the MP's surgery and people calling in at all hours of the night. This love of politics has also stayed with me and a highlight of my Focolare life was accompanying Chiara Lubich in 2004 when she spoke in Westminster, in the Houses of Parliament, bringing together MPs and Peers from across the political spectrum. For me it was a dream come true.

A sense of social justice is part and parcel of who I am. This is also what attracted me to the Focolare – changing the world, building a united world, living for 'That all may be one' (Jn 17: 21). The desire to change the world is one of the reasons I was drawn to work for the international development agency, CAFOD where I spent eighteen years (until 2014). My final role was part of the Leadership Team, focusing on the governance of the organisation and on strategic planning.

Now you have been asked to go to Australia and to be responsible for the zone of Oceania. How did you react to this invitation?

First of all, I let out a scream! I wondered where on earth the idea that I could take on this role had come from. But I also recognised that God leads us on a journey. Over the last year I have found myself with a particular prayer from my childhood on my lips that came back to me again and again: 'Jesus, my love above all things do with me as you will.'

This invitation chimed with the desire inside – to still be generous with my life. It's with the grace of God that I say my 'yes'. This brings me back to the end of May this year when the possibility of moving 'down under' was becoming a bit more real. I was in Glasgow having just finished a course. All the thoughts about the possible move were going around in my head when suddenly, I experienced a deep sense of peace. I realised that I was back in the same student area where I had been all those years ago. This was the very place where I said lots of 'yesses' to God. And I realised that if the love of God had accompanied me over all these years, why should I doubt it now? 

⁴ Women living in a Focolare community