

Ecumenism, Interfaith & Justice, Wednesday November 28th

First of all thank you for the invitation. I am very impressed by the kinder Leeds and heartshift programmes.

Lusa and I have been asked to talk about ecumenism, interfaith and justice relating to the challenges of the times, and how faith communities and civil society can enable the change we want to see.

It will be good to have a conversation together.

The various areas of dialogue are like the ripples formed by a stone thrown into a pond. We are naturally at home and in conversation with people of our own faith tradition or beliefs but we are called and can enjoy the encounter with people in those further circles.

From a Christian point of view we can look beyond our specific tradition to other Christian churches, then beyond our Christian faith to believers of other religions and then beyond that to people with profound beliefs of a non-religious nature. Once, at an interfaith event, I met a lady who told me she did not have religious beliefs, adding, and “Don’t forget us, because we want to be involved too”.

What helps us reach out to these various circles?

The concept of kindness is very powerful, and another word for kindness is love. St John says in his Gospel: “So we have known and believe the love that God has for us. God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them”. (1 Jn 4:16) These principles were spoken about very much by Chiara Lubich, founder of Focolare. Focolare began with the discovery of God as love and the response, in the midst of war: “We have believed in love”.

She quoted Erich Fromm, a great psychologist of our times who said: “Our civilization very rarely seeks to learn the art of loving. Despite the desperate search for love, everything else is considered to be more important: success, prestige, money, power. We use almost all our energy in pursuit of these goals and almost none in learning the art of loving.”¹

The love that comes from God helps us to beyond our own categories and limitations. It has characteristics that can help us be outward facing believers and active citizens.

The first is that it is not limited to family and friends, but reaches out to everyone, to people we like and those we don’t, to people from our own country or other countries. An example of this is the help given at a church in Leeds, not only by Anglican the parish community but also by the Salvation Army and a member of the focolare community in considerable support given to an asylum seeker. Still on the subject of reaching out to all, I’d like you to hear now from Veronica

¹. Eric Fromm, *The Art of Loving*, 1956.

Bishop, a friend and member of the focolare community in Leeds, who will tell us about a local context where people were brought together around concepts which are not specifically religious:

VERONICA's experience

I work as a chaplain to 70 elderly people living in independent living flats. Some are independent and some have care. Around half, from a number of different denominations, like to attend services in the communal areas, while the others have different beliefs and some no faith. In my role as chaplain, more by my life rather than words, I have been able to share something of the spirituality of unity which I have received from the Focolare community. This focuses on Jesus prayer to the Father "May they all be one" "This oneness can only be built where there is respect and love for all. During Lent I felt it would be a good opportunity to try to involve everyone, not just church goers. Instead of focusing on giving something up we had a Lenten tree in the lounge on which people could hang leaves each time they remembered to do something positive for someone else. This idea really took off among all and was a talking point. I was aware of an increase in acts of kindness around me. Soon the tree was full of leaves.

During the first part of lockdown I worked remotely doing phone contacts. I was concerned that people would suffer in isolation. The tree was not, however, removed by carers as I thought it would be but was moved to the centre of the now empty lounge as a visible testimony to what matters in life for all who passed by.

As lockdown continued the love and concern for one another which had grown in lent was transferred to the garden which was sadly in a neglected state as the previous gardener had left. So much so that people didn't want to go out. One day a resident, not too strong himself was moved to do something about it and started digging. Another seeing him struggle came out to help until many residents; even those using wheel chairs began to join in pruning roses and dead heading. The garden was transformed and there was a joyful atmosphere among all was able to enjoy it in safety.

As it grew colder we were able to meet indoors in groups of 6 but once again people have to isolate in their flats and many are missing family's friends and grandchildren. I looked for yet another way of keeping peoples spirits up and a friend suggested a thankfulness tree. As well as being invited to donate to the food bank residents were sent a leaf on which to write down what they felt thankful for in life. On passing the tree they could then add their food donation and their leaf. Staff have also been intrigued by these different trees and added to them. A few staff and residents were visibly moved thinking of all they are thankful for and some in reflecting were also able to share difficulties.

I feel that wherever we are what really matters is that we try to be the first to love even when it's hard. Even a small act of kindness can have ripples that will travel far.

