

(English translation)

Paris, 17 December 1996

Acceptance Speech upon receiving the UNESCO prize for Peace Education

Mr. Director General of UNESCO,
Mr. President of the International Jury,
Your Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

First of all, a greeting, full of respect, to everyone here and my heartfelt thanks to those who wished to award me the prestigious 1996 UNESCO Prize for Peace Education.

Allow me to offer a few thoughts to this noble assembly.

My intention today is not to speak of the history and structure of the Focolare Movement, a Movement that, together with many other excellent and valuable organizations, initiatives and projects, is an instrument for bringing about unity and peace on our planet. You have already heard about this, as shown by the citation awarding the prize.

Rather, I would prefer to speak about the secret of the Movement's success.

This lies in the new way of life it proposes, a new lifestyle adopted by millions of people. It is inspired by profound Christian principles, while also emphasizing parallel values present in other faiths and cultures. In actuality, it has brought to this world of ours—which needs to find or secure peace—precisely peace and unity.

I'm speaking of a new spirituality that is both timely and up-to-date: the spirituality of unity.

...

It is deeply rooted in certain phrases from the Gospel, phrases that are interlinked.

I will cite only a few here.

Those who share the spirituality of unity also share a profound understanding of the essence of God: God is Love, he is a Father.

In fact, how would it be possible to imagine peace and unity in the world without a vision of humanity as one family? And how can it be seen as such without the presence of one father?

There is the call to open one's heart to God the Father who certainly does not abandon his children to their own destiny, but who wants to accompany, protect and help them. He knows the depths of every person; he follows each one in particular, counting even the hairs on one's head. He does not place burdens on their shoulders without being the first to carry them.

He does not leave the renewal of society solely to the initiatives of men and women, but he takes care of it.

To believe in his love, this is what this new spirituality requires, to believe that we are personally and immensely loved by God.

To believe.

Believing and choosing him as the Ideal of one's life from among the countless possibilities offered by our existence is equivalent to intelligently taking on the attitude which everyone will assume at the point of reaching the final destiny: eternity.

Clearly, it is not enough to believe in God's love; it is not enough to have made this great choice of him as our Ideal. The presence and loving care of the Father of all calls each one to be a daughter or a

son, loving the Father in return and living out day by day the Father's loving plan for one's life, that is, to carry out his will.

And we know that a father's first desire is for the children to treat each other as brothers and sisters, to care for and to love one another. They should know and practice what can be described as the art of loving.

He wants us to take the initiative in loving without waiting for the other person to love us first.

This art of loving means that we love each one as ourselves, because "You and I," Gandhi said, "are one. I cannot hurt you without wounding myself."¹

He wants us to be the first to love, without expecting the other to love us back.

It means knowing how to "make ourselves one" with others, that is to identify with their burdens, their thoughts, their sufferings and their joys.

If this love for the others is lived together, it becomes mutual.

And Christ, the Father's Son par excellence, Brother of all, has left a norm for humanity: reciprocal love. He knew how necessary it was so that there might be peace and unity in the world, so that there might be one family.

Certainly today, whoever attempts to shift the mountains of hate and violence faces a huge and heavy task. But what is beyond the strength of a million isolated and separate people appears possible to those who have made reciprocal love, mutual understanding and unity the motivating force of their lives.

And there is a reason behind this.

Another surprising and amazing element of this new spirituality, which is linked to mutual love and very precious indeed, is something else that was announced by the Gospel. It says that if two or more are united in genuine love, Christ himself, who is Peace, is present among them.

And what greater guarantee can there be than this for those who want to be instruments of peace, of building the unity of the human family?

This reciprocal love, this unity that gives much joy to whoever puts it into practice, calls for commitment, daily training and sacrifice.

And for Christians there appears in all its light and drama a word that the world does not want to hear because it considers it to be foolishness, an absurdity, nonsense.

This word is the cross.

Nothing good, useful, or fruitful can be accomplished in the world without accepting fatigue and suffering – in a word, without the cross.

Being committed to bringing peace is not something to be taken lightly! One must have courage; one must know how to suffer.

But certainly, if more people would accept suffering out of love, the suffering required by love would become the most powerful instrument for giving humanity its highest dignity: that of feeling that we are not so much a togetherness of peoples, one beside the other, often in conflict with one another, but that we are one single people, one family.

God the Father has not left us unaided in this arduous journey. We know the resources that the Church has always put at the disposal of Christians.

And, we cannot forget Mary, who is loved, venerated and present in other religions as well— Mary, the Mother of Jesus and of every person on earth. From her we can draw inspiration, comfort and support. The task of a mother is always that of bringing the family together.

¹ Quoted from WILHELM MÜHS, *Parole del cuore*, Milan, 1996, p. 82.

This spirituality of communion is not necessarily linked to the Focolare Movement: it is universal and, therefore, it can be lived by many.

In fact, through this spirituality fruitful dialogues have opened up with people of various religions and cultures. They find here that emphasis is placed on the values they believe in and together we set out towards that fullness of truth towards which all people are directed.

Through this spirituality, men and women today of almost all the nations of the world are slowly but surely seeking to be, wherever they are, seeds of a new people, of a more united world, of a world of peace with more solidarity especially towards the least and the poorest.

May God, Father of all, make these efforts of ours fruitful, along with the efforts of all those who are working toward the lofty goal of peace. And, as John Paul II said to the United Nations on the fiftieth anniversary of its founding: "In the next century and the next millennium we can build a civilization worthy of the human person, a true culture of freedom and peace.

"We can and must do so!" he continued. "And in doing so, we shall see that the tears of this century have prepared the ground for a new springtime of the human spirit."²

And the prize I am receiving today will also be used for the promotion of unity and peace. In a little town of the Movement by the name of Peace, in the Philippines, Asia, it will help to build a structure at the service of interreligious dialogue.

(see: *New Humanity Review* (February 2006), no.12, pp.5-11.)

² L'Osservatore Romano, Weekly Edition in English, n.41, Oct. 11, 1995.