



GRAND MAGISTERIUM – VATICAN
EQUESTRIAN ORDER OF
THE HOLY SEPULCHRE OF JERUSALEM

At the service of the living stones in the Holy Land

“Every Christian is a citizen of the Holy Land”

Interview with Margaret Karram



Originally from the Holy Land, in 2021 Margaret Karram was elected president of the Focolare Movement, founded in 1943 by Chiara Lubich and which today has over two million members. Her father, Boulos Asaad Karram, was a member of the Order of the Holy Sepulchre. “Following in the footsteps of my father, Knight of the Holy Sepulchre, I try to be a servant of the light of love that illuminates the night of humanity,” she says in this interview.

Margaret Karram, what is your Palestinian family history in a nutshell?

I was born in Haifa, Galilee, on 3rd March 1962. My parents, Palestinians and Catholics, named me Marguerite-Marie in honour of the visionary of Parayle-Monial, who helped make the Heart of Jesus known and loved. My father was from Nazareth and my mother from Haifa. They married in the 1950s. I have three siblings: Marie-Thérèse, Anna-Maria, Antoine-Joseph. We received Israeli citizenship at birth. Members of my paternal family who had fled to Lebanon in 1948, when the Jewish state was created, could not return. So we did not get to see our relatives much, but we enjoyed listening to our grandparents and parents telling us our family history and leafing through photo albums. This reality of separated families in the Holy Land is very hard, it is a painful experience, and there is a strong sense of injustice, but our education in the faith gave us a horizon of fraternity to build bridges of peace.

In my childhood we lived in Haifa in a neighborhood where several Jewish families lived, on the slopes of Mount Carmel, not far from the famous monastery-sanctuary of Our Lady of Mount Carmel, and attending the school of the Carmelite nuns we learnt, together with the Arab Muslim children, how to forgive and how to move forward in interreligious relations. I remember that the Jewish children

in the neighborhood would sometimes insult us, telling us to leave, that this country was not ours.... Our mother, seeing me cry because of this, decided to invite these children home to offer them warm bread. I was about 5 years old, it was an unimaginable effort for me, but I will never forget the smile of those Jewish children who came out of our house with a piece of delicious Arabic bread each. Later, their parents came to thank my mother and from there a new relationship was born between all of us. I learnt how a small gesture of love can build a friendship and help us overcome our fears.

Ever since I was a child, I have had a strong desire for justice in my heart and over the years I have wanted to dedicate my life to bringing peace to my country. There is still much to be done for Palestinian rights, even though Haifa is considered a multicultural and multi-religious city.



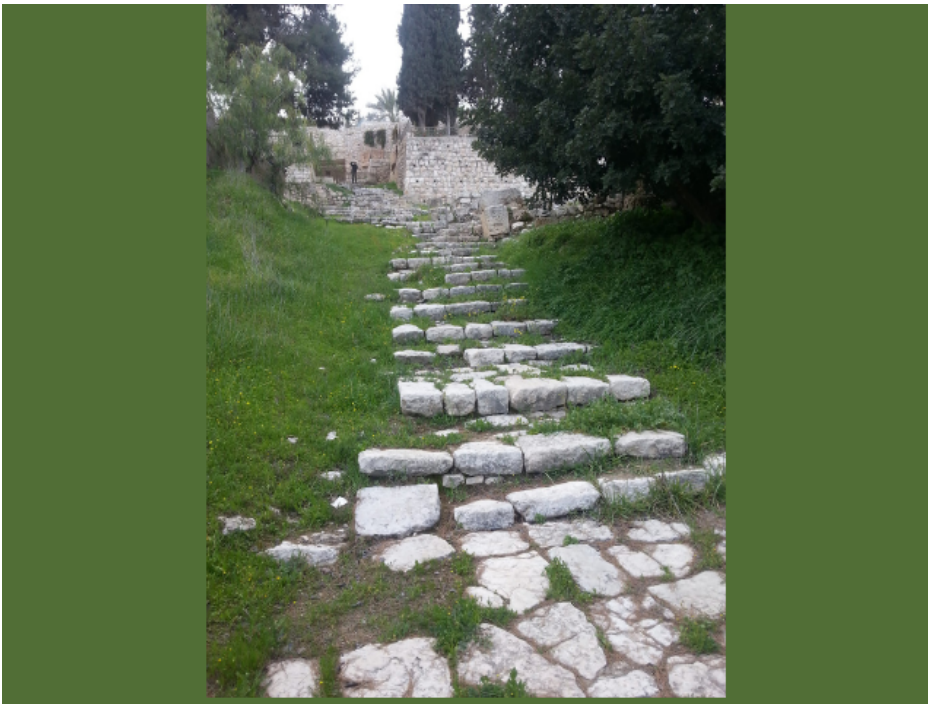
Margaret Karram's father was a Knight of the Order of the Holy Sepulcher. His example of generosity and service still guides the president of the Focolare Movement today.