Secondly, this kind of love takes the initiative. It does not wait for others to take the first step. It's what Jesus did with us when he came on earth to give his life for us. This can be important in many contexts and also in the family. My parents were estranged but when I discovered this kind of love

I went to visit the parent most distant from me to build bridges. However, I'd like to share with you a video in which a physiotherapist in Brazil talks about a project helping coronavirus patients who have breathing difficulties, and who can't talk easily, to communicate. Their method is offered freely around the world. This shows that justice is not only about giving to each their own, as the definition goes, but can also be about each giving what they have for the sake of the human family. If we develop a culture of giving then overcoming the disastrous consequences of the coronavirus will not be a distant goal.

VIDEO LINK:

<https://collegamentoch.focolare.org/en/2020/10/04/acts-of-fraternity-part-2/>

When you click here you need to choose the English tab and then click once on the middle section "Porto Alegre" and it starts up. At 2'.39" it ends.

Text of video: Rita Bersch – Porto Alegre (in Portuguese – with English voiceover):

I am a physiotherapist and I work in the field of assistive technology. Assistive technology is an area of knowledge that supports people with disabilities in carrying out daily activities such as nutrition, hygiene, movement and even communication. Due to the coronavirus, people with severe respiratory problems and consequently with communication problems continue to arrive in hospitals.

In this local and global situation, together with a group of friends we decided to share our knowledge, precisely in order to help when speaking becomes impossible. In practice we create alternative communication tables, which are simple resources like this, with graphic symbols that the patients can choose to express what they want to say. Pointing here, for example, the person can say: "I am out of breath", "I'm in pain", "I feel sick", "I am tired" or "I am afraid."

In the other group there are requests and questions: "I need help", "Call the doctor", "Call my family", "How am I doing?" Since the patient cannot use a dictionary or does not know some terms, we have created a grid with letters where they can write the word they want to say. And also an outline of a human body. So that, after having highlighted the symptom or pain, they can show the part where this symptom is felt and its intensity. Considering that this epidemic is global and that these resources could help people around the world, we have translated it into different languages such as Chinese, Spanish, Portuguese, French, English, German ... Everyone can access the archives of this material, print it, classify it and offer it to the health services of your cities. We are very happy to know that this resource has already arrived in many hospitals, health centres and ambulances throughout Brazil. We have received reports of how the relationship between the patient and the healthcare staff is changing and is better informed, finding that this simple resource makes it possible to establish a new type of communication and provide more adequate care. And on the part of the patients, they are relieved of the anguish and tension of not being able to communicate.

Link shown in video: www.ufrgs.br/comacesso/pranchas-cao-hospitalar/

The translations of the communication tables are at the bottom of the page.

Thirdly, this kind of love considers the other person as oneself. All the great faith traditions share the Golden Rule, which says: “Do to others as you would have them to do you” (Luke 6:31). This means having respect for others, their identity and their freedom. In interfaith work some people want to dialogue on points of faith and scripture, others want to evangelise their non-Christian neighbours, others want to work locally for the benefit of the community and so on. There is quite a gap between the evangelisers and dialoguers. When I worked at Churches Together in England I was encouraged by Jim Currin, our Evangelism officer, to write a Grove booklet in the evangelism series. I trusted in God’s help to find a point of contact between these two camps. One day I was walking up Headingly Lane and the title popped into my mind: “Friendship and exchange with people of other Faiths: a context for witness and dialogue”. Friendship (love, kindness) puts our relationships on a healthy footing. Then we can sincerely share our beliefs and also work together. In the UK, the Focolare has a dialogue group with people of other religions.

Fourthly: When our loving kindness becomes mutual, when it is unselfish and generous, within the family, in all areas of society, there is unity, in which we experience greater light and strength because of the presence of God, of love, among us.

So in these very challenging times, where we are all vulnerable to the virus, but appalling inequalities and poverty are growing, I would like to see more people who are well rooted in what nourishes them spiritually but are outward facing, active citizens, working together and making a difference.

Lastly, I heard a sermon in church recently in which the priest spoke about a family with four children who had no home, no car, no job, nothing. The he said: let’s not be afraid of the virus, let’s only be afraid of not loving.

Thank you very much.