

THE GRAIL IN PORTUGAL

25 YEARS OF HISTORY: 1958 - 1983

Fundação Cuidar o Futuro



1. THE BEGINNINGS

We were twelve women between the ages of 18 and 27, all but one were students. We were leaders of the University Catholic Action. And we were unbelievably naive: in Lisbon, among the Catholic circles, our "strange" ways were discussed. For example, we prayed in English because we had no good translation of the Psalms in Portuguese and we did not want to stop praying Vespers!

The Grail corresponded to the deeply felt longing among the student groups to which we belonged for an expression of Christian faith lived new dimensions. Worship celebrated with depth and beauty, women shaping all the actions and choices they made in life, international dimensions carried further than was possible in Pax Romana (the International Movement of Catholic Students) and, most of all, integration of all aspects of life.

The two room apartment with a big terrace overlooking the river and the city were in our eyes a Grail City Centre where different circles of people started to form. There was a Missionary group studying comparative religions, the Bible group giving a theological basis beyond the encyclical-centered moral approach so typical of apostolic movements in those years, the Sunday-Mass preparation every Saturday afternoon, the group on woman as she appeared in the writings of Gertrud von le Fort, Claudel, Mauriac, Gide. Often forty students would come. It was a period of harvesting before the true sowing and toiling had been done.

2. A DIFFERENT LIFESTYLE

Through the years, we have attempted to create spaces where everyone could discover the rhythmic sense of life--as women, as Christians. The spaces where a life-style progressively took shape were the Grail Centres. They were modest rented apartments in the city where people could find an attentive ear and empathy, a moment of prayer, a discussion on current events in Portugal and abroad. News from other Grail groups encouraged us in our country which was full of repression and involved in a colonial war. Often the Centres were places where residential programs took place, either with focus on University and urban life or on the rural life.

Key in our rhythm of life were what we called "tempos fortes" (strong moments) to enlighten daily life, to help us to situate ourselves in another realm, to give us a glimpse of the fullness of life we craved for.

A special "tempo forte" is the Summer.

Summer holidays as "moments of being" have been times of genuine bliss for many who had the opportunity to share in a life that we shaped through Grail values.



3. SPACES OF OPENNESS TO THE NEW

The Grail we experienced was a space of beauty, of aesthetic values embracing and radiating from encounters and initiatives. We were extremely sensitive to our capacity to express the cultural dimension of the Grail. We were to articulate later in a more elaborated way the link between each one's creativity and the "cultural impact" of our endeavours.

This vision led us to work for hours on small aspects of our initiatives and made us attentive to every detail in the physical set-up of our Grail spaces or the spaces we used for particular events. Indeed trying to create a beautiful "atmosphere" was the way we described our attempts to care for the environment in the 1950s.

We tried to incorporate that dimension in all our activities. From 1963 to 1974, we had several series of weekly cultural programs in Coimbra and Lisbon (after 1968), and some programs in Porto and Portalegre. They took the form of lectures and debates, of play readings and exchanges with scientists. We can estimate that more than 1000 students attended the cultural programs. The Centre of Art and Culture in Coimbra (which existed between 1963 and 1969) was a highpoint of our cultural expression. It was a place not only for cultural debates and seminars but also for displaying current books and religious art.

Two main lines ran throughout our cultural programs. One was the link between culture and faith -- thus the use of contemporary literature to evoke Christian values, the intermingling of secular readings with the Christian message.

Many still remember an Advent program on the Word, starting with the incapacity to communicate so poignant in Ionesco's play "The Bald Singer" and ending with several Portuguese poems.

The other aspect of those programs was the link between the cultural and the political. As meetings on political issues were forbidden in the country since the early 30s, we, like other Catholic groups, took advantage of the fact that the activities of the Church had a certain autonomy which gave us the freedom to denounce in our cultural programs what was wrong in the Portuguese society and to advance suggestions and perspectives for what we wished would happen.

