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Ecumenism, Healing and Reconciliation

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Before speaking about the subject of this conference, allow me to give a brief introduction to the Focolare Movement and say something about Chiara Lubich, the founder of this vast movement that is currently spread in 194 countries and has approximately 2 million adherents.

The Movement began in 1943, in Trent, Italy, at the height of the Second World War. Chiara Lubich, who was 23 years old at the time, saw that bombs, violence and hatred were destroying everything, all plans for the future and all ideals. She saw everything crumbling before her.

Yet, in this devastating situation a profound intuition took shape in her. Something – or rather, Someone – exists that not even the bombs could destroy: it is God. So she chose God as the “Ideal” of her life.

A great adventure then began for her. Together with some of her friends, she would bring the New Testament to the air-raid shelters and they read Jesus’ words: “Father, may they all be one” (John 17:21). They felt that they were born to contribute in the fulfilment of that prayer: unity, universal fellowship.

In this way, a new current of spirituality began in the Catholic Church, which subsequently spread to other Christian Churches, to the faithful of other religions and also to people without religious reference points.

Chiara Lubich passed away on 14th March 2008. Throughout her life she untiringly took her message of unity to the most varied places and to many countries worldwide.

In 1969, while addressing an international meeting of young people, she entrusted to them her heart’s burning desire; to respond to the most urgent and dramatic need of humankind, the need for peace:

“... Travelling around the world I have been to different European nations, to North and South America, and also to the Middle East and Africa. I realized that there are great evils in the world. I saw the whole of humanity like “a

wounded Adam.” I witnessed conflict among peoples, and the constant threat of war. I saw all the social problems that need to be resolved. I remember my visit to Jerusalem; it was truly a divided city. In the whole of the Middle East there are conflicts which constantly endanger peace. And so I said: what can we do, we who have the Ideal of unity? We must help these brothers and sisters love one another; this body must be healed. Here there must be the health of humanity.”

How did we respond to Chiara Lubich’s wish?

The experience and reflection which has matured within the Focolare Movement during its 67 years of life tells us that in order to promote peace there is a special path to follow, that of dialogue. We need a dialogue of life, which does not create opposition among people but enables people, who may be of different traditions or different faiths, to meet and be open to one another, finding what they have in common and living those realities together.

Along the way, various specific spheres of dialogue and sharing came to the fore. We began setting up places and finding opportunities for meetings within the Churches to which we belong, so that there could be an ever greater fellowship. We had the experience of being a united people, made up of Christians of different denominations, through sharing the specific gifts of each Church, in the hope, one day, of reaching doctrinal unity too.

The motto of Chiara Lubich’s life was the prayer of Jesus “May they all be one” which we can translate into “make the whole of humanity become one family”. She invited millions of people the world over to commit themselves to live in order to achieve it. “May they all be one” is the specific aim of the Focolare Movement. The Movement was born for and lives for that goal.

In this perspective we see that dialogue, put into practice in its infinite dimensions, is a fundamental aspect of the Focolare Movement, one we cannot do without. Indeed it is the only path that can be followed with any hope of success by those who want to contribute to bringing about universal fellowship. Dialogue is a lifestyle, a new culture, which the Movement can and wants to offer the women and men of today.

If we seek now to understand the specific characteristics of dialogue as practised by the Focolare Movement, the first is its foundation.

Chiara always taught us to look to God as the Father of all and as a consequence to see every man and woman we meet as God’s son or daughter and therefore our brother or sister. She herself explained this, writing to her companions in 1947:

“We must keep our gaze fixed on the one Father of many children, and then

consider all people as children of that one Father. Our thoughts and affections must go beyond every human limit and acquire the habit of aiming constantly towards this universal fellowship in our one Father, God.”¹

If this is the foundation, then the dialogical method that Chiara taught us can be nothing other than love! It is a dialogue between brothers and sisters, so dialogue is between people, not ideologies or thought systems. Dialogue must necessarily be supported and sustained by mercy, compassion and charity, summed up in the Golden Rule “Do not do to others what you would not wish done to you”² or as it is found in the Gospels of St Matthew (7:12, 22:36-40 and Luke (6:31, 10:27) where Jesus repeatedly exhorts his followers to live the Golden Rule written in the Book of Leviticus in the positive form, which is more demanding: ““In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets.”³

Love and mercy, once put at the basis of dialogue, not only enable us to see our neighbours in a new light, but help us discover diversity, any diversity, as a gift. Chiara said:

“Whoever is close to me has been created as a gift for me and I have been created as a gift for those near me. On earth everything is in a relationship of love with everything else: each thing with each thing. But we need to be Love in order to find the golden thread of love between beings”⁴.

“But we need to be love”. Chiara’s words express a call to action for all people of good will so as to create bonds of unity among the whole human family.

It is this dream of unity which has changed the hearts of many men and women, letting them see others and those who are different in a manner they had never thought of before.

At the moment, given the enormous opportunities offered by the means of communication, interactions between people have hugely multiplied. But they have become brief, ephemeral and devoid of meaning, and relationships are shattered or diminishing. It is only when love which goes beyond purely natural bounds becomes part of the I-you relationship, that interactions can be transformed into relationships, and we can build networks of true fellowship.

In this regard, religion, every religion and ours in particular, is called to respond, to give meaning, a soul and some genuine and sound answers to humankind which is lost, confused and traumatised. We can accept one another, respect each other, collaborate and become leaders in building a peaceful world where justice and respect for people are the norm.

