

(English translation)

Milan, 9 March 1995

### **A spiritual communitarian way**

From Chiara Lubich's talk at the conferment of the Italian Catholic Publishers' Guild's "Author of the Year" award

Your Excellency, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I would like to begin by expressing my sincere thanks to the Publishers' Guild for this prize with which they are honoring the many years of literary work of a woman, in this very year dedicated to the woman. My thanks are accompanied by the happy thought that someone must have enjoyed those works and that perhaps they did some good.

To tell you the truth, I was never so surprised in my life as when I learned I had been awarded this recognition, because I never wrote a book, even though many books carry my name as the author.

Those books, in fact, are collections – put together by other people – of thoughts, ideas, conversations, meditations, talks and extracts from diaries jotted down over the years as a service to the Focolare Movement. This fact deepens my gratitude even more.

And I also thank all the ladies and gentlemen who have come here today not only to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of the foundation of this Publishers' Guild but also to be present at this award ceremony.

I would be amiss if, given the occasion, I did not say something about the content of these books. They refer to a new spirituality which came to life in the Church over fifty years ago, a typically communitarian or collective spirituality: the spirituality of unity, a spirituality very attune to our times, a sign of our times.

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What is special about this spirituality? It has been said that it is a communitarian, collective one.

We know that in the two thousand years since the time of Jesus, many spiritualities have flowered in the Church one after the other and at times simultaneously. They are beautiful, rich and profound, and so today, the Church, the Bride of Christ is adorned with the most precious pearls, with the rarest diamonds which have formed, and continue to form, great saints.

In the midst of so much splendor one element is always present in these spiritualities: it is primarily the individual who goes to God.

This consequence dates back to that distant period in history when the fervor of the early Christians (which had forged the community of Jerusalem into one heart and one soul) had begun to wane and the persecutions had ended. At this point many Christians decided to save their faith by withdrawing to the desert. It was the age of hermits.

This saved many Christian principles and resulted in many hermits becoming saints, but often the importance of one's neighbor was undervalued. He or she was even looked upon as an obstacle in the way to God.

'Apa' Arsenio said: "Flee from human beings, and you will be saved."<sup>1</sup>

And still many centuries later, in the famous book, *The Imitation of Christ*, it is written: "One holy man said: each time I have been in the company of people, I have come away less of a man myself."<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Vita e Detti dei Padri del deserto*, edited by L. Mortari, Città Nuova, Rome, 1975, p. 97.

<sup>2</sup> *Imitation of Christ*, I,XX, 1-6.

Of course, an individual spirituality is never only individual. Because of the reality of the Mystical Body of Christ, what takes place in one person always has a certain influence on others. This is true also because these Christians offered and are still offering prayers and penance to God for the sake of others.

Today, times have changed.

Now the Holy Spirit is forcefully calling men and women to walk side by side with others, indeed, to be one heart and one soul with all those who want to do so.

The Holy Spirit impelled our Movement, twenty years before the Council, to make this very decisive move towards our neighbors. In our spirituality, we go to God by means of our neighbor. "I - my neighbor - God," we say. We go to God together *with* our neighbor, *with* our brothers and sisters, or better, we go to God through our neighbor.

The studies done by our experts, at least at first glance, show that a collective spirituality, like this spirituality of unity, is appearing in the Church for the first time. Yes, in the past there were experiences which came close to it, especially in those brought about by people who put love at the basis of their spirituality.

St. Basil is an example of this. For him the first commandment regarding love of God and the second regarding love of neighbor were at the foundation of the life of his community. Preeminent is also St. Augustine. For him, mutual love and unity were of supreme value.

However, Father Jesús Castellano, professor of Spiritual Theology at the "*Teresianum*" in Rome, and consultant for the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, a person with a deep knowledge of our spirituality, said, "In the history of Christian spirituality we hear: 'Christ is in me, he lives within me,' and this is the perspective of the individual spirituality, of life in Christ; or we hear that Christ is present in our brothers and sisters, and this is the perspective of charity, of the works of charity. But what is missing is to discover that if Christ is in me and in the other person, then Christ in me loves Christ who is in you and vice versa and there is 'reciprocal giving and receiving.'"

