

Interview with Manfred Kochinky (died 12 December 2013) in New City Magazine November 2012.

Paul Gateshill talks to Manfred Kochinky about what his choice of God means in the face of terminal illness.

How long have you been living in the Focolare in the UK?

I arrived in London in September 1979 and then four years later I moved to the focolare in Liverpool where I stayed for three years. In 1986 the Edinburgh focolare was opened and I stayed there for thirteen years. I must say I grew to love Scotland very much! Since then I've been in the south and back in Welwyn Garden City since March of this year. I'm very happy to be back!

What made you decide to give your life to God and live in the Focolare community?

I don't really know to be honest! I don't think I ever had a vocation in the ordinary sense of the word. It was a continual saying 'yes' to what God proposed in each moment which has brought me here. I feel very strongly that I am not here because of my own merit, but because I had God's help through others and through circumstances to say yes to him in each moment. I realised that he, God, loves me, a creature, enormously! Well to be loved by God, there really isn't anything better!

What line of work have you been doing during these last twenty plus years?

I have always worked in the Criminal Justice System. My first job in Liverpool was as a Social Worker with juvenile offenders. In Edinburgh I worked as a Criminal Justice Worker with offenders suffering from HIV/AIDS. Then in East London I was employed as a Probation Officer and then promoted to Senior Probation Officer. I transferred to St Albans before I was seconded to the Home Office. Since May 2006 I have been employed as Prison Service Manager in an establishment near London. I am very fortunate to be able to say that I enjoyed most of my jobs.

In February you were diagnosed with an aggressive form of brain cancer. What happened that day?

It all rather came out of the blue. I collapsed with a seizure and was rushed to hospital. After many scans and many consultations it was decided to operate mainly to see what was there, but also if possible to remove as much of the tumour as possible. The operation took place and then I had a meeting with the doctors who informed me of the diagnosis.

Looking back on what happened I have to laugh sometimes. I really enjoyed being busy and as I was lying on the floor in the office with medical and ambulance staff standing around me, I remember asking a colleague to let the Senior Manager know I would be a bit late for the meeting due in the next fifteen minutes! When I was in hospital in the A & E department someone brought my pyjamas. I told him that I wouldn't need them as I would be home that night. However, everything then was taken away from me. I could no longer drive and shortly afterwards there were increasing concerns about me returning to work.

How did you feel when the diagnosis was made?

First of all it wasn't really a surprise that I was seriously ill. After the operation the doctors kept hinting that I would need more treatment. When I was called to a meeting and asked to bring someone along I was sure they would not tell me how well I was. Indeed when I was told about the tumour, I was more overwhelmed and grateful to have my brother and a very good friend with me to ask the questions on my behalf. Gradually it became clear to me that I was seriously ill with no prospect of recovery. It was then that I realised the only thing I had was the present moment. I could worry about the future, I could regret the past but could change neither. My only chance was to live the present.

Did you ever think: Why me?

Not really. I suppose I knew there was no answer to that question and a risk in becoming rather negative in my outlook.

What are your reflections over these last seven months?

I think this illness has profoundly changed my life! Firstly it has shown me that I am totally in God's hands. Whilst I may previously have lived an active life which gave me the illusion that I was actually doing something, I now realised that it was not the 'doing' that was effective, but it was the 'being'. I became aware of how much God loves me and has always loved me as I am. He does not want me to be perfect; he just wants me to love him above everything else. Suddenly the illness makes sense: it is there to make me love more, to be there for the others and to give my life to God moment by moment. It does not make the illness nice! It turns it into an opportunity.

I know you have been sharing what you have been living on Facebook. Tell me what urged you to do this and how have friends and colleagues responded?

Very early on in the illness I understood I could not live this on my own. It all happened very publicly, it was something serious, and I tried to live a communitarian spirituality, the spirituality of unity. So it was a logical step to communicate my experience on a daily basis on Facebook to all those who know me. I was keen not to exclude anybody and was careful about the language I used. I was convinced that 'he who has ears to hear, let him hear'. Nobody was left out. I have the impression it created a community.

At the same time I was able to provide a blog for those who shared my own way of life. It was a sharing on a deeper level. It is a rich experience for me and I believe for many, because it allows me to show how much God is at work in us. It has allowed us to focus on what is really important and live with him in the present moment.

What impact has this had on your life in the Focolare?

I believe it has changed my life and the lives of the others. From a practical aspect I am now at home. I need someone with me due to the danger of fits. My response to the treatment has been positive but does not allow me to do much.

I believe we have all been able to focus on the essentials in our lives and in that it has brought us closer together focusing on 'being love' more than the 'doing'. Two very good friends have come up with the phrase 'Does it Matter?' or short DIM! Every time I wanted to argue a point about something I first asked myself DIM? Then I made my contribution and if someone put another argument I again asked myself DIM? Funny thing was that the practical things resolved themselves, because we all put God first in the present moment! That meant that he is truly present amongst us and there is nothing more beautiful than that.