

Lublin (Poland), June 19, 1996

The spirituality and aims of the Focolare Movement

Extract from the address given by Chiara Lubich at the conferral of the honorary doctorate in Social Sciences by the Catholic University of Lublin, Poland.

The Focolare Movement.

It is not easy to describe it in a few minutes. However, we can clearly see the purpose for which we believe God brought it about.

It came to life within the Church in the 1940s. In those days an ideology that did not acknowledge God was spreading throughout the world. It wanted to banish God from society.

Hatred had acquired an important role in the fulfillment of a society which nonetheless wanted to present itself as progressive.

Unity, the unity of peoples without God, was the utopia presented as credible, as one for which it was worth spending most of one's energy.

In was within this context that the Focolare Movement began. This is a Movement whose main objectives and goals are these: God chosen in fact as an Ideal; love chosen as a lifestyle; unity which becomes the practice binding each person to God and people with one another.

How can we describe the Focolare Movement today?

It is both a religious and civil Movement, numbering more than two million people of every race, language, ethnic group and religion, present the world over, in almost 200 nations.

Its members are bound to one another as brothers and sisters through the love that Jesus brought on earth, or simply by benevolent love which all religions propose; love which is accepted also by people who are indifferent to religion, as the only means necessary to build universal brotherhood.

The Focolare Movement—in the eyes of John Paul II—is a small “people,” an expression of the great people of God, moving on towards the building of a civilization of love, towards the goal of a more united world. This movement has a specific spirituality, which is collective and also has its own well-defined culture.

Most of the people who adhere to the Focolare Movement are Catholics of all ages and vocations, but there are also Christians of other Churches and faithful of other religions. Nor should we forget the non-believers, if they are men and women of good will.

It is a Work of God and therefore very varied. One can look at it from different points of view, from the spiritual to its apostolate, to the pastoral, charitable, communitarian, prophetic or social dimensions.

Today, at least in this first part, we would like to consider it especially from the social point of view.

The Focolare Movement is fifty-three years old: it was born in 1943.

How can we describe its first stirrings? What was “the first inspiring spark,” as John Paul II called it?

It was simple, as are all the things of God.

During the terror of the war, it was a re-revelation of who God truly is: Love.

He loved us immensely. He loved everybody.

This was the re-discovery that made us feel that God was close to us, present in all circumstances of life.

This was the first announcement we made to all those we met: God is here, He loves you, He counts even the hairs of your head; He died for you.

This is the way we believed in love.

But we had to respond to this love. How? With our love, which is certainly not empty sentimentality. Rather, it meant being in and living in accordance with His will: “Not everyone who says

“Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only those who do the will of my Father...” (Mt. 7:21).

And His will—we understood—is that we love.

The Spirit (which I would like to call the charism of unity), which began to enlighten us, urged us to love.

But we could honestly love only by keeping and practicing the Words of God.

It was not possible to take anything with us during the many times we fled to the air-raid shelters during the day and night to protect ourselves from the bombs. All we could bring with us was a Gospel, yes, a small copy of the Gospels.

And there, as we waited for hours, we read. They were unique, universal words, addressed to everyone.

We understood at once that if they were translated into life, they would give rise to a revolution.

We read them and lived them. And the world within us and around us changed.

Although we were fascinated by the whole Gospel, we were especially struck by certain words of Jesus and by realities that underlined love: love for God, love for neighbor, love for one another, welcoming the spiritual presence of Christ among us, as He had promised wherever two or more are united in His name (see Mt. 18:20), which means in His love; and following the greatest expression of Love, Jesus crucified; achieving unity, the effect of mutual love lived out not only with those who represented the Church, but with everybody (“May they all be one” [Jn. 17:21]): unity which, as Christians, we are called to live following the model of the Holy Trinity.

We understood the Eucharist as enabler and bond of unity. We understood Mary as the Mother of beautiful Love and unity. We deepened our understanding of the Church as communion in love; the Holy Spirit as Love made a Person.

Afterwards, these words and realities of the Gospel which had particularly captivated us, began to take shape as the main pillars of a spirituality completely centered on love and unity: the spirituality of unity.

Decades later, we are discovering it as a genuine spirituality of the Church, alongside those spiritualities more focused on the individual that have adorned the Bride of Christ down through the centuries. This spirituality of unity has a characteristic all its own: a radical and intense communitarian dimension.

In those days we experienced - in wonder and amazement - the daily fulfillment of Gospel promises: “Gifts for you” (Lk. 6:38) when we had given; “all these things will be given you besides” (Mt. 6:33), which arrived when we had sought His kingdom; the “hundredfold,” which regularly came to whoever among us had left everything for God.

But there is an event from those days, one of the thousand anecdotes that studded our life, which confirms this specific communitarian vocation.

One day we were all in a cellar in order to shelter ourselves from the dangers of the war. We opened the Gospel at random and found ourselves before Jesus’ solemn prayer to the Father, as he walked down the Kidron Valley towards the Garden of Olives.

“Holy Father...” we began to read, and although we were unprepared, we had the impression of understanding the meaning of that difficult passage. Above all, we felt certain that we had been born for that page of the Gospel; for us, it was like the “magna charta” of the new Movement.

This communitarian spirituality led us to put in common the few material and spiritual possessions, as well as our needs - in different ways - with the many people who were now following us.

These gospel practices did not leave other people indifferent. We wanted to emulate the early Christians in some way and we knew that among them there had been no one in need because of the communion of goods they lived.

In fact, one day some Communists came to our first focolare asking to know the secret behind what was taking place around us. They told us that they wanted to accomplish what they had seen accomplished in the city of Trent all over the world.

In answer to their question, we pointed to the Crucifix on the wall: had it not been for Him that we loved one another to the point of sharing everything?

But that secret wasn't for them; they bowed their heads and went away.

The Movement then began its rapid expansion, first in Italy, then throughout Europe, including Eastern Europe, and later all over the world.

It was all because of that "secret" which we had shown our Communist brothers. In fact, on one occasion—foreseen, we think, by God—we had come to know that Jesus had suffered the most when on the cross He experienced the abandonment of the Father: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Mt. 27:46).

We were touched by this fact. And our youth, enthusiasm and especially the grace of God, urged us first focolarine to choose Jesus in His abandonment as the ideal of our life.

Ever since then we have discovered His face everywhere: in our own sufferings, which we loved with all our might because they were an expression of Him, and in our neighbors, especially if they were suffering.

He had felt that the Father was far from Him; He had experienced within Himself the separation of human beings from God and from one another. We recognized Jesus forsaken in all the divisions of the world, whether big or small: divisions in the family, between generations, between rich and poor; divisions at the heart of the Church itself among its various works; divisions between different Churches and between religions; even the division between those who believe and those who do not believe....

But—and this is important—all these divisions did not frighten us; on the contrary, out of love for Him forsaken, they attracted us. We understood that our place was there, precisely where there was the trauma, the break.

This love for Jesus forsaken was fruitful then in every field.