

**World Youth Day
"Mary arose and went with haste" (Lk 1:39)**

"Rise Up" Meeting – Integral Ecology

Speech of Margaret Karram, President of the Focolare Movement

Yesterday I told you that ever since I was 14 years old, I knew that I wanted to spend my life for social justice, for peace in my country; I am Palestinian and I grew up in Haifa, in Israel, and my country has been experiencing conflicts and violence for many years.

So, the topic we are reflecting on today, social friendship, is very close to my heart. There is a passage Pope Francis wrote in the encyclical *Fratelli Tutti* that expresses very well the purpose of my life. He encourages us to build bridges, to live an "open fraternity, which allows us to recognize, appreciate and love each person, beyond physical proximity, beyond the place in the world where they were born or where they are living".

This "fraternity" has always been my passion, and when I got to know the Charism of unity, I realized that I could live it with every person, in spite of their culture, their religious affiliation or their ethnicity.

When I was 22, I went to study in the United States of America, at a university where there were many young Jewish Americans. Everything was so new for me, the country was new and also Los Angeles. the city I was living in. It was a huge metropolis compared to my city which was so small and where we all knew one other. At university, I knew no one; I had to study in a language that was not my own and I was afraid I would not be accepted.

For months I hardly spoke to anyone. Then came the Jewish New Year and, knowing that I was alone, someone invited me to participate in the religious celebrations. I accepted but I wanted to tell them that I was a Christian. The first reaction of these young people was astonishment and they asked me: "Why did you come to study here if you are not Jewish?" I felt that the time had come to tell these new friends about my choice of life which meant for me, that I wanted to live for peace and that therefore, I wanted to get to know and to be enriched by people who are different from me.

From that moment on, everything changed: we started studying together, taking breaks together, sitting next to one another in our classes. Then the time came when one of them said to me: 'I would never have dreamed of sitting next to someone who is of such a different nationality from mine'.

Perhaps you know from history, that Jews and Arabs have considered each other enemies for a very long time.

Now, even my professors began to take an interest in me in a completely different way, they gave me so much attention and after class they would ask me how I had got on, if something had offended me... A relationship of respect, friendship and mutual appreciation was born between us.

I can say, as the pope says, that we can live this 'open fraternity' which breaks down the walls and the fears which we build within ourselves.

Another example that I would like to tell you about is an experience we had of spending a few days together last year in northern Galilee. It was promoted by the Focolare Movement. We called it "Dare to care for a better future".

At the basis was the idea of creating a space where people of different ethnicities and religions, but also those without a religious belief - children, young people, families - could get to know each other and build bridges. Talking to each other, getting to know one other in person, discovering that the other person has the same problems as you, the same questions as you, is very important. There is nothing like face-to-face dialogue- to break down the prejudices we might have.

A Muslim who was there said: 'Being with others is a skill, a talent, a practice. It's just like learning a language, which you lose if you don't practice it. Here I have understood that, as the title of these days says, it takes courage to care for one another, to become better human beings.'

Another person, a Christian, said: 'We cannot speak of peace if we do not know each other. Knowing each other breaks down all barriers'.

As a movement, we try to regularly promote opportunities for getting to know one another, and for meetings based on a friendship, which we try to cultivate on a daily basis. Then, as my friend Talat used to say, we have moments like this which 'serve to bring energies together, to share experiences, to shorten the road to building a more fraternal society'.

These are just a few examples, and I am sure that you too would have a lot to tell! But from my own experience I would like to tell you that having the courage to step outside of ourselves, and wanting to get to know the other 'in real life', truly works and living this way is so much more beautiful!

And thinking also of Mary who is the protagonist of this World Youth Day... she always had courage, she followed Jesus, right to the end, even under the cross where she experienced her greatest suffering. She is truly a model for us, a model of courage, of someone who never gave up.

I would like to invite you not to miss the opportunities for building true relationships wherever you are. These are the basis for peace... you have all the potential, and you are not alone, there are many of us and this gives us the strength not to give up, but to keep believing!