

# The Secret Focolare Rooms

By [Miguel Perlado](#) – 6 December 2020 – [Focolare Movement](#)

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Following the recent [scandal revolving around the French priest Bernard Preynat, which shocked the diocese of Lyon](#), another case of abuse of minors in the religious context was recently opened in France. This time, the abuses were reported within the [Focolare Movement](#), a movement that has been in Spain since the 1960s. The history of the Focolare Movement (also known as the Obra de María [the Work of Mary]) focuses on the [founding myth of the Italian Chiara Lubich](#), who, at 19 years of age and at the same time as a pilgrimage to the Loreto sanctuary promoted by Catholic Action, had her first vision when she saw herself together with the Virgin and San José at the House of Nazareth before a procession. She became convinced that she could open up a new way for single people and married couples to create a community devoted to God, the core of which would later crystallise into the Focolare Movement.

A few years later, when she was 23 years old, when she was on her way to the shops to run some errands, she experienced a call from God who asked her to surrender fully; according to the story, Lubich lifted her gaze to the sky and could answer nothing more than “yes”. It would be one year later, in the middle of a bombing during World War Two, when taking shelter in the “little house” - a dwelling that would be the embryo for the first Focolare core - she and other young ladies committed themselves to a union saying “we are ready to die for each other”. This “unity” between these first young ladies, this “spirituality of the communion” as it would much later be called, is also translated into striking imitation, such that they would all dress, cut their hair and behave in the same way, an element that was addressed fairly in [De l’emprise à la liberté: Dérives sectaires au sein de l’Eglise](#) and which, elsewhere, was described as [the cloned performance that characterises cultic deviations](#).

It would be a few years before [the founder would experience a series of celestial visions over several days, which would become known as "Paradise '49"](#), a moment in which Chiara entered Paradise when she went on a retreat into the Dolomites in 1949. This experience is recounted in a document that would be interesting to analyse both theologically and psychologically. The result of these visions, in which the founder “enters the secrets of Heaven”, it is clear that the member of the Focolare movement can only have a series of revelations by climbing a series of internal steps, where knowledge of the mysteries is reserved to only a few. In this series of visions, the founder becomes aware of God’s future plans for her, of the movement and some of its principal figures.

Everything will focus on the experience of the founder, progressively settling on a cult of her personality, because she is the only who “has experienced God” or who “has taken as her husband Jesus Forsaken”. The essential literature is that which focuses on Chiara. [This cult of her person is encapsulated in the following words, uttered by the founder herself in 1950](#): every soul of the Focolare has to be an expression of mine and nothing else. My Word contains all those of the Focolare movement. I summarise all of them. When I appear they must let themselves be engendered by me and commune with me. Like Jesus, I, too, must say to them: ‘and he who eats my flesh...’.

The movement expands and [founds its first Citadel: Loppiano, "a laboratory of fraternity"](#). A context in which a paradisaical environment, inasmuch as this Citadel “is the very droplet from Paradise that slipped from behind the clouds”, and where the Focolare movement can show its main currency: the smile. For there to be dancing, singing, performing colourful shows, in a melting pot of peoples, in a location with music, film, shops and direct testimonies, in a genuine barrage of love that leaves the guest less dazed when they leave. What is more, these number of Citadels expanded, establishing another 20 around the globe, because they wanted to be “little Edens that reproduce the environment prior to the Original Sin”.

The Focolare attempted to demonstrate through these Citadels what the world would be like once transformed by Lubich's ideal, since they were convinced they were "the presence of Mary". The Citadels are part of approximately 60 "Mariapolis" centres, situated in 49 countries. These Citadels are "revolutionary", places for the "utopia of a united world". In Spain, there are two Mariapolises, but only one is a Citadel (the "Centro Mariápolis Luminosa", inaugurated by Chiara Lubich herself on her last trip to Spain in 2002).

Although the movement advocated devotion and humility, it is important to understand that its festivals celebrated by Focolare families - "seed of communion for the world of the Third Millennium" known as the FamilyFest - demonstrated impressive resources. The record of the means deployed was reached in the 1993 celebration of the FamilyFest in Rome, for which 13 satellites and 200 television stations over 150 countries on the five continents were put into action attracting an audience exceeding several million viewers.

