

ECUMENISM

Taking risks

Christian dialogue is not easy, but it's important to take risks. According to Focolare president **Maria Voce** there are walls which divide us which need to be climbed. Below are some extracts from an interview with Maria Voce by Andrés Beltramo Álvarez for the Spanish journal *Alfa y Omega*.

The keyword is 'journey', because 'truth is sought through journeying'. Maria Voce, or Emmaus as she is known in the Focolare, became animated as she described Pope Francis's vision of ecumenism. Her eyes lit up when speaking about an ecclesial reality which truly has unity as its vocation. Such was the route undertaken by Focolare founder Chiara Lubich. It is one of the very few movements born in the Catholic Church which embraces the faithful of other Churches.

'I think that true Catholicism is what God perceives it to be: a gathering of communities each having their own identity. I imagine the moment will come, because it must come, when everyone will be one. Jesus asked for this. Therefore not just one Catholic Church: it could be Catholic in the sense of universal, but not a single Roman Church or a single Church of Constantinople.'

Your words came across almost as provocative

'Of course, they're provocative!' Maria Voce replied. It was clear that in her 'provocation' she felt supported by the Argentinean Pope. On Pentecost Sunday 2017, Pope Francis convened the charismatic Catholic and non-Catholic movements. Before the meeting had even started, the Pope specifically asked for Maria Voce. A priest went looking for her and she joined the group of leaders sitting on the stage. At the end of his speech, the Pope approached her and, to her great surprise, took her by the



hand: 'Come, Maria ...,' he said without adding anything else. And they left the assembly together. 'From the first moment of his election, when he appeared on the balcony to greet the crowds and introduced himself as the Bishop of Rome rather than as the Pope, I understood that it was already a sign of his ability to relate to other Churches.'

Maria Voce referred to the experience of Lund, in Sweden, which marked the fifth centenary of the Protestant Reformation of Martin Luther. 'Something immense happened in Lund, when two Church leaders at the same level of authority met and signed a joint statement,' she said. 'The challenge is to follow the Pope's example and join in the "spirit of Lund". If John Paul II will always be remembered for the *'spirit of Assisi'*, the present Pope should be remembered for the *"spirit of Lund"*.'

What about anti-ecumenical attitudes in the Roman Catholic Church?

Maria Voce acknowledges that 'unfortunately' among Catholics there still exist attitudes of the past. There are those who think that 'the Church is us' and that all others are excluded. This attitude has brought about a sort of spiritual fatigue. 'We have slowed down history. It's not that we are in a state of inertia in a practical sense, but perhaps, out of fear, we have slowed down the historical processes. I would not say this of the whole Church, but it

Photo: Città Nuova

Left: Maria Voce and Jesús Morán, president and vice-president of the Focolare

Right: Pope Francis hugs General Secretary of the Lutheran World Federation Rev. Martin Junge during an ecumenical prayer service in the Lutheran Cathedral, Lund, 31 October 2016.



Photo: © Andrew Medichini

is true of many of its members. We are brothers and sisters bonded by Baptism; they live the same Gospel that I live. Who am I to say that someone is of less value than me in front of God. The Pope is giving great impetus to this.'

How can the ecumenical dialogue proceed?

According to Maria Voce, it can be done in many different ways. Among these is to re-evaluate the great men and women in the history of the Church, such as Luther. Another way is to value the martyrdom of Christians irrespective of their Church and to look for ways to express one's faith in ways 'more acceptable to all'. But, above all, it means to live our shared faith concretely, because the new stage in dialogue promoted by Pope Francis is carried out by journeying and not by standing still. It is a risky endeavour, however, and one of the challenges is a lack of formation. As leader of a movement that has taken root worldwide, Maria Voce says, 'It's right to ensure good formation, but we have to take risks; if we don't take risks, we cannot move forward. This is the path of the extraordinary ecumenism the Pope is treading. We feel we must help this ecumenism become a lived, down to earth experience.'

It is not about creating confusion, or losing one's identity. Rather, it's about taking part in occasions, such as liturgical ceremonies, while avoiding confusion, in which our voices can be raised in shared prayer. In this regard she

emphasizes: 'Are there still things to do on this journey? As long as there are places in the world where Christians fight each another or try to dominate one another, or are divided, then there is much left to do.'



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Ecumenical meeting in the Centre of the Focolare, Grotta Ferrata, 2015.