As we said, Chiara Lubich, the founder of the Focolare Movement, lived this extraordinary adventure and involved a huge number of people in an adventure where ordinary love is not sufficient but where it is necessary to learn an art, as she herself defined it, the art of loving. She described it and summed it up in a few key points.

Love everyone: which means not to discriminate. We love not only our relatives and friends, but everyone: we love those who are white and those who are black, people from our own country and foreigners, friends and enemies, rich and poor, VIPs or beggars, people from our own religion, those of other faiths or atheists.

Love always: it's a love which does not allow for breaks, pauses or allowances. It urges us to love in every circumstance.

Be the first to love: this love always takes the initiative, without expecting to be loved in return.

Love others as ourselves, which means to enter truly into others, to put ourselves into the shoes of those who are different from us, to the point of feeling their sufferings and joys as our own, in order to understand them and help them concretely and effectively.

In order to do this, silence and being able to listen are important; to create an inner silence so as to be able to listen to others and understand them from within. Chiara always spoke of this to us with these simple words "make yourself one". "To make ourselves one" with the person we are talking to is not a tactic or an external strategy; nor is it just an act of kindness, openness, respect or the absence of prejudice. It certainly is all of this, but with something more.

This practice of "making ourselves one" requires complete emptiness of self: setting aside our ideas, affections in our heart, and everything that is our will, in order to identify ourselves with the other. We cannot enter into our neighbours' heart, understand them and share their suffering or joy, if our hearts are filled with a worry, a judgement, a thought... anything.

We cannot hide the fact that this way is difficult and requires great commitment in order to overcome obstacles and temptations of selfishness and self-absorption. It's the price we pay to transform wounds into blessings, death into life, to make the encounter with others a place where peace and fellowship flourish.

You may know that the charism of the Focolare Movement can be summed up in one word, unity, its specific vocation. The entire Movement is committed to live it this year, throughout the world, with great intensity: working and committing ourselves on all fronts to contribute to building up a united world, to bring unity, peace and reciprocity in every environment.

This is how we should live so as to remain faithful to our charism, to that first inspiration of Chiara which she described in 1946:

“In our hearts, one thing is clear: unity is what God wants from us. We live in order to be one with Him and among us and with everyone. This splendid vocation binds us to heaven and immerses us in a universal brotherhood. Nothing could be greater. For us, there could be no loftier Ideal.”⁵

The spirituality which then developed, starting from this first realisation, showed us that in fact unity contains within it God’s design for the whole of humanity throughout history.

Let’s look now at the world we are living in. How can we face all its troubles? How can they be solved?

We must realise, first of all, that we can bring this gift of unity wherever we are. What Chiara resolutely asked of us in 1981, when she gave us the themes on unity, applies today too. She invited all members of the Movement to strengthen mutual love, to show unity, as a fire of love which brings a special presence of God wherever the different groups are. These are her words:

“Before all else God wants from us, ... that we bring to life living cells everywhere, ... cells that are ever more ardent, ever more numerous. God wants us to enkindle ever bigger fires in families, offices, factories, schools, parishes, parliaments, monasteries and convents to feed a fire of love for God in the Church and in society.”⁶

The many experiences we receive from different countries show that it is always possible to light fires in all these places and keep them burning.

What is our aim, then? To reach the whole of humanity. The goal is the fulfilment of God’s design for humankind, which is universal fellowship. As Gandhi said: “The golden way is to be friends with the world and to regard the whole human family like members of one family.”⁷

We have a great responsibility. But we are certain that God will help us in every step we take, in all our efforts, inspiring us with the right ideas, the most valuable inspirations, in the atmosphere of joy and fellowship which we are already experiencing here.

CONCLUSION

All these life experiences of the Gospel certainly encourage all of us to do everything that we can to move forward together on the path towards the fulfilment of Jesus' prayer "May they all be one" (cf. Jn 17:21).

They help us be aware of that extra encouragement God wants to give us, Christians of today, who experience a loss of credibility and influence in the world and who suffer persecution and separation. Only when we unite ourselves more to Christ crucified and forsaken and, through Him, in the Father, as His sons and daughters, we participate in Trinitarian love, can we draw light, strength and hope, and let ourselves be formed individually and as a community.

The Holy Spirit, the bond of love, will help Christians understand that they are living a precious and important time: a passing from darkness into the light of the resurrection, towards a greater fullness, in which diversity means enrichment and the opportunity to create communion: where the wounds of one will be the wounds of others; where all together, with humility and detachment, we will try to find the essence and the origins of the one faith in Jesus, by listening to His Word.

And in Him, the miracle of unity in diversity and of full reconciliation will be accomplished, as a visible sign of His body, the instrument of salvation for humanity.

¹ C. LUBICH, *L'arte di amare*, Città Nuova, Roma 2005, p. 29

² Babylonian Talmùd , Text on *Shabbath* 31a

³ Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount in the Gospel according to Matthew 7:12.

⁴ C. LUBICH, *Scritti Spirituali 1, "L'attrattiva del tempo moderno"*, Città Nuova, Roma 1978, 140.⁴

⁵ Cf. C. Lubich, *Unity and Jesus Forsaken*, New City New York 1985, p. 26.

⁶ Cf. C. Lubich, *L'unità e Gesù Abbandonato*, Città Nuova, Roma 1984, pp. 45-46.

⁷ Mahatma Gandhi, *Harijans*, 13-11-1946, pag. 402