

FOCOLARE

The dove from Noah's Ark



Going to Syria for half of July seemed to be a very exciting and dangerous experience (according to the media). Our colleagues at work could hardly believe we wanted to go there. We must confess that even we were a bit scared at the beginning. However, as soon as we got on the plane,

we didn't think about our fears any more but only about the community we were going to meet.

In July 2018 **Sylwia Machej** and **Patricia Batista** from the UK spent three weeks in Syria forming part of a 'temporary Focolare'.

On the plane, we met an amazing Syrian girl who spoke to us about

the real situation in her country. We were so touched by the way she spoke about her hopes and her joy that we thought, we could not have had a better welcome to the Syrian adventure.

A temporary Focolare

We spent almost three weeks there being part of a temporary focolare – composed by members of the Focolare Movement in Syria of all vocations and ages, the two of us (Patricia and Sylwia) from the UK and a family of three from Italy (Paola and Lucia Crepas with Maria Stella). Our first encounter with Syria was our 2-hour delay at the border. After this first obstacle we entered a country with clear signs of destruction from the recent war which contrasted with the hope, strength and deter-



mination of its people. On arrival at our first stop, Homs – where we spent 10 days – we were happy to see that life for the locals had pretty much got back to normal.

Action for a United World

Our programme was very intense but nobody was complaining. Full of energy and joy we threw ourselves into this adventure. The daily mass in the Jesuits' chapel was a very important moment of the day. We taught English in the after-school centre which was set up by AMU (Azione per un Mondo Unito – Action for a United World).

The children were so enthusiastic to learn and to be with us. It was an amazing experience – even with their limited English and our limited Arabic we managed to communicate and build very special relationships. We led sports activities for children in the centre run by the Jesuits, prepared meetings for young people as well as for the elderly and for families.

One family

Some of us also had the possibility of visiting cancer





Above right: Patricia Batista (in red) and Sylwia Machej (centre kneeling) with their new family in Syria.

patients in their houses. Unforgettable meetings – having nothing and yet, at the same time, having everything. One of these patients in the last stages of cancer said to us – I have my family around me, an open window to the world, where I can listen to the happy noise of the children playing on the street.

Other than all the activities, for us the most important thing was to support and to be with the local community from Homs. We aimed to be one family, where the doors are always open, and where everybody has a place. Life was very simple, electricity was intermittent which meant, for example, not always having the internet, sleeping on mattresses and not being in a comfortable apartment in the big city.

While in Homs, we had the opportunity of meeting with the local bishop, Jean Abdo Arbach, whose enlightening words helped us understand the rest of our stay in Syria. He compared our coming to Syria to the dove from Noah's Ark – like a sign of hope that life is returning.

This was undoubtedly an amazing gift – to get to know Syria and the Syrian people. We heard so many tragic stories but their strength, hope and faith was stronger than anything else. Having very little, they have everything.

Joy in the midst of suffering

We ended our trip to Syria with the summer gathering of the Focolare, the Mariapolis in Saidnaya together with more than 300 people from the Syrian community. It was the first Mariapolis after the war. In the opening session some members of the community told the story of how the Focolare Movement began: the experience of Chiara Lubich during World War II, followed by an experience of a member of the Syrian community during the recent war. Such strong similarities of the discovery of the love of God in times of extreme suffering. Just as in the early times of the Movement when the first Mariapolises were held in the Dolomites, we had to prepare the accommodation, the meeting hall, the servery and washing up places, clean the toilets and cook! What an experience! Everybody was involved. So much joy!

Being an open door

Certainly our life has changed. Somebody said that Christians are an open door within society, ready to help and support everybody. For me personally (Sylwia) the Syrian experience was an open door within me, to everybody and everything. The Love we received in those days was much bigger than what we gave. We felt God's presence on every step of our trip, walking at our side in every moment. We lived this experience with all those who were there and with all those who supported us in different ways to contribute to making Jesus' dream come true: 'That all may be one' (John 17: 21). 🌱