

Lisbon (Portugal), August 3, 2023

**World Youth Day
"Mary arose and went with haste" (Lk 1:39)
"Rise Up" Meeting – Integral Ecology**

Speech by Jesús Morán, Co-President of the Focolare Movement

DIALOGUE EXPERIENCE IN CHILE

In October 1988, the Chilean people said "NO" to Augusto Pinochet and began the journey back to democracy. Although the "NO" vote won decisively, the referendum was highly contested, as Chilean society was split in two.

At the time I was working as a university pastoral counsellor at the Pontifical Catholic University of Chile, in Santiago, the capital. The university was a microcosm of Chilean society and reflected the same divisions. With a group of young people from the Focolare Movement and other students involved in pastoral work, we decided that we had to do something to overcome the radical conflicts, something that would favour unity, encounter and dialogue. On a previous occasion in the central courtyard of the humanities campus, where I had my office, we had already formed a cordon to separate two groups who at the same time and in the same place, had called a meeting to promote their positions. They hit us, they spat on us, but in the end, we helped prevent further violence that would have been a disaster.

We had a spontaneous idea: in order to overcome any conflict, people need to get to know each other in depth. So we scheduled a series of meetings where we invited students who we knew held opposing views. The goal was not to decide anything, nor to steer the vote in one specific direction. We didn't want a debate, just fellowship. That was our logic. At the beginning of the meetings, we explained these premises and then opened the session. Everyone could say how they would vote and the underlying existential reasons. It was not easy, the temptation to discuss ideas was very strong, but we invited those present to keep within what had been agreed upon.

I remember one session where the son of one of the military who had received threats and the son of a "desaparecido" spoke. An extraordinary atmosphere was created. We were crammed into the room and you couldn't have heard a pin drop. These two students represented the two extremes of Chilean society at the time. There were no comments. It seemed to me that these extremes were connecting with one another for the first time. Each of them would certainly have voted in a different way, but now they understood the other's reasons, and this was the only hope for the new phase that would surely begin in the country. At the end of the meeting, a girl who was a pastoral leader offered to drive me home. She came from a rich, right-wing family. She was very confused because she had decided to vote "No," against the advice of all her people, who were rebuking her. She asked me if, as a

Christian, she was doing the right thing. I told her that I would not answer that question: she had to decide according to her own conscience. And that she had to be in peace, without coming down from the cross. This, in fact, is the choice of the Christian.

After the referendum, with the young people who had participated in the initiative, we decided to take ahead this idea and we created the "Meeting Centre for Dialogue," a platform that continued for several years and basically maintained the same goals, although now it was open to the debating of ideas, but always in an atmosphere of dialogue.