The movement was organised in small communities that were managed according to the model of the family of Nazareth, composed of laypersons, unmarried (separately, men or women) and married people, utterly committed to God. The movement required [a first commitment of living a radical love for their neighbours](#). To that end, the members had to deprive themselves of wealth, release themselves of all that is unnecessary, with the conviction that the delivery and the spiritual communion will be returned a hundredfold. [Later, the founder developed the "economy of communion". The idea is as follows: one third of the profits goes to the endeavour, another third goes to the poor and the final third all goes to the Work of Mary](#). In practice, this led to over 700 companies associated to Focolare members being devoted to this economy of surrender since, according to Chiara, "to love your neighbour, you have to empty yourself completely", and only through this self-denial can one achieve communion with others. Without losing sight of the promised perspective: only those who believe in unity will achieve the fulfilment of happiness. It deals with a high commitment to that which not everyone can achieve, and "those who leave us do so because they didn't want to die: didn't want to deny themselves and carry their cross. Either they are psychologically incapable of life in the Movement or they have been overwhelmed by temptation". Former Focolare members report using "the moment of truth", with their corresponding "fraternal corrections", like an encounter where if the response from the Focolare is the same as that which is expected by Jesus - according to the head of the community - then it is a path to Paradise, but if the response is contrary to expectations, then the path leads instead to Purgatory. The idea in this path to Paradise "is to pass the ice of suffering to pursue the blaze of love", that which [according to the experience of former members translates into a form of compliant submission and sustained obedience for the ideas of a spirituality of the unity](#), not the figure of Christ via the communion, rather like the assimilation of his or her own personality by the community, as is expected of the Focolare member to completely merge with the group; and on the other hand, on the idea of Jesus forsaken, the suffering Christ crying on the cross should always be loved. The combination of these two aspects raises the expectation of a passive obedience on the part of the member of the Focolare movement, which could lead to the progressive erosion of the capacity for autonomous thought, because the Focolare member must be completely emptied with the aim of this complete surrender to the community. [The story related by some former members of the Focolare movement is more graphic still](#), which indicates that it was explained that the significance or believing in "unity" as "we should not think, rather we should cut off our heads and completely fulfil God's will as voiced by the head of the Focolare area".

The members of the Focolare movement may be placed within this set of movements that a former Focolare director, Gordon Urquhart, called "[the new armies of the Pope](#)". Also, as Cardinal Le Grende would in due course point out, a little after the appointment of Pope Benedict XVI, [the four main movements that were identified as cultic deviations and forming part of this army from within the Catholic Church were](#): Focolare, Opus Dei, Legionaires of Christ and Neocatecumenal Way. And that is, in the words of Le Grende, "these movements demand a great deal from their members: obedience, availability, exclusivity, significant financial contributions, respect for the founder and the directors".

And then reasoned as follows: “Faced with so many requirements, there are two different views. It could first be seen as miracles and the generosity of these Christians who want to live their faith with such commitment and, to that end, spare no effort. The second possibility raises the question of whether many demands go too far, whether they were presented too insistently or whether they have been imposed through *abnormal and excessive mental pressure*.”

When a religious group uses secrecy, money and veneration for its essential values, there is a risk of a cultic deviation. But there is also a risk when the group institutionalises so many *abnormal and excessive pressures*. Concealing or covering up the problem with a conspiracy of silence is dangerous because it perpetuates the abuse of power and leaves the victim trapped in guilt without escape and in fear of not being accepted by the community or of being lost, as I have seen in therapeutic work with people who have left some of these movements.