With the revolution in 1974 a new space for the new was open. It was not necessary to speak any more in metaphors. Neither was it necessary to denounce the evils of the society. The political forces knew what they didn't want but the working out of new forms, of viable alternatives has proved to be more difficult. There were no already-made solutions for the problems we were facing. It became necessary to pierce through the layers of new dogmatism, thoughts and possibilities. Hence, the starting of a very unpretentious publication, "Mudar a Vida" (To Change Life) which was read in the most diverse circles and whose impact is far from being assessed. Its energizing power goes beyond the 1200 subscribers. It deals with themes like "Experimentation/Innovation/Transformation", "Towards an Ethical Society", "Reflections on Power", "Basic Needs", "Cultural Democracy", "A new International Order", "Faith and Political Action", "The Year 2000", "To name God".



4. DISCOVERING THE TRUE COUNTRY

Since the beginning we were very much aware that the Grail is not a rigid set of values, trying to gain shape in different situations. Rather, the Grail appears more and more to us as fashioned and shaped by the varied situations the Grail groups are living in. It is the consciousness of the limitations and potentialities of a situation that leads to the launching of a Grail endeavor.

The official starting of the Grail in the Portalegre area was lived out in that spirit. How could we ignore the discrimination and the oppression imposed on the vast majority of the Portuguese people? When we started we were still thinking in terms of "community development", a conceptual hang-over from the 50s, trying to work on the social motivation and economic organization of the communities without tackling the questions at their sociological and political roots. Still, it was possible to reach a certain degree of mobilization of community forces. Soon the different aspects of the activities undertaken were to become the "Project of Human Promotion and Evangelization". It was born out of the conviction, that evangelization was not possible without a basis of "human promotion" and that reciprocally, "human promotion" was paving the way for the announcement of the "Good Tidings". The Project existed in all the local counties of the Portalegre district, even outside its borders. It developed two cooperatives of hand-woven fabrics and regional embroidery, organized social centres, and was at the core of many local initiatives. For a period of 10 years it was an in-service training for almost a hundred social workers and rural animators.

Later (1968), in another area (Coimbra's surroundings) we undertook the follow-up of such initiatives. In collaboration with a sociologist from Roine we developed a project of Participative Sociology which involved more than 50 students. While the Grail did not have enough people and resources to cope with the needs identified, small teams from Coimbra carried on limited pilot-projects aimed at developing local initiatives.

Meanwhile, more limited actions were undertaken to put students in contact with the under-privileged people in Portuguese society. The workcamps which were run from 1962 to 1974 had as their focal points work in rice and tomato fields, in activities of a subsistence agriculture, in vintages, in sardine-canning industries, in ceramics and plastics industries, in the building up of basic infra-structures, especially roads, and in other sectors where women often provided the major labor-force. Such workcamps reached about 700 students and took place in about 25 villages.



5. COMMITMENT TO THE PEOPLE

All these actions gained a new emphasis with the growing awareness that commitment to the people of Portugal as underprivileged, poor and oppressed was part and parcel of our endeavours. It was not any more the approach to "promotion of the people", but rather the urgency to give back to the people the possibility to be full authors of their own history, subjects of their own decisions. Paulo Freire and his approach had a decisive influence on our action and interpretation of events. We seized his concepts and used his methodology in our work.

In 1968 we started a program of literacy and conscientization built on the socio-linguistic study of the populations worked out with several teams of people from outside the Grail and dozens of students in volunteer action. The programs were extremely relevant in rural areas; they had more difficulty in reaching their goals in the city slums.

Such programs were crucial for the Grail itself as well as for those who wanted to find an opening in the tight political situation of that period. From one side, the crying social injustice and exploitation of the people, and from the other, the absurdity of maintaining a colonial war against the Liberation Movements of Angola, Mozambique, and Guinea-Bissau could no longer be put into brackets.

All the Grail participants were involved in a national process of reflection between 1970 and 1973. At regular intervals (almost every six weeks) we gathered together in a group of 30 to 60 participants to analyse the situation of Portuguese society and the perspectives for its future. As we moved towards the end of the process the profile of what we called "The Utopian Socialism" became sharper and sharper, creating in us an attitude of expectation and active commitment.

