

The land's story is my story: a common home in the Portuguese countryside

Margarida Alvim worked for CIDSE's Portuguese member FEC for 10 years during which she developed the "Casa Velha: Ecology and Spirituality" project which now occupies her full time as a partner of FEC. In this blog, published in occasion of the Season of Creation, she shares her own story of ecological conversion.

One of four sisters, Margarida was born and raised in Casa Velha. Her father's family, a local Portuguese lineage, has lived on the land for 4 generations. Margarida combined her father's ancestral connection with her mother's open French attitude to make Casa Velha what it is today. The buildings can now comfortably host up to 45 guests. Local community members, school children, and youth volunteers come constantly to learn about ecological ways of life and to spiritually connect with nature.

This is the full version of the interview we conducted with her for [this entry of our systemic change blog](#).

How would you depict Casa Velha?

Casa Velha is a farm in the small village of Vale Travesso in Ourém in the centre of Portugal, 20 minutes from Fátima. The farm has been in my family for 4 generations, since the beginning of the 20th century. It was a very important farming estate in the region. Because of its size, it had and has a huge influence on land management. Casa Velha, in conjunction with the work that FEC and CIDSE are doing, takes a bottom-up approach which is connecting local experience with others at national, regional, European and world level. It helps us work, encourage and inspire each other, and bring local experiences together so that we can show together that change can in fact happen and is possible.

What kind of changes did you realise there in the last decades?

Over the last 20, 30 years, the whole central and northern part of Portugal has faced huge challenges in terms of rural development. Many people have left the countryside because of the impact of European Common Agricultural Policy – as in the past it contributed little to rural cohesion, the policy is now making some attempt to create this integration, but the area was heavily depopulated, Casa Velha estate was failing as a farm, and the family was also failing at the same time, for various reasons such as illnesses.

I was needed and we, the new generation, felt itself called to look after the people, estate and land

and this required another meaning, another direction. 10 years ago we started some small-scale experiments, hosting small groups who met in Casa Velha for a period of encounter, work in the fields, relaxation, community and prayer. This small experiment grew extraordinarily and there is now a Casa Velha: Ecologia e Espiritualidade organisation.

Casa Velha is still a family home but the estate has changed enormously. The garage became a chapel, the Good Shepherd chapel, the hayloft became accommodation, the hen houses, the hen enclosure became

an Agriturismo. But more important than the outer change was that it was becoming a place for inner change. Next to the changes outside there were changes inside as well. Casa Velha became a common home that many pass through during the year - around 2000 per year on almost 40 activities it is an open space for cooperation between different vocations, ideas, and skills, so it is a family home

But one where we can experience and support the human family, it is ground on which we can experience looking after our bigger home, our common home.

Would it be possible to spend some days at Casa Velha?

We can now host 12-15 people in the Agriturismo. There are 6 double rooms and a common lounge.

We have a chapel that can be used for groups, a hostel that can take 27-30 guests and then we have fields where groups of pilgrims sometimes come to camp.

Throughout the month, at weekends we have a group of Casa Velha volunteers that we call the stalwarts. There are 18 young people from different parts of the country who come on weekends for a time of prayer, community and mission with the children of the town, visiting the elderly people on their own and also looking after Casa Velha, working in the kitchen garden and doing whatever is needed.

In any week we might host school's students for a couple of days of activities on ecology and spirituality.

What do these activities mean or represent in the story of Casa Velha?

It is a story of change and looking after the earth and people as an example that can inspire them in their school or family to recreate this link with the earth and looking after the family and the community.

We always do a walk through the estate where we help people understand what surrounds them and take a moment to contemplate, take in, understand that we are part of a bigger story, of a much bigger house of all the life surrounding us, because the first reaction when we ask young people "what do you see?" is "I don't see anything".

They are a little taken aback by what is around them, so we always start with a period of contemplation to feel part of creation and then to be thankful for all the things that we can all remember we have in our lives, our personal situation and want to look after our surroundings.

Normally we work together for an evening looking after an area - it might be choked with weeds or need cleaning - and at the end of the day when they return home they can see something has changed because of what they had done together.

Also during the month, we hold a silent retreat or weekend retreats using St Ignatius' spiritual exercises over 3 days with mixed-age groups of around 15, in silence.

We rely on our stalwart volunteers who cook and support these activities. At Casa Velha, there is always myself and Maria who works here full-time supporting young people, cooking, in the Agriturismo one who welcomes everyone and is almost better known than Casa Velha itself. Since February, Since February 2019, we started also the experience of having during some months a resident community of volunteers.