The current Jesuit Pope Bergoglio has two close Focolare Cardinals: Becciu, from Italy, and João Braz de Aviz, from Brazil, responsible for the dicastery of the Causes of the Saints and of the Institutes of the Consecrated Life, respectively. The Focolare members keep a low profile within the Vatican, although [according to some analysts they make up 36% of the Colleges of Cardinals](#). At the moment, the Focolare movement [is trying to fully consolidate its position through the beatification of its founder Chiara Lubich](#). To this end, a professor at the School of Theology of the Society of Jesus in Brussels, [Jean-Marie Hennaux, has drafted a document analysing the Focolare Movement and has given it to Bishop Raffaello Martinelli, who had earlier made a request to officially open the cause to beatify the found of the Focolare Movement](#). This detailed analysis of the operation and theology of the Focolare Movement is covered in the volume published in 2017, in which I had the honour of taking part: [“De l'emprise à la liberté: Dérives sectaires au sein de l'Eglise : témoignages et réflexions” \[On abuse of freedom. Cultic deviations within the Church. Testimonies and reflections\]](#), a text that brings together works on not only the Focolare movement but also the other cultic deviations found within the Catholic Church.

Indeed, and in relation to one of the above-mentioned Focolare Cardinals, the Italian Angelo Becciu [was implicated in an embezzlement scandal in September of this year](#). Recently, [all of his rights as a cardinal were removed](#). And he was obliged by Pope Francis to resign as prefect of the Congregation for the Causes of the Saints for amongst other reasons, in around 2009, buying a property in London on the part of the Secretary of State for a value of about 200 million Euros; in addition, he had also diverted €100,000 from Peter's Pence in favour of a cooperative whose owner and legal representative was his brother, as well as supplied some €300,000 from the Italian Episcopal Conference for the same purpose; and also for nepotism, having employed the services of his other brother, who ran a carpentry business, to renovate his house in Angola. In addition, a few weeks ago, the police detained a woman close to Becciu, ["the Cardinal's lady, an alleged diplomatic relations expert also pocketed a significant amount of money in the shadow of the Focolare Cardinal](#).

Now, and after the shock generated by the dismissal of the Focolare Cardinal, there are claims emerging of sexual abuse within the Focolare Movement. The whistleblower who opened a can of worms was Christophe Renaudin, a 54-year old musician and professional clown. This is the first time that claims of sexual abuse have been made within the Focolare Movement. [According to what was published in the French journal \*Les Jours\*, which had covered these abuses, Renaudin was abused by a consecrated layman](#). The abuser was Jean-Michel Merlin, who is now 80 years old. He devoted his life to the Focolare Movement from the 1960s until 2016, when he was expelled.

All the scandals surrounding the sexual abuses in the Catholic Church in France led to the bishops of France deciding during its plenary assembly in Lourdes on 7 November 2018, in addition to the existing measures, on the creation of an independent commission intended more generally to “shed light on the past and on the consequences, and restore confidence”. To this end, an independent commission was established to shed light on the sexual abuse of the minors in the Catholic Church since 1950, to understand the reasons that favoured the way in which these cases were handled and to make recommendations, in particular evaluating the measures taken since the 2000s.

In this way, [the Independent Commission on Sexual Abuse in the Church \(CIASE\) commissioned by the French Episcopal Conference](#) was formed. Its mission is "to establish the facts, understand what happened and prevent a recurrence of so many tragedies". On 3 June 2019, this same Commission issued a call for testimonials. As of the closing date last October 2020, [3,652 telephone interviews had been carried out and some 2,459 e-mails and 360 letters had been handled](#). Of the total received, 1,628 victims completed the questionnaire they were sent. Despite the current COVID-19 situation, the Commission has been able to carry out 190 interviews with victims (including 68 investigative interviews) and some 55 hearings with experts and key witnesses have been held, still more having been carried out adapted to the circumstances peculiar to the pandemic.

Renaudin was one of the victims heard by this Commission. As a preadolescent, he was studying at a boarding school and, at the end of the 1970s, the director suggested to his family that he be taken to Focolare meetings in France. Christophe and his two brothers would spend the weekends in the Focolare community, where he met Merlin, then a consecrated layman in his forties, a former engineer who had taken his vows and ran the Movement's publishing house, as well as being responsible for the young adults. Renaudin's family, of a more humble background, were entranced by Merlin's charisma, even welcoming him into their own home.

