

(English translation)

Aachen (Germany), November 13, 1998

## **The Interreligious Dialogue of the Focolare Movement (Part I)**

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Your Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen, Friends,

I have been asked to speak of the Focolare Movement's experience with interreligious dialogue. I hope my presentation will be of interest to you! ...

From its earliest days, the Movement has had many contacts with brothers and sisters of other religions faiths. However, the first strong experience came more than thirty years ago, when I went to visit a remote, forgotten valley in Cameroon, Africa. We had recently come in contact with the Bangwa, a tribe strongly rooted in the traditional religion. We had gone there to help them with the high infant mortality rate which was threatening their extinction.

One day their head, the Fon, and thousands of his people, gathered in a wide clearing in the midst of the forest for a celebration during which they offer us songs and dances.

It was there that I had the strong impression that God, like an immense sun, was embracing everyone, us and them, with his love.

For the first time in my life I intuited that we would have something to do also with people of non-Christian traditions.

Two years later, in fact, there was the encounter with a great Buddhist personality, Rev. Nikkyo Niwano, founder of a flourishing lay association in Japan of six million members: the Rissho Kosei-kai.

On that occasion, he invited me to speak of my spiritual experience to ten thousand Buddhists, in the Great Sacred Hall of Tokyo. I proclaimed Jesus and the Trinity! And all that I said was welcomed as if they longed for nothing else but to hear these things.

The public was like a well-prepared ground into which the seed entered deeply. What a unique impression it made on me to repeat the words of Jesus to those people who did not know them: "Even all the hairs of your head are counted" (Mt. 10:30), "Give and gifts will be given to you," (Lk. 6:38), "Ask and it will be given to you" (Mt. 7:7).

They didn't know that they were so loved by God. I thought: there is a future here, for Jesus, for the Church.

But our most surprising encounters with Buddhism began a few years ago, when we met two eminent representatives of Thai monasticism who have thousands of disciples in their own country and elsewhere.

During their extended stay in our international little town of Loppiano, in Italy, whose 800 inhabitants seek to live faithfully the Gospel message, they were profoundly touched by the unity among all and by Christian love which they weren't familiar with. ...

When these monks and their companions returned to Thailand, they began witnessing to the mutual love they found among Christians. They took every opportunity to tell thousands of faithful and hundreds of monks about what they had experienced in their encounter with the Focolare Movement and also with Pope John Paul II.

Some months later, I was invited to Chiang Mai, in northern Thailand, to tell my spiritual experience to 800 students at the Buddhist University so that it might be a source of greater knowledge for them. They were very attentive and open, and showed great spiritual depth and purity of heart.

On another occasion, they asked me to speak in their temple to Buddhist nuns in white garb, to monks in their saffron robes, and to many lay men and women.

It was perhaps the first time that a Christian, and a woman, was speaking to such a distinguished Buddhist gathering.

Their interest was remarkable, they immediately gave all their attention.

“I’ve been living in a monastery for sixteen years, and I’ve also been to India,” said an 82 year-old nun, “but I’ve never heard such beautiful things!”

We were edified by their asceticism and by their evident detachment from everything.

This is something of our experience with Buddhists.

And the dialogue with Islam?

At first, we had only occasional contacts which were linked mostly to the personal relationships of focolarini in Islamic countries. Today, however, this dialogue offers quite a different panorama.

Now 6,500 Muslim friends are in contact with the Movement. What links us to one another is precisely our spirituality. In it they find incentives and confirmations which help them to adhere and live out in a deeper way the very heart of their Islamic spirituality, and in some cases, also their mysticism.

This year we held the Third International Meeting of Muslim Friends of the Focolare Movement.

These meetings have been characterized, above all, by the presence of God, which I feel was “perceivable to all,” in such a clear and evident way that people are won over.

And it is this presence of God that gives hope.

Moreover, I have personally seen this hope become reality in the Malcolm Shabazz Mosque of Harlem (USA) a year and a half ago, when I spoke to 3,000 African-American Muslims, to whom I had been invited, here also, to give my experience.

The welcome they gave us, beginning with their leader, W. D. Mohammed, was so warm, so sincere and enthusiastic that it opened our hearts to the most promising dreams for the future. ...

Continuing now with the religions that trace their roots back to Abraham, I must speak of the evermore frequent meetings we have had with our Jewish brothers and sisters in various parts of the world. The most recent of these was held this year in Buenos Aires during my trip to Latin America, with one of their large communities.

With great emotion we met one another and made a pact of mutual love which was so profound and sincere that it was as if we had suddenly overcome centuries of persecution and misunderstanding.

Now there are approximately 30,000 members of other religions who share, as much as they can, the spirituality and aims of the Movement.

If someone were to ask me why the Focolare Movement’s interreligious dialogue has had such a rapid and fruitful evolution, we would have to respond that the decisive and characteristic element is love, love poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit.

Love which finds a spontaneous and immediate echo in the other religions and cultures. This is true because all the major religions have in common the so-called Golden Rule which, for us, says: "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you" (Lk. 6:31). This is present in all religions.

And so we say: you must love, we must love, and so we must love one another, so they we must treat one another like brothers and sisters. We can work together for universal brotherhood. ...