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Interview with Chiara by José María Poirier

(Journalist of La Nación, Argentina)

Journalist: Chiara, my first question is on interreligious dialogue, the dialogue the Focolare Movement proposes and has with people from different faith traditions and religions.

Chiara: There is the fact that Jesus by coming down on earth redeemed the whole of humanity: every person. He also established the Church, but His redemption had an effect on everyone. So everyone could have the possibility of being saved, if they live according to their right conscience. Knowing this, we approach people of other faiths conscious of the possibility that tomorrow may find them in Heaven and perhaps not us!

So the attitude that we should have – and this is the level we aspire to – is that of loving them as Christ loved them. So to love them without any discrimination, giving all that love prompts us to give. And in loving them, we discovered that almost all the major faiths: Buddhism, Hinduism, Judaism, Islam, have a formula that is typically Christian, because it is a phrase from the Gospel: “Do not do others, what you would not like done to you”. “Do unto others as you would wish them to do unto you.” They all have this formula, and it’s called “the Golden Rule,” precisely because the Scriptures of these faiths have it in common.

So what does this mean for us? We go towards them with our “supernatural” love - which is participation in the very love of God, in the life of the Trinity. They meet us with this other love that they have, which is not simple non-violence, but is a really positive attitude of love (...) and in this encounter we build a fraternity, which although it may not be the unity in Christ which can exist in the Church and among Christians, it is a universal brotherhood which binds us together through love.

(...)

Journalist: Why do you think that the charism of unity has taken root in so many different nations of the world, among people from such a wide range of social and cultural environments?

Chiara: Because God is the Ideal, and He has to do with everyone, He is Father of all, of all cultures, of all faiths, of all nations, of all vocations and of both sexes.

Journalist: What has the charism of unity meant for you, in your own personal life?

Chiara: What it has meant – and it’s now been over 50 years since it started – it has been a journey. I have tried to assimilate it always more, always more, to the best of my ability: making mistakes - beginning again, beginning again - making mistakes, going ahead, making progress. It has meant my journey towards God.

Journalist: I would like to ask you, Chiara, about two aspects which seem to me to be central to the spirituality of the Focolare Movement: Jesus in the midst - the presence of Jesus in the community, and the mystery of Jesus forsaken, Christ on the cross.

Chiara: Jesus in the midst is the fulfilment of that sentence of the Gospel where Jesus states that where two or more people are united in His name, which means in His love, He is present there. And it is also referred to in other places: “Where there is charity and love, God is there,” goes the traditional hymn. And this is what it leads to. So it’s something immense: the possibility of the presence

of Christ among us in our family, in the office, even in parliament! He helps us, He guides us, He enlightens us.

Jesus forsaken is the expression of the greatest pain that Jesus suffered on earth, when at the climax of his suffering on the cross he cried out: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” It can be explained if we understand that he “covered” himself with all the sins of the world that had separated human beings from God and also from each other. He took on all this separation to the point that he cried out: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”, giving voice to humanity separated from God.

We find in Him the solution to recompose unity in different parts of the world, in all situations.

Journalist: What do you mean when you talk about a “collective spirituality”?

Chiara: It means that we do not go to God alone, but we journey together. Our spirituality is based on love and, in particular, also on mutual love, which is the typical commandment of Jesus – he called it “his” and “new”. So naturally for love to be mutual, to be reciprocal, there must be at least two of us! So it is not a journey made on our own, but a journey taken together.

Journalist: Chiara, how do you think it is possible to aim for unity while respecting cultures that are so different from each another?

Chiara: We really do need to know how to respect everyone. But it is love that illuminates us in this and allows us really to understand the other person. And more than that, love makes it possible for each one of us to be enriched by what is precious in the others, it is an enrichment. We like to say that we must become “world persons” in the sense of approaching all people in an attitude of appreciating and being enriched by what they hold dear, and naturally also by sharing the treasures that we have in us. But there are no obstacles for those who love.

(...)

Journalist: What is the foundation for the dialogue you propose among people from different cultural traditions?

Chiara: You know, with regards also to people without an explicit religious belief, we have an on-going dialogue because we see that even if they do not believe in God, in the transcendent, they do share a belief in certain values. Now, since Jesus is the man-God, there is a human part and a divine part in the one person of Christ, so all purely human values have a meaning in Christianity. We find that if we can offer to them our “spirit”, our spirituality, which can be summed up in one word - love, they too can truly offer us their own experience of having lived, appreciated and of having worked for many values such as solidarity, peace, unity and freedom.

Journalist: I would like to ask you, as an expert in the spiritual life, what meaning does suffering have in the life of a person?

Chiara: Great meaning, great meaning. The cross gives equilibrium to humanity. If we are without the cross, we would flitter here and there like butterflies not knowing where to rest; while suffering is what gives us meaning. And more than that, it is a direct way to reach union with God. Whoever suffers, if they go deep in their hearts, they will generally find union with God. And union with God is the basis for being able to live in a Christian way, as well as to live humanly.

Journalist: How can we aim at unity while respecting the diversity of different cultures?

Chiara: As I said before, we have to respect others, we have to love others, allowing them to be who they are. But to do this, we must be able to “not exist” ourselves, in order to enter into them, into their world. We need to step into the other person’s shoes, as they say. We need to step into the others’ shoes to be able to understand how he or she understands things. And so in this way there can be unity, because we “make ourselves one” with the others, and perhaps the other person makes him or herself one with us, while at the same time there is also diversity. If we look at the three Persons of the Blessed Trinity who are so different: the Father is not the Son, the Son is not the Father, and neither one nor the other is the Holy Spirit, and yet they are one because they are all love. It’s a bit like that for us too.

(...)

Journalist: You come from a Christian Catholic background: in your profound dialogue with people of other faiths, have you found riches that you had not known before, or has everything you discovered recalled something you already had within you?

Chiara: No, no, I found things that I had not known before. I think this could be because, over the centuries, we may have believed that we had discovered Christianity completely. But, in reality maybe we have discovered Christianity only up to a certain level so far; and over the next few centuries we may discover Christianity on an even deeper level, then ever deeper and deeper. In the meantime, there are those in certain faiths who through their religion - but also most certainly with the help of the Holy Spirit - have reached depths in some aspects which we have not yet reached, but which we will come to appreciate as ‘seeds of the Word’. They are principles of truth, presences of the Word of God that perhaps we have not yet discovered. To give an example, when I was in Thailand I found such a wisdom, such asceticism, such detachment from oneself, that it is difficult to find here.

Journalist: Thank you, Chiara.