"There is also a communitarian spirituality," he continues, "ecclesial, modeled on the Mystical Body.... This spirituality is usually referred to as a current of spirituality in our century, the century of the rediscovery of the Church. However, that 'something more' which (the Movement)) gives us with our collective spirituality is the vision and practice of a communion, of an ecclesial life, 'modeled on the Mystical Body,' in which there exists the personal gift of each to the other and the dimension of becoming 'one.'

"Even when present-day authors offer intuitions or statements on this dimension of theology and spirituality, they are without a proposal for incorporating it in a practical way, as a lifestyle, and of incarnating it in an experience: from the simplest things like 'keeping Jesus in our midst', which is the *alpha* and the *omega*, to its more demanding dimensions like the *economy of communion* or inculturation."<sup>3</sup>

Modern theologians foresaw a collective spirituality for our times and the Second Vatican Council called for it.

Karl Rahner, in speaking of the spirituality of the Church of the future, images it, he says, as being in a "fraternal communion in which it is possible to make the same basic experience of the Spirit together." He affirms, "Those of us who are older... have been spiritually formed in an individualistic way.... If there ever was an experience of the Spirit made in common and commonly held to be so,... it is

<sup>3</sup> Father Jesús Castellano, OCD, *Regarding the Collective Spirituality of Unity of the Work of Mary*, June 21, 1992 (manuscript).

clearly the experience of the first Pentecost in the Church, an event, we must presume, which did not consist certainly in the casual meeting of a collection of mystics who lived individually, but in the experience of the Spirit made by the community.... I think that in a spirituality of the future, the element of fraternal spiritual communion, of a spirituality lived together, can lay a more decisive role, and that slowly but surely, we must proceed along this way.”<sup>4</sup>

In 1957 Cardinal Montini said that in our times, what was once a unique experience must now become general, and that the exceptional saintly figures, while ever venerated, must give way, in a certain sense, to a sanctity of the people, to the people of God who become saints.<sup>5</sup> We are living in an age, therefore, when Christian collectivity comes into full light. Besides searching for the kingdom of God in individual souls, one searches for the kingdom of God in the *midst* of people.

Furthermore, there are elements proper to an individual spirituality which are pursued especially by those who are more committed, such as solitude and fleeing from people in order to reach mystical union with the Trinity within one’s self. In order to safeguard solitude, silence is necessary. Separation from the world is obtained through a cloistered life, the veil, the habit. In order to imitate the passion of Christ, different forms of penance, at times very harsh ones, fasting and vigils are practiced.

In the collective way, there is solitude and silence so as, for example, to act upon Jesus’ invitation to “go to your inner room, close the door, and pray to your Father in secret” (Mt 6:6). Distance from other people is kept if contact with them should lead to sin. Generally speaking, however, the neighbor is welcomed. Christ is loved in each and every brother and sister, Christ who can be alive or can be reborn in each of them through our help as well. Unity with others in the name of Jesus is sought so as to guarantee his presence in our midst.

With the more individual spiritualities, it is as if one were in a magnificent garden (the Church) looking at and admiring only one flower: the presence of God within one’s self. In a collective spirituality all the flowers in the garden, *every* presence of Christ in every person is loved and admired. And his presence in others is loved as one’s own.

Since even the communitarian way is not, nor could it be, *only* communitarian, but is fully personal, too, it is a general experience that when you are alone, after having loved your brothers and sisters, you experience union with God in your soul. In fact, it is enough to take in hand a book to do meditation and you sense that God, present in the depths of your soul, wants to converse with you.

In this light then, we can say that those who approach their neighbor in the correct way, that is, loving as the Gospel teaches, find themselves becoming more Christ-like, more fully human.

Since we seek to be united with our brothers and sisters, we love the spoken word in a special way. It is a means of communication.

In the Movement we speak when we make ourselves one with our brothers and sisters.

We speak when we share our experiences about putting the Word of Life into practice, or about our own personal spiritual life, knowing that if fire does not spread, if it is not communicated, it dies out. This sharing of what is in our souls is of great spiritual value. St. Lawrence Giustiniani gives a very beautiful explanation. He says: “Nothing in the world renders more praise to God and reveals him worthy of praise more than the humble and fraternal exchange of spiritual gifts.”<sup>6</sup>

4 Karl Rahner, *Elementi di spiritualità nella Chiesa del futuro*, in “Problemi e prospettive di spiritualità,” edited by T. Goff/B. Secondin, Brescia 1983.

