

DIALOGUE

Together on the wings of unity

Mustafa and Fatimah Merali report on their recent trip to the Focolare town of Loppiano followed by a conference on Muslim/Christian dialogue in Rome.

On Saturday 14th April, twenty three Shi‘a Muslims – including university students, seminarians and professionals from Argentina, USA, Canada, UK, Italy and Iran, gathered in Italy for what can only be described as an experience of a lifetime.

For roughly five days in Loppiano and four days in Rome, we embarked on a two-part journey with our Focolare brethren. In Loppiano we learnt more about the Focolare Movement and got to experience their way of life, and in Rome, we joined an international conference: ‘Giving Hope Together’. Perhaps most of us did not expect that on this trip we would embark on a life-changing experience, a journey on which we would get glimpses of God’s love and his potential plan for establishing unity on earth around the oneness of his being.

A joint venture

The programme was organised by Sophia University Institute of Loppiano, Italy – an academic institute established by the Focolare Movement, represented by its president, Professor Piero Coda – in conjunction with the Islamic Centre of England (ICE) in London and Risalat Institute in Qum, represented by their director Dr Mohammad Shomali.

The few days spent in Loppiano were packed with programmes and tours as we were taken around the village to see the various schools, businesses and workshops that made up the community. The participants arrived from their various countries on day one and we were settled into our respective accommodation. The

next day began our introduction to Loppiano where we watched videos about the history and purpose of this small town which has become a kind of lab of fraternity; where its diverse members try to build a sample of a united world. We also heard testimonies from residents about the concrete ways in which they strive to live a life of mutual love and unity with one another. We then proceeded to attend the local Mass, after which we lingered to meet and greet people from all over the world and from all walks of life.

In the afternoon, we met with the heads of the various 'schools of formation'. The discussion that ensued was intense and fruitful, and the hour-long planned session ran much longer than expected. These teachers spoke about some of the practical ways in which they attempt to bring God to all aspects of life. They also try to instil in students the need to set aside oneself in order to welcome and love the other.

Schools of life

We later managed to visit a school for families and a school for priests where we met and interacted with the various members of the schools. We asked questions, held discussions and toured the facilities. The school for families hosts families from different parts of the world to experience the culture of unity while immersed in the atmosphere of Loppiano.

Families spoke about the importance of communication and explained how they emerged stronger and more unified as a result of this programme. In the school for priests, it was interesting to hear how priests from different parts of the world spend an average of four months at the formation centre to live the spirituality of unity. With an emphasis on mutual love, these priests do everything together in harmony, including praying, cooking, cleaning, and studying.

Over the course of the next few days, we visited Polo Lionello, the Centre for Economics, where we were given a tour of an exhibition displaying and introducing the Economy of Communion – an ethical business model that was founded by Chiara Lubich. The model encourages participating businesses to be an integral part of their communities, willingly sharing a portion of their profits to those in need, thus fostering a 'culture of giving'.

Ciro and Hung

The talented handicrafts of Loppiano were a joy to see. We visited the studio of renowned artist **Ciro** who

is famous for transforming everyday 'scrap material' into beautiful pieces of art. We also visited **Hung**, the Calligrapher who made stunning wire sculptures. He is also known for his graceful Chinese calligraphy pieces, and we were honoured to have him create a piece for us as we all watched enthusiastically.

Among the highlights of the Loppiano trip was the fifth round of Wings of Unity held at Sophia University Institute (See also New City June 2017). The conference featured talks by Dr Shomali, Professor Coda, Roberto Catalano, Vincenzo Di Pilato and Sister Shahnaze Safieddine. The theme for this session was: 'Mission of Prophets & Mission of Religions'. The discussion brought forth a deep sense of spirituality and connectedness with the almighty.

On our last day in Loppiano, we participated in a sharing session with Sophia staff and students. Professor Coda and Dr Shomali both gave inspirational talks, and we all left feeling inspired by the deep sense of unity that we witnessed.

After this profound experience, our group was on a spiritual high as we bade farewell to Loppiano and made our way to Castel Gandolfo on the outskirts of Rome, home of the Focolare's Centro Mariapoli.

The picturesque views of the winding roads to the top of the hill, where one view opened to the stunning Lake Albano and the other the valley leading to Rome, were the perfect setting for this interfaith conference.



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Photos(4): © Caris Mendes

Professor Piero Coda (left) with Dr Mohammad Shomali (centre)

Giving Hope Together

The Focolare Movement was hosting an international conference for their Muslim friends entitled ‘Giving Hope Together: Christians and Muslims journeying in the charism of unity’. Around 400 Christians and Muslims from all over the world gathered for this four-day event.

The programme included keynote talks by religious leaders, testimonies and experiences by different participants. The talks covered topics such as ‘Suffering in Islam’ presented by Dr Shomali, and ‘Suffering in Christianity’ as well as talks on Lady Mary from both religious viewpoints. Various workshops and sharing circles split the big group into smaller ones, so that all were able to interact and network with fellow brothers and sisters in a more intimate manner.

An open afternoon was organised for Saturday the 21st April to invite other guests to partake in this conference, and here Professor Coda and Dr Shomali

introduced the Wings of Unity project. Throughout the conference, one attained a new sense of appreciation for the multicultural mosaic of the brethren in faith who shared in this collective unity between Christians and Muslims. It also offered a lens of recognition and reflection of the global peaceful movement of the Focolare, aiming to bring everyone closer to God, irrespective of their beliefs.

Our trip to Loppiano and conference in Rome were both avenues of reflection, meditation and grounding of oneself back to the ultimate reality; being one with the almighty. It provided a spiritual boost and cleansing, turning one’s heart into a blank page awaiting God to write his will upon it so that we can fulfil it. 🍌

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Pat Whitney accompanied the group of Muslims from Britain and shares her impressions of the trip to Loppiano and Rome

I was looking forward to accompanying Dr. Shomali's group on the visit to Loppiano and Rome in April. It seemed an opportunity to deepen friendships that had begun in 2017 when many of the same people had visited Montet, Switzerland, and Marcelo Claria and I had been present as Focolare representatives from the UK. The 2017 experience had opened my eyes and heart to the impact that the charisma of unity can make upon people who come from a completely different religious and cultural background from my own. I was expecting the 2018 journey to be a gentle continuation of the same: instead, it was so powerful and energising that it is difficult to capture its essence in a few words. There was a striking trust and openness amongst us all, that drew out the very best of our human nature. We seemed to experience what it means to know that we are all children of God.

The journey began with our visit to Loppiano. Dr. Shomali described the little town as a 'house with many floors – so many floors that not even the focolarini know them all!' He was right! Even though, I lived there for a year, I didn't appreciate Loppiano's richness in terms of witness and dialogue. As we visited the Theotokos church, Sophia Institute, the various centres, schools, studios and industrial areas, there was always a deep sharing among everyone present that threw light upon our individual situations. It was like 'coming home' before going out again to face the challenges that surround us.

In Rome, we joined a larger group of Muslims, both Sunni and Shi'a, coming from all over the world – Pakistan, Syria, Philippines, USA, Macedonia, Jordan, Iraq, France, Germany and Turkey to name just a few. I was amazed by the sheer variety of cultures, languages and dress code present in one meeting hall! I was equally amazed and impressed when I saw people who are political and cultural 'enemies', being totally open and welcoming towards one another. One of the participants said, 'This is paradise and you must help me to never wake up and lose this.' I understood what that person meant. Now that I am back home and the news of our world often seems more negative than positive, the memory of that week is an incentive to contribute in some small way to creating a better world. 🍌