All this was brought to a climax with the revolution on April 25, 1974. We were challenged to use all our past experiences to reach the Catholic underprivileged areas of the North and Centre of the country in order to help develop a Gospel interpretation of what was happening. Mobile teams were formed which reached approximately 150 villages in 10 months. The approach of the mobile teams was quite different from that of the priests, so difficulties began to emerge. In the years that followed we faced the patriarchal structure of the Church in a variety of ways.

This period did not go by without a serious cleavage within the Grail itself. The members who were 20 to 23 years old between 1974 and 1976 were taken up in the euphoria stage of the revolution. They were driven by the strong idealism of the extreme left and felt that the political stands of some of the public figures from the Grail were not radical enough. As they represented a group on which much had been invested, their breaking with the Grail left a generation gap in the current membership.



6. TO CREATE ALTERNATIVES

The majority of the Grail participants was deeply involved with the popular movement which took shape spontaneously in all places of work and life during the first two years of the revolution. A few were working at the level of political decision-making, confronting the demands of a period of turmoil.

When a year of service was required by the Government from all those wanting to enter the University, we had an excellent opportunity to work with students again. Those who were teachers took positions in the civic service projects. Later, with governmental changes in the education system that year became an introductory year to the university. We then devised a residential 2 month period to help the students use the TV/guidance given to them.

Similarly, we initiated another program, geared to the young rural women who between 1978 and now are the generation which bears the massive changes from rural to urban life-style. We were very much encouraged in this line by the example of the Grail in Kisekibaha, Tanzania. In our own way we made the first serious attempt at Grail participation among rural young women. A residential program of two months was elaborated, consisting of learning units around the basic interests of the young women (economy, health, literacy and education, faith). The program provided two years of in-service training when the young women would go back to their villages and, take up some responsibility. Most of them worked with children. At regular intervals they would come together to evaluate their work and to deepen their learning process.

As a result of this project a special program of non-formal education of children was developed. Qualified Grail participants established centres for this project in 12 villages and helped the young women to carry on their task. This project has been particularly noted by UNICEF as a new "model" of its kind. Two of its features may justify such appreciation. One is that the non-formal education of the children has the arts and crafts as its core. The other is the involvement of the mothers in a special program which gradually has become a conscientization process of those women and the catalyzer of new initiatives at the local level.

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7. WOMEN WEAVE THEIR OWN STORY

It took the Grail in Portugal quite a while to become fully aware of its potencial as a women's movement. Regularly in the cultural programs there were lectures and readings about women, their situation, their role, their impact on social life. In the late 60's and early 70's several task-forces tackled in a more profound way woman's condition of oppression: some worked out the image of woman in mass-media, the relationship between the ideology on women conveyed by each particular media and the preconceived ideas of the profile of women as defined by each mass media; another task-force worked out the time-budget of the women who participated in it, a rather accurate way to see the priorities in women's lives as well as the multi-functional level of their daily occupations.

With the 1974 revolution and the generalized awareness that the oppression of women has a very close relationship with the general situation in society, the Grail shaped a process of self-awareness for women in rural areas. Around Porto and Coimbra projects evolved for women of different backgrounds.

Since 1981 a few people have launched a national "women's network" encompassing women of many different background who see the inter-connection of the women's struggle and the wider struggle of society. The "women's network" cannot be called a Grail project, but from the vantage point of the Grail it is an expression of the image of the "current" which we often used in the 50's.



8. THE YOUNG ONES SPEAK UP

Throughout the whole history of the Grail, there has been contact with teenagers. In different periods, that action took different forms. Sometimes there were programmed activities, at other times spontaneous initiatives. Before 1974, there were groups who met regularly, had special week-ends geared to the formation of the self and the awareness of the social environment. Summer camps were the outcome of the yearly programs. In other periods, as recently in Torres Vedras, groups of adolescents tackled concrete tasks they saw as meaningful and out of that grew a sense of social responsibility and involvement in the Grail. Some of the groups were able to produce their own publications: "Onda", "Meter a Mão na Massa", etc.. For several years there was an attempt to have European Summer Camps, though the follow-up proved to be difficult. Nevertheless there was a strengthening of personal ties which we see as essencial in that age-period.