5 Cf. G. B. Cardinal Montini, *Discorsi sulla Madonna e sui Santi* (1995-1962), Milan, 1965, pp. 499-500.

6 St. Lawrence Giustiniani, *Disciplina e perfezione della vita monastica*, Città Nuova, Rome, 1967, p. 4.

We speak during the large public gatherings in order to keep the fire of love of God ablaze in all.

And when we do not speak, we write: we write letters, articles, books, our spiritual reflections, so that the Kingdom of God may go ahead in many hearts. We use all the modern means of communication. And we dress like others in order not to separate ourselves from them.

In the Movement, too, we practice those forms of mortification which are indispensable to Christian life. We practice penance, especially the penance advised by the Church. Special emphasis, however, is placed on the penance that a life of unity with our neighbor entails. We know that unity is not easy for our “old self” – to use St. Paul’s terminology – which is always ready to emerge from within us.

Furthermore, unity is never achieved once and for all; it always needs to be rebuilt. When there is unity – and through it the presence of Jesus in the midst – people experience immense joy, that joy promised by Jesus in his prayer for unity. When unity diminishes, however, shadows appear. We lose our bearings and life becomes a kind of purgatory. This is the penance we must be ready to face.

What must come into play here is our love for Jesus crucified and forsaken, the key to unity. Out of love for him, we first embrace the suffering within ourselves and then go beyond it and make every effort to rebuild unity.

Also in the Movement we pray. Liturgical prayer, such as the Mass, is especially valued because it is the prayer of the Church. One of our characteristic prayers is the collective one taught by Jesus: “If two of you on earth agree to ask anything at all, it will be granted to you by my Father in heaven” (Mt 18:19).

For those who walk along the way of unity, the presence of Jesus in the midst is essential. We need to always revive his presence in our families, in our communities, in our gatherings, in our little cities, or we risk failing personally, too.

It is the presence of Jesus in the midst that brings that “something more” which is a characteristic of our charism. Just as two magnetic poles do not produce light until they are united, and as soon as they are united they do produce light, likewise, two persons do not experience the typical light of the charism of unity until they are united in Christ through charity.

Jesus in the midst with our brothers and sisters is the norm of all norms for all those traveling along this way. With his presence everything has meaning and value, whether it be work or studies, our prayer life, our efforts to spread Christian life around us or to reach sanctity. And sanctity can be reached if we journey towards God in unity.

Men and women of all ages, races, languages, nationalities and backgrounds follow this spirituality because by now it has reached the four corners of the earth. It is followed by persons of other Christian Churches and other faith traditions, as well as persons of other convictions.

Consequently the world and society in all its expressions, aspects and vocations becomes imbued with the divine, and every reality is clarified, consecrated, perfected.

St. Theresa of Avila, a doctor of the Church, speaks of an “interior castle,” that is, the reality of the soul, inhabited at its center by His Majesty, to be discovered and illuminated throughout the course of one’s life overcoming different trials. This is the height of sanctity in a primarily individual way, even though St. Theresa drew all her spiritual daughters into this experience.

The moment has come, however, or so it seems to us, to discover, illuminate and build not only the “interior castle,” but also the “exterior castle.” We see the entire Movement as an exterior castle where Christ is present and sheds light on all its parts, from the center to the edges.

If we think of where this spirituality reaches, even beyond the structures of the Focolare Movement, all the way to persons in responsible positions both in society and in the Church, we immediately see that this charism doesn't only make of the Movement an exterior castle. It helps to make the whole social and ecclesial body an exterior castle.

The Holy Father, in speaking recently to a group of more than seventy Bishops friends of the Focolare, said, "The Lord Jesus did not call the disciples to follow him individually, but in an inseparably personal and communitarian way. And if this is true for all the baptized, it is particularly true... for the Apostles and their successors, the Bishops."<sup>7</sup>

This spirituality, therefore, embraces all the people of God who, through this charism, become more one and more holy.

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<sup>7</sup> John Paul II to a group of Bishops, friends of the Focolare Movement, in the *L'Osservatore Romano*, February 22, 1995.