Your father was a member of the Order of the Holy Sepulchre, what does this membership mean to you?

My father, Boulos Asaad Karram, born in 1918, was invested as a Knight of the Order of the Holy Sepulchre by Grand Master Cardinal Eugene Tisserant, on 25th March 1965, the Feast of the Annunciation, when Archbishop Alberto Gori was Patriarch of Jerusalem. On a wall in the living room of our house in Haifa, the picture of my father with his white coat marked with the Jerusalem cross accompanied me throughout my childhood and adolescence. Later, I discovered the universal importance of this commitment of 30,000 members worldwide, who carry the concern of the Mother Church in the Holy Land on behalf of the Holy Father and the whole Church. My sister recently found an album with photos of my father's Investiture and we were very moved.

My father loved the Holy Sepulchre and wanted to bring the light of Christ into the darkness of the world. He worked as head of the legal service of the Carmelite Fathers, was president of the Third Carmelite Order, president of the Legion of Mary and president of the Latin parish choir. Very attached to Marian devotion, he wrote a book in Arabic, at the request of the local bishop, on the Virgin's apparitions. He had many commitments in the local Church. Unfortunately, a year after his Investiture in the Order of the Holy Sepulchre, he suffered a stroke and lost his speech, despite speaking seven languages... Paralysed, he gradually recovered from this stroke, but remained partially disabled for

30 years, unable to work. I was only four years old when he suffered this paralysis. His love for the Virgin Mary touched me because I often saw him reciting the rosary. The first words he spoke after a year of paralysis were "Ave Maria". My life in the Focolare Movement, recognized as a 'Work of Mary' in the Church, is rooted in my father's example. In my own way I wanted to continue and realize his work. After his stroke, my father was no longer able to visit the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem, but God's plan allowed me to live and serve for 25 years in the community of the movement in the Holy City, the 'focolare'. There is a golden thread in my life, and I try to be a female Knight, a 'dame' of Jesus Crucified and Forsaken, that is, a servant of the light of love that illuminates the night of humanity.



An international center for unity and peace will rise in Jerusalem near the staircase Jesus used when he left the Upper Room and prayed to his Father "that they may all be one" (John 17:21).

In Jerusalem, the Focolare has a unity project, linked to the original Roman Stairs that Jesus used when he left the Upper Room to go to Gethsemane after the Last Supper. What is the status of the project and how will it work?

Tradition has it that on leaving the Upper Room after the Last Supper with his disciples, taking these stairs up Mount Zion, down the Kidron Valley to the Garden of Olives, Christ, looking up to heaven, recited the prayer that is the heart of his testament, addressing the Father: "That they may all be one" (John 17:21). These stairs were climbed by Jesus after his arrest, to be condemned by the Sanhedrin during an unfair trial in the house of the High Priest Caiaphas. Chiara Lubich visited the Holy Land in 1956 and this place, so important in the Gospel, particularly inspired her. She wanted to create a center where people could witness that unity is possible. The first women's focolare was founded in 1977 in Jerusalem and this dream remained, although we did not know how it would be realized.

The Assumptionist religious in Jerusalem then thought of selling part of the land near these holy stairs in 1989, and we bought it for this project. Due to administrative difficulties, it was only in 2003 that an agreement was signed between the Focolare and the Assumptionist religious. From 2003 to the present, it has been a matter of working with the local authorities: The Ministry of the Interior, the Israel Authority of Antiquities, the Jerusalem Municipality, etc., in order to obtain the building permit, which is expected, hopefully soon.

The building will occupy only 1,000 square meters and a large garden of 7,000 square meters will facilitate moments of meeting and exchange. This International Centre for Unity and Peace will bring together people from various churches and other non-Christian denominations to share experiences, conferences and meetings on the subject of interreligious dialogue. Pilgrims will have access to it, as will the inhabitants of the Holy Land. The place is rich in spiritual significance, very close to the Western Wall, known as the Wailing Wall, and the Great Mosque. Since I was young, we have been working on this project and I hope to see it realized, especially because Chiara Lubich cared so much about it.

Giving one's life for unity is a big thing, it is often painful, it is not for nothing that Jesus asked the Father for this gift before He died. It is the dearest testament to His heart. We are well aware that the graces this Centre will offer must be earned through our own efforts and sacrifices, so let us continue to love, pray and hope. The Holy Land, as Pope Francis says following Paul VI, is the "fifth Gospel". "Transmitting the 'fifth Gospel', means making the Holy Land known, that is, the historical environment and geographical area in which the Word of God was revealed and then became flesh in Jesus of Nazareth, for us and for our salvation," Pope Francis said in January 2022. "It also means getting to know the people who live in those places today, the lives of Christians of different Churches and denominations, but also those of Jews and Muslims, to try to build a fraternal society in a complex and difficult context like that of the Middle East." This is our mission.

