

## PROFILE

# Eddie McCaffrey – the root

We continue the series on 'Pioneers of the Focolare'. **Padraic Gilligan** pays tribute to Eddie McCaffrey, whose journey from despair over his illness to the fullness of joy and peace was an inspiration to many. He became the root of a flourishing spiritual community that grew up around him in Dublin.

**I** met Eddie McCaffrey for the first time in autumn 1974 when I was about 14. He lived down the road from me and our families had come into contact with each other as Eddie and my sister both had Muscular Dystrophy, a neurological condition which, eventually, left both of them in wheelchairs with limited mobility.

Our initial meetings were awkward – a restless, energetic, pretty loud and immature teenager and a buddha-like, static guy with a bad beard in his 20s. He was also a Liverpool supporter and liked blues guitarist John Mayall so what could he possibly have in common with an Arsenal follower who dug T Rex?

I was in contact with him for a few reasons. Earlier that summer I had attended my first Mariapolis at Hopwood Hall, Manchester and was visiting Eddie as a kind of 'follow up' to hear more about Focolare, Eddie and his mother Margaret being the heart of a nascent Focolare community in Ireland.

I soon settled into a pattern of visiting Eddie on a Saturday morning prior to departing for my part-time job in a local wine store on the Saturday afternoon. We'd spend about an hour together, in easy, natural conversation and those meetings shaped the future of my life in ways I couldn't possibly have ever imagined. During our conversations I learned the back-story of how Eddie came to live on my road overlooking the ancient weir on the river Dodder.

## Liverpool lad

Born in Liverpool – hence his football predilections – Eddie lost his father in a road accident when he was two. By the time he was seven, the Muscular Dystrophy had progressed to the point that he was unable to walk. His mother Margaret, meanwhile, met and married John

Neylon, a contractor from the West of Ireland, and, for reasons of John's work, the family re-located to Dublin when Eddie was in his teens.

Apparently upbeat and cheerful as a young boy, Eddie's first two decades were far from easy. While other 10 year olds kicked football and climbed trees, he was taken to school in a wheelchair; while other 18 year olds dreamed of going to college and exploring the world, Eddie was housebound, his mother Margaret his portal to the outside; while other young men pursued careers and met their life's partner, Eddie's world was whatever he could see from the front bedroom of the house he shared with his mother and step-father.

## Shattered dreams

By the time he was twenty one, Eddie's innate cheerfulness had turned somewhat and, despite a relatively active social life with the Irish Wheelchair Association, inside, increasingly, he felt a growing sense of disappointment. Despite his physical disability, Eddie had always had big ambitions and high hopes – recognition as a writer and poet, going to university and getting a degree, having meaningful relationships, getting a job and contributing to society – but these all gradually unravelled leaving a void, a desire for deeper fulfilment, a need for purpose and meaning.

Things changed utterly for Eddie and his mother Margaret when an unexpected visitor, sent to them by close friends in Liverpool, knocked on the door of the family bungalow in the early seventies when he was 21. For the first time they heard the story of Chiara Lubich in war torn Trent and how her dreams were systematically shattered by the brutality of war. This resonated strongly with Eddie. He knew only too well what it was like to



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experience bitter disappointment, to see your hopes for the future battered and destroyed. And he found great solace and new hope, too, in Chiara's discovery of God-love amidst the horrors of the air raid shelters.

### **Seeds of hope**

Over time Eddie and Margaret were more and more drawn to Focolare, visiting Italy on two occasions in the early 1970s and participating at Mariapolises, first in the UK, and then in Ireland too where the first Mariapolis took place in 1974 in Clongowes Wood College – ironically, a stone's throw from Curryhills House where Focolare in Ireland is headquartered today.

Thinking back to that time now, it's astonishing to realise that Eddie only knew Focolare about 4 years when he became my guide, every Saturday morning, sowing in me seeds of faith, hope and love that continue to grow in my life over 40 years later, often despite myself.

I often think of the much quoted words of 'Hotel California' – 'you can check out anytime you like, but you can never leave'. Even if I wanted to, I could never break that impulse to try to live altruistically, outside of myself, for others. While theologically it's probably correct to state that those seeds were sown in me with baptism, I think it's fair to say they started to spring into life when I connected, however implausibly, with Eddie in the mid-seventies.

### **Radix – the root**

And sowing is entirely appropriate imagery when talking about Eddie. In a letter to Chiara Lubich in 1974 – quoted in Maurus Green's short biography *The Vanishing Root* – he asked her for a new name to accompany the new life he found in Focolare. Chiara responded as follows:

*To help you remain faithful to this special calling, I have chosen for you the Word of Life 'But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise' (1 Cor 1: 27) and the new name: 'RADIX', which means 'Root'.*

And that's precisely what Eddie was. He was below-the-ground, unseen, silent, the anchor, the tether, the root. Astonishingly, however, over a short number of years, he gave life to and nurtured an eclectic, vibrant, widely diverse community of souls – including my own – all drawn in by his mesmerizing spiritual energy.

Eddie died in November 1979. His funeral was a real celebration with about 2000 people attending. Someone commented: 'I have never seen a funeral like this. It is more like a wedding.'

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You can read more about Eddie's life in 'The Vanishing Root' by Maurus Green OSB. Published by New City (1994) (ISBN 0904287505)