

Face to face with the President *The heroism of love in a marriage*

“We have to stop pretending to be a happy couple, I want a separation”. These are the words of Virgil’s wife 12 years ago. He would never have imagined their relationship would come to an end. Misunderstandings, insufficient dialogue, a coldness that over time, led to the drastic decision: separation.

There are many challenges that every couple must face, small and big, but sometimes they cannot overcome them alone. And unfortunately, there are many couples in crisis, wounded, facing the pain of separation. The New Families Movement, a branch of Focolare, offers support to accompany couples to help them overcome crises.

In November 2021, New Families organized a worldwide online meeting for the formation of those who accompany couples. Margaret Karram, President of the Focolare, gave this message.



Dear Everyone, here I am, finally face to face with you. I have joyfully followed this well-prepared program, which you have carried out seriously in order to respond to today’s challenges, in a world where the unity of the family is increasingly threatened.

Your participation in this course testifies to the presence of people who still believe in the family and who are therefore ready to give their lives for it. I sincerely thank you for your availability and for your generous commitment.

As you know, my homeland, the Holy Land, is a land where peace is always under threat. I have experienced first-hand what it means to live in an atmosphere of conflict. At the same time, I grew up in a beautiful family, in which there was a deep harmony and from which I received all those values that made me become the person I am. These two factors lead me to appreciate in a particular way the aims of this course: to consider and help the frailties of the family with greater awareness and with a systematic method.

I think the participation of people from so many countries, from all 5 continents, in this program is very enriching .

I know that in the introduction to the course, Maria and Gianni¹ recalled the words of Chiara Lubich at the inauguration of New Families in 1967², with a special emphasis that I would like to repeat. These are Chiara’s words: *“Which families should we prefer, to which should we go out and approach first? Those in which the face of Jesus Forsaken is most striking, those families most threatened by separation or divorce, wherever there are families torn apart that need to be reunited”.*

It also emerges from the final document of the General Assembly of the Work of Mary, that there is an urgent need to respond to the cry of humanity and of the family that is at its heart.

Much has been done by the families of the Movement and certainly it is still a question of continuing with vigour. Indeed, we could say that we are starting a new stage in the journey of New Families, one in which we hope to open up to the reality of the family today in a very real way: the family that is increasingly in crisis due to the exaggerated rhythms of everyday life, rhythms that complicate relationships and lead to the loss of dialogue in a couple and ultimately to separation, where children are the main innocent victims.

With the pandemic, for several reasons, the number of crises has increased for families. There are many examples. You know all about them, certainly even better than I do. This course for accompanying couples

¹Maria and Gianni Salerno, international coordinators of the New Families Movement.

²Rocca di Papa, 19th July 1967

in crisis and who are facing separation, confirmed to me how timely Chiara Lubich's call is and how urgent and important it is for families to commit themselves to families. Motivated families, like you, give a strong example; your unity, perhaps hard fought for every day, is an incredible testimony that heals and gives courage, it is a true gift for many other families and in particular for those wounded by the crisis or by separation.

I wanted to tell you an experience that I had when I was in the Holy Land, because while it is important that families help families, sometimes we, focolarini, can also give a hand. I remember that the families with whom we lived in the Holy Land, even if they are beautiful families, there is so much the sense of family there, suffered terribly because of the external situation of conflict, war and hatred. Their children breathed in this atmosphere too. These external causes therefore caused even more crises in couples, and also in their relationships with their children. We often found ourselves listening to these families and trying to encourage them.

I remember that we opened our home, the focolare, to welcome them, for example to invite them to dinner. And I learned this: that for these families it takes time, you can't stand there and say: now I have something else to do, we need to dedicate all the time necessary, with generosity and fully listening. Often, we didn't have the answers, but simply sharing the pain of those families with whom we were in contact at least gave them a little relief.

We used to think up all kinds of ideas to bring these families, these couples together. For example, if we had some work to do around the house, instead of calling a plumber or someone we didn't know, we would ask the husband of a couple, "Can you fix this thing that has broken down in our house?" Then after his own work, in the evening, he would come. And we thought: even if he breathes this family air in the focolare, it is not enough. Then we would call his wife and say to her, "Can you come later to pick up your husband who doesn't have the car with him?" So she came. But that was not enough, we invited them to dinner, we spent time with them. And on the way home, they talked to each other. These are small examples to say that surely you too as families can help these families who find themselves in need even more.

Then I wanted to share this with you too.

A few days ago, I took part in a course for married focolarini, married people who want to become part of the focolare. They asked us many questions about the life of the focolare, about the life of a couple, etc. One of the questions was about forgiveness and the Pact of Mercy³. I told them some of my reflections, which I would like to share with you too.

I said, it is easy to say: "We forgive each other and start over", but it can't be taken for granted. The Pact of Mercy and any Pact that is made, is always made between two people: I can make it with someone else or with God. And I thought: how do I experience this in my life? If I make a Pact of Mercy, first of all I try to forgive those who have offended me and I try to do all my part; but on the other hand, I don't have to wait for the other to forgive me. It is not that simple.

I remembered that Chiara Lubich always told us that we must love without expecting anything; the love among us must be so pure that it does not even expect to be forgiven but does all its part. And I am really convinced that Christian love is heroic. Speaking to you now, I imagine how heroic this love must be in a couple. Often, even among us, when you feel that you have been offended, judged or misunderstood for something you said or for your way of behaving, sometimes even because of your culture or your character, it is not so simple. I have experienced that it takes time to accept the fact that others did not understand me or were unable to welcome me.

³ In the early days of the Focolare, Chiara Lubich and her first companions made a "Pact of Mercy" every evening, that is, to try to see each other completely new, forgetting each other's defects and covering everything with love.

A lesson I have learned from my own experience, is that sometimes you have to know how to wait, because sometimes we want things to...: stop, let's start again, it's all over! But is not so; you have to be patient because each of us needs our own time to go through a forgiveness process.

I have learned that at times we have to stay on the cross, not expect anything and wait for this process within us to work out and ask Jesus to lead the way inside the other too. Then try to talk to one another in sincerity, in freedom and have the courage to say things to one another face to face. I have seen this that facilitates forgiveness, facilitates dialogue and helps reconciliation in times of crisis and conflict.

I would like to conclude with this wish from Chiara Lubich, who is committed to living with all of you. *"My God, may I be the tangible sacrament of your love in the world: your arms, which embrace and consume all the solitude of the world into love."*⁴

Margaret Karram

⁴Trent, 1st September 1949