Cardinal Carlo Maria Martini said that until there is peace in the Holy Land, there will be no peace in the world. Would you agree with this?

I met Cardinal Martini several times, he had come to live in Jerusalem and hoped to die there. He came to visit us at the Focolare and we would discuss the departure of many Christians who, faced with difficulties, leave the Holy Land without hope of returning. Jews and Muslims sometimes face each other in a form of fratricidal duel. Cardinal Martini felt that we must of course respect the will of those who wish to leave, but at the same time believe in the power of heaven, in this fragile but very much alive Christian presence, regularly revived by pilgrims from all over the world.

Every Christian is a citizen of the Holy Land, hence the importance of the links that the Knights and Dames of the Order of the Holy Sepulchre forge with the local parish communities through the pilgrimages organized every year.

Cardinal Martini also strongly emphasized the importance of interreligious dialogue as the road to peace. We must never take sides, he insisted. He advocated loving without distinction, in a delicate balance of working with some, then with others, until we can bring them together. This work of sowing, sowing, sowing bears long-term fruit.

We brought together Jews, Muslims and Christians who did not know each other and were afraid of each other. Fear builds walls within people. What is missing and what we must cultivate is mutual knowledge. For example, the Focolare has collaborated with another organization to support a group of young people from the three religions who have started to meet in Jerusalem just to talk and get to know each other once a week. The year-long project has been repeated with various young people for three years. This kind of experience gradually changes the way people look at each other and leads to a desire to do good and concrete things together. A few months ago, the Focolare organized an interfaith weekend with families, young people and children, who lived together in an atmosphere of true respect and knowledge.



Margaret Karram grew up near the shrine of Our Lady of Mount Carmel in Haifa, Israel.

How does the Virgin Mary, so important in the Focolare Movement, guide you on the path of interreligious dialogue?

The Virgin Mary is a model for me because she is the woman of dialogue and peace. First of all, she knew how to listen to God's voice and adhere to his plan of love. She believed without understanding everything. We can learn from her to listen because we are often afraid to confront the other who is different, to create a relationship. In today's society we hear but we do not really listen, we talk too much. It is not so much the ear that must listen, but the heart. Mary helps us to welcome this listening heart in prayer, following her example. Mary meditated in her heart.

With her I try to take people into my heart and entrust them to God. Mary also acted: she knew how to run to Elizabeth, her elderly cousin, to support her. She knew how to intervene, as at Cana, for people's needs and their happiness. If our action in society has a chance to be fruitful, it is in our ability to listen, to be silent, to contemplate. Mary was immersed in the Torah, she certainly attended the synagogue in Nazareth, she went to the temple in Jerusalem. She is a guide for us in putting the Word of God into practice.

The monthly Word of Life that the movement has distributed for so many years now flows from this, because it reaches millions of people, in all languages, and the Gospel, if lived, causes extraordinary changes, a true revolution of love on a spiritual and social level. In my own life, when as a young woman I wanted to fight for justice and could have been tempted to take up arms to obtain it, the Word of Life allowed me to participate in building a holy land, the Holy Land that God dreams of and that God loves, and not a land of bloodshed.

The whole Church is ravaged by repeated scandals and movements like yours are not spared. How are you experiencing this period of crisis and what role can women play in the future to ensure that abuses of all kinds cease for good?

The abuse crisis in the Church resounds a call for purification. God wants to purify us so that our lives are free from pride and we are only inclined to build his Kingdom, far from all self-referentiality. In this storm, Jesus seems to be sleeping in the boat, but we must continue to be faithful to him by trying to improve our lives. God is allowing this process for a fundamental reform that is evangelical. The current synodal journey helps us, as God's people, as baptized people, to support each other beyond our institutional affiliations, to move forward in respect of our charisms.

On this path, women can certainly bring balance to the Church, to relationships free from the desire for power. The president of the Focolare Movement will always be a woman, a sign that underlines the importance of women in the Church and their enriching and truly complementary role. Women have a different capacity to love and suffer than men, they have a different sensitivity and can do much to transmit the faith, to "give life" spiritually. Today's world, tired of speeches, needs vital experiences that are realized in the patience of waiting. Physiologically, women are more oriented towards fecundity than efficiency. Pope Francis emphasizes this, without wanting to clericalize women, and his pontificate is a great hope in this field too.

Interview by François Vayne

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