This month we will probably have a family weekend with my sisters, nephews, and perhaps involve the family in the activities. I think this could be a typical month since you would meet pilgrims going to Fatima staying at Casa Velha as well as tourists who came across Casa Velha on the booking site and are spending a few days here.

There are days when we are on our own in silence and others when everything blends together but the space is big and there is this feeling that in fact we are also and are part of the same house in this diversity.

What impact spirituality has on your life?

I grew up here and appreciate Casa Velha as a gift that I received from my family. At the beginning when I was needed to look after the house and the family I felt it was a burden because I was at university studying in Lisbon where I graduated as a forestry engineer.

Then a crisis arose where I had to take over Casa Velha and initially thought that perhaps it would take me away from what I wanted to do in life like going to the missions, doing something else. I realized I was going through a spiritual process that I supported with the spiritual exercises of St Ignatius.

Talking about Casa Velha for me is talking about my history and my story of personal conversion, and discovering vocation.

I was coming to understand what Jesus was asking me and the question I asked which helped me come back to Casa Velha was "Jesus, what are you asking from me and where do you want me to be?" I was a bit confused at that point because my mother was unwell and the house run down so it was difficult to think to change my life to devote myself something that was going to end soon.

What I heard from Jesus was "Now I need you at home so go home and look after it."

I did it and was grateful, I think I am still grateful for this decision that meant resigning and leaving my job, leaving the home I had in Lisbon, leaping into the unknown and going to Casa Velha.

How did your decision change your life?

I felt I was where I should be, feeling at peace, knowing I was in the right place. This change opened me up other paths to follow and others who wanted to help my family, my sisters, friends.

It was my vocation. Our vocation always involves others and it developed into a vocation for the family as well. This did not come out of the blue, everything happens because we are born with this consciousness that we are grateful for that place, others looked after it for us and therefore it is natural that we should look after it ourselves.

It was a radical change for me and became one for the family too. Initially we did not know what was going to happen because my mother died a year after I returned home and then realising there were

repairs needed. We started slowly with small projects and difficult conversations between ourselves. There were lots of tension but there was always this fundamental desire to focus on the common good and we all prayed together about what was to happen. That is why, 10 years on, we have today's Casa Velha that is still a family home.

However, the transformation we were seeing in the buildings externally was mainly a conversion that was happening internally that demanded much patience, waiting, care and compromise and understanding how to live with gratitude, openness and care.

That is what we are doing now, because one day I will not be here. The beginning of this history is not me, it is the Lord of History, the Lord of the house. People often ask me what the future will bring and I am obviously concerned about this, especially since I am responsible for everything that happens here.

What I can do, what we can and have been doing is that the family, our nieces and nephews are growing up involved in the Casa Velha project, all my sisters, brothers-in-law and their children contribute to and join in our camps during holidays and Easter doing what needs to be done in Casa Velha.

This is the best way to bring them up with a feeling for this house. On the other hand, there are lots of people outside the family who feel called to a mission and vocation at Casa Velha. This is an aspect that is now on the table that needs to be looked at. At Casa Velha what we can do, more and more we do it together and look together to see what is going to happen and how to respond

to be a missionary body and not a person or a family.

What does Casa Velha mean to you?

I discovered that Casa Velha is more than just walls or a location.

It is a communion and a community coming together in Casa Velha and it is really important to have a place with a history and roots where there is room and time to live together and discover together what Jesus is asking us.

There is already a Casa Velha in Lisbon with people who feel they belong to Casa Velha but do not live in Casa Velha.

It is more than a place or a house, it is a way of life. So that will not vanish in the future either.

And another thing I always say and that I believe is that so much good has happened here to so many that if one day we had to leave the place, it was worth it and the story will continue in a different way.

In the same way that the estate needed to decline somewhat for this renewed mission for Casa Velha to come to life. We will see... now we are being asked to look after the present well and ensure that those involved and who will be in the future are aware what the mission is we are asked to undertake.

After all, I was and am a specialist in forestry and I began my working life in that specialisation. At university I had a research grant, I worked for a charity and later for a very large Portuguese forestry company. I enjoyed it and more importantly, I was working with really good people in forest management,

specialising in forest statistics and modelling - how much woodland we would need in the future for paper, timber etc. My first introduction to climate change was when I worked on calculating carbon under the Kyoto Protocol, and the role of the forest but I always felt there was something missing in my work. I was really looking for other dimensions where I could contribute that were important to me, so I started to think about changing job to something more related to the common good. I looked at policies, public policies, so looked to working more in that line. Then the Jesuits challenged me to work with them in a Jesuit NGO supporting their missions.

