

(English translation)

Rocca di Papa, 18 July 1967

Her Conversation with Patriarch Athenagoras

Interview by the Vatican Radio

Presenter: "... Any day now, His Holiness, the great Roman Pope, will go on a pilgrimage in this old city.

"We take this great opportunity to bring the Churches even closer. We are nearing the goal of unity." These are the words expressed in these days by the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople, Athenagoras, referring to the upcoming visit of Pope Paul VI to Istanbul and Ephesus. It's a serene and affectionate declaration of a great soul, of a man of our times. These are the words of someone who, three years ago, was already a protagonist with Pope Paul, in an historical encounter in Palestine.

Who is this man? What are his feelings, his hopes and his goals? How can we describe his personality?

Miss Chiara Lubich, foundress and president of the Focolare Movement, just before the announcement of the Pope's visit, had the opportunity to meet with him precisely in these days in Constantinople.

What are your first impressions from your recent encounter with Patriarch Athenagoras?

Chiara: As soon as I found myself in the presence of this great person of our times, I had the impression of having before me the completely open heart of a father. He was a father who loves people and even in his venerable age, he presents a youthful, fresh spirit, rich of the greatest hope and faith.

My first impression was not that of finding myself before a non-Catholic brother, but finding a soul as if we were already of the same reality.

Throughout the whole conversation he always showed the highest appreciation for the Holy Father Paul VI. I had the impression that he follows all the events of the Catholic Church with extreme attention and veneration, especially the activities of the Holy Father.

Presenter: Pondering over this recent conversation you had with Athenagoras, what do you think of the forthcoming meeting between Pope Paul VI and the Patriarch?

Chiara: Given the deep belief of Athenagoras in the charity towards Christ and towards his brothers and sisters as the core of Christianity, I think that the act of the Holy Father to anticipate the visit of the Patriarch to Rome, is the best gesture to show that the Catholic Church is the Church of love, where the Pope, the successor of Peter, is the one who loves the most.

Presenter: Do you therefore also think that there will be positive prospects and expectations after this encounter?

Chiara: I think that Patriarch Athenagoras will manifest his conviction that love is the way to reach unity in the truth. This is the way that the Holy Father Paul VI also indicated in a recent talk addressed to a group of Orthodox students.

They have similar viewpoints concerning the way to reach unity, so we can hope that the Holy Father and Athenagoras may find very effective solutions to start theological dialogues and I think that with this atmosphere we can hope for everything.

On the other hand the figure of this great patriarch, like a prophet standing up with his faith and love for Constantinople, cannot but have a great influence on the Orthodox world, which he himself will visit soon before reaching Rome.

Presenter: We know that Patriarch Athenagoras has his own clear vision of the ecumenical problem, as what emerged also from his statements to you. Could you tell us how his vision was expressed during your conversation?

Chiara: The ecumenical vision of the Patriarch, whose humility and holiness are visible from his every attitude and word, was clear in the last part of the long conversation, when he spoke to us about his recent Easter message. “I have the habit of publishing a message every Easter,” he explained. “The last one said: ‘The first ten centuries of Christianity were for the dogmas and the organization; the next ten centuries saw misfortunes, schisms and the division. The third era – this one – is the era of love.

We meet in the same chalice through this way of charity. Of course,” he continued, “we need theologians, but the differences are too small and faded by the sun of love. The differences have lost their colour thanks to the sun of charity. In the first thousand years we lived in communion; then we separated.”

Therefore, referring to the recent annulment of the reciprocal excommunications by the Catholic and Orthodox churches, he affirmed: “Now the schism is gone; why don’t we return to the same chalice? We believe that we have the same Mother, the Virgin Mary, Mother of the Church, as the Pope said; we have the same baptism: the door of the Church. Tell me: why don’t we return to the same chalice?”