9. TO CELEBRATE OUR CHRISTIAN FAITH

Gradually we come to the core of all the efforts and attempts made in these 25 years. A renewed Faith, as a personal search and as a communal act, has been all through the years the goal and the way. Coming directly from positions of leadership in the Youth Catholic Action, the members of the first group were very much aware of the need of sound foundations in the Grail as a Christian movement. Hence the intensive theological formation which took place. The beauty of the liturgical life experienced at Grailville (U.S.A.) and at Tiltenberg (Holland) as well as the understanding of its formative value, by reaching out to the world of symbols, led us to give the liturgical year our most persevering efforts and the best of our creativity.

We had the chance to live intensively the period of Vatican II whose leading theologians had a strong impact on our own formulation. During that time we studied and taught the main documents of the Council. The Bible initiation was made in the first fifteen years in study-groups with the general orientation of Bible exegetes. Later, we became very much aware of the Bible as a narrative of events received today by the community of believers and, through that, revitalizing revelation by its continuous reinterpretation. In that spirit, we became very much aware of the Bible-circles, groups (each of about 20 people) scattered throughout the country. Every week of the year they were given the guide-lines: a well-known event with key questions to help the discussion, the reading of the Gospel and its clarification and finally the question: "What does this event mean as we read it today in the light of the Gospel?"

A very important element, reaching out directly to more than 100 subscribers, was the publication "Igreja-em-Diálogo", every issue focussed on a theme, reprinted some outstanding articles on that theme and had an editorial to connect it with reality both in society and in the Church. For a time, it was even possible to gather the regular readers of "Igreja-em-Diálogo" in different cities and to have discussion-groups. No wonder then that several of us were invited to give theological lectures to other lay or religious groups and were involved for some years after Vatican II with theological up-dating programs for priests and religious. This is an enduring contribution of the Grail to the Church in Portugal.

Of course, our celebrations are the climax of it all: A subtle interweaving of our own culture and of the ritual we are about to celebrate, the use of the endless Portuguese poetry, the protest songs before 1974, the imagination in finding increasingly the symbols appropriate for the place, the time, the group and the situation lead us to say that in Portugal, like elsewhere in the Grail "we are at our best in celebrating".



10. "I BELONG WHERE I AM NEEDED"

The Grail as a federation of national groupings would never have reached the heart of the Portuguese women. We belong to a people who has in its blood the mingling with other peoples, other cultures - as one woman writer recently wrote: "here for centuries, we have been boarding the boat, leaving for outside of ourselves, in the folly's boat, a people without strength or will, just boarding, just going". Ambivalent? Yes, but asking for an exchange deeper than mere dialogues, plunging into other asking and not exactly demanding, in a word, carrying with ourselves an old, old way of being in the world and embracing the stranger, becoming one with the other.

Hence, the tremendous attraction of the Grail for the Portuguese women as a trans-national movement (don't we say that the women's movement is the most international of all social movements?). To be part and parcel of a Grail whose strength is more than the sum total of national entities. Of course, in Portugal, like elsewhere, we thought we had to disentangle the "specificity" of the Grail from the different cultural forms it took. Until we understood that, like Christianity itself, the Grail comes into us molded, enriched with the living tradition that makes of it more, much more than a set of principles. Scarcely one year has gone by without several Grail people from Portugal being elsewhere either as a time of formation or as a part of their commitment to the vision and the mission of an international reality.

Likewise, we have seized opportunities to have come to Portugal, Grail participants from other countries: for shorter or longer periods they came and stayed. They brought always a new dimension, new perspectives and new skills to the Grail life in this country. We think that this merging of cultures is the anticipation on what a new international order is all about; we live in solidarity with this world of ours and the parochial mentality is out of tune with the planetary village.

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