I took that leap and it was a big change from all aspects. Regarding subject-matter, I went from mastering everything I did to knowing nothing. I was going into the developing world - cooperation, development training and it was pivotal in revealing the world to me. Touching and knowing reality, understanding imbalances and injustices and really getting to know other aspects of the question. I worked three years for the Jesuits in the Gonçalo da Silveira foundation but I had time for myself because where I was previously employed there was only time for work. I was able to see that Casa Velha was calling me and so I gave up working for that organisation to go back to my roots.

I was unemployed for a while, then FEC, the faith and cooperation foundation invited me to work from home on the millennium development goals from the Church point of view. It was an opportunity to combine my technical training, my past, my history, my local situation and Casa Velha (since it had become a partner of FEC) in this bigger context of integral human development. We started to work with the schools of the municipality and also with CIDSE on raising awareness of development issues. I began this task of interconnecting very different histories, people and places that were, however, deeply united in facing these human and community challenges. I think FEC and CIDSE were fundamental in supporting the growth of Casa Velha. In forestry, the first colonisers of the soil are called pioneer trees, for example conifers. When the soil is bare, they grow in the sun with little water and initially they are the strongest. Once they have matured, new species might appear, like oak, that need some shade to thrive. I think that FEC and CIDSE were pioneer species for Casa Velha, and it began to grow and now can take its own course with greater independence in partnership with FEC and CIDSE but growing in stature itself.

It is totally different, now I am a forestry management specialist but with this understanding of development - rural development, regional development and social cohesion I went back to being a forestry management specialist but with this greater understanding of my mission.

What are those questions and answers you are looking for in your life?

Throughout our lives, I think everybody ponders on 3 things, we look for 3 answers and that is to feel part of something, feeling I'm a part of something, I feel part of a family I feel part of a community, I feel part of the earth.

The second is who I am, I know my identity, it is very important to know who I am for the third thing that is knowing what I am going to do in this world.

Why was I born? I am not here by chance, and to discover where I can contribute, where I can make a difference and borrowing the image of the Garden of Eden that I am very fond of, and I often use this image. There is a garden and a long history we are part of. There have already been many people in this

history and it continues with us and will go on after us and I and everyone is asked to be born in some part of the garden and I was born in Casa Velha.

What can I contribute to make our world better? We all want a better world.

I can look after my part of the garden, I can look after Casa Velha. But how can I look after Casa Velha properly? Casa Velha has become a place and a time where, for everyone who spend a day, a week, comes regularly or just once in their life, these questions surface and they find answers. Everyone says they feel at home in Casa Velha.

How do things that are going on in the world relate to Casa Velha and the rest of the world's problems?

What we do and what brings me to CIDSE and Brussels today is changing ways of living, making a systemic change to achieve a more sustainable world in which climate change will not have such a negative impact.

We know what is happening in the most vulnerable parts of the planet, especially areas that are developing but vulnerable, I and we also experience them in Ourém, in Casa Velha, because both in Portugal and Europe there are depopulated rural areas. There are remote areas that policies ignore. The countryside is abandoned meaning climate change has a huge impact.

Extreme weather means that you have high temperatures, little rainfall, different patterns of rain and with the land abandoned, the result has been forest fires. And forest fires apart from burning down huge swathes of Portugal have already killed lots of people, two years ago over 100 died in forest fires. This shows that climate imbalance is a social imbalance and shows that we need to come up with something new and at Casa Velha this mission is to work to make development possible for all, for there to be greater rural/urban cohesion, a different and a new link between town and country through more sustainable consumption and production in local markets, teaching new generations to make a commitment to a community to reconnect with the soil, that is why Casa Velha feels connected to the world because there we experience the same major challenges that are also felt at the global level.

Small farmers are the most vulnerable and at the same time on one hand are most affected by climate change and on the other hand they produce the greater part of the world's food.

It is clearly understood, at political level, at the level of the sustainable development goals what they are trying to do is good.

The real difficulty is getting States, countries, politicians to apply this and at the same time we are contributing to this locally. We can inspire politicians and we often run activities at Casa Velha that politicians and decision-makers come to where we can discuss this situation in concrete terms. So at the same time Casa Velha has become a place for national and European decision making. I think this is how we achieve systemic change. We are ever more conscious of our history, our good story about the common good and together with other good stories can start to get things going, start a change for the common good.