Merlin taught the boys his trade as editor and introduced them to the film d'auteur. But his family did not know the truth about those weekends in the Focolare community until the beginning of the 1990s. When Christophe was between 14 and 16 years old, Merlin came to his room and forced him to kiss him, masturbate, perform fellatio and then, finally, ask forgiveness. His brothers and a friend were also subjected to the same spiritual and sexual molestation. As Renaudin recalls, "there was no way to ask for help. Merlin knew what to do so that no action would be taken. He made sure he had already won my family's trust and affection."

In 1993, when he was 27 years old, Renaudin asked Merlin for a personal meeting that would take place at a Parisian café. According to Renaudin, the man remained silent and asked for forgiveness. Not only of him, but also of his parents by means of a letter: "I would like the peace of Christmas to come in and change each of our hearts", he wrote. "I know that the crucifix can give each of us its peace". But in 1994, after seeing a television programme in which a victim of incest gave her testimony and talked about the statute of limitations on all those offences, the young man decided to report sexual assault and attempted rape of a minor. For their part, the brothers and his friend testified under oath before the investigators from the Child Protection Brigade in Paris. The predator, in custody, ultimately confessed to his acts, although at the time he denied the attempted fellatio (considered rape and, thus, a serious indictable offence). The prescription period, in those days, for so many sexual abuses, was only three years, the case was thus deemed closed because the time had lapsed. The issue of fellatio remained as the accused was detained after the child refused. As a result of these judicial proceedings, Merlin was ordered to pay his victim some ten thousand Euros in 1998.

Renaudin tried to rebuild his life, overcoming episodes of depression, difficulties completing his studies and then working and attempting to build personal relationships with the help of long-term psychotherapy. "I'm 54 years old and this history is still very much a part of my life. There aren't many days when I don't think about it. When you're a victim, it eats your capital, your desires. I want to unravel the mechanics behind all of this: that of the predator and his victim."

In 2015, seventeen years after the judicial decision on his complaint, the case would come back to catch him again and leave him completely offside: another member of the Focolare Movement warned him that his abuser, Jean-Michel Merlin, was still a member of the Movement. In fact, he had not been forced to leave Focolare until 2016. And that Merlin continued travelling around the world representing the movement, especially at the beginning of the 2000s, with no supervision. The matter was more serious if one considered that, during all those years, no one was monitoring the legal requirement that he not be near teenaged or young boys in the context of his pastoral work.

In the months after Christophe Renaudin told his story in a meeting of [the Independent Commission on Sexual Abuse in the Church \(CIASE\)](#), other men recounted more episodes of abuse in the Focolare movement and the list has been growing. On 25 September 2020, pressed by Christophe Renaudin and other former members, the two co-leaders of the Focolare Movement in France addressed their followers. In an email sent to hundreds of members, the Movement thus affirmed that it knew about nearly 30 identified victims. This was like an earthquake that shook the very foundations of the Focolare Movement in France and beyond. In Renaudin's words, "there was something wrong, something we could see but that we could not identify. And this caused a haemorrhage of young people who had left after a few years. A vague disorder to which we could now give a new significance. We're all responsible for turning a blind eye, for not paying attention. We didn't think enough about those victims and preferred not to put these things in the public domain."

[In a declaration published on 22 October 2020, the President of the Movement, Ms María Voce, referring to the investigation of the French journal \*Les Jours\*](#) and responding to the progress made by the Independent Commission CIASE, indicated that "I would like to reaffirm the full and unconditional cooperation of the Movement so that we may learn the truth about the deeds and that justice can be done for the victims". Although, according to information gathered by *Les Jours*, in practice, the current Focolare president has known about the accusations against Jean-Michel Merlin since the end of the 1970s but did nothing to prevent the abuse from continuing until 2016. Possibly because of this complicit silence, and on the same day they sent out the circular, Bernard Bréchet and Claude Goffinet, co-leaders of the movement in France, and Henri-Louis Roche, co-leader of the movement for Western Europe, handed in their resignations.

The work of [the Independent Commission on Sexual Abuse in the Church \(CIASE\)](#) will now continue with its [revision of available material and the conclusions are expected in the Fall of 2021.](#)