

(English translation)

Amman, 29 November 1999

### **The Spirituality for Common Living and Common Action**

Chiara at the Seventh Assembly of the World Conference on Religion and Peace

Moderator: It's a pleasure and a great honour and privilege to introduce to the Assembly Ms Chiara Lubich, the president and the foundress of the Focolare Movement.

Chiara: Distinguished Delegates, Brothers and Sisters of Every Religion,

Thank you very much for the warm welcome I received in this splendid country and my cordial greetings to each and every one of you. And my heartfelt thanks to the Secretary General of the WCRP for having invited me, on behalf of the Assembly Preparatory Committee and the International Executive Committee, to conclude this Assembly with some reflections and experiences on the theme: "The Spirituality for Common Living and Common Action".

First of all, it is an honour for me to participate in such an important event.

During these days, we have felt the weight of an enormous responsibility: that of representing our religious traditions in what is the most decisive challenge of this and the coming millennium: the building of a new and peaceful world.

The various problems examined, the plans of action in favour of peace, the final declaration of this Assembly call us all to a commitment which we might feel is beyond our strength.

This is why it is essential to keep in mind the great ideals that prompted us to meet together, because it is only by believing in these that we will be able to face the challenges of the future.

...

We all know them. ... What urged the enlightened founders of the Conference and what continues to draw all of us here is love for peace. ...

We are here because we, too, ... are convinced that, in spite of everything, peace is still possible; indeed, that it is the only feasible path for a future worthy of the highest human values. ...

We are here because we are profoundly convinced that working towards peace corresponds to our innermost vocation, to the most heartfelt aspirations of the human heart, and, in a word, to our being women and men of religion.

In view of the great modern challenges of technology, of ethnic conflicts, of poverty and the violation of human rights, "religions must draw," as Bishop Rossano, an expert in this field said, "they must draw spiritual strength from their deepest recesses so as to help humanity today and to lead it toward solidarity and peace."<sup>1</sup>

Each one of us, stirred by his or her own religious faith, is certainly engaged in this wonderful adventure.

Each one has had positive and negative experiences and has shared them with others during these days so as to propose new solutions to problems and to pursue new incentives in favour of peace.

Allow me, then, to offer you my personal experience in contact with people of all ages, languages, races, religions and ethnic groups around the world. It is an experience of common living and common action which can also provide the key for building a harmonious and peaceful human society.

Several years ago I was invited to Japan by a large Buddhist lay Movement. Many of its young members asked me a number of questions, one more demanding than the other. One of the questions was: "In your opinion, what is the meaning of the word 'peace'?"

<sup>1</sup>. P. Rossano, *Religioni in dialogo per la pace*, Brescia, 1991, p. 161.

The notes I had prepared to answer that question were limited to a few words: "Peace is the fruit of unity. When we have unity with God, there is inner peace. When there is unity among brothers and sisters, there is peace in the family. When there is unity among peoples, there is peace in the world."

But the young people persisted with other questions: "Yes, unity is important, but how can we accomplish it?" Another brief answer: "In order to accomplish unity, we must be united to God by doing his will. We should further unite among generations, groups, and Movements. Likewise, we should foster unity between the rich and the poor (thus, by all means, promoting some form of communion of goods); we should encourage unity among people of different races, of different nations; we should unite, as far as possible, those who follow different religions and different ideologies."

These were the brief notes I had written at that time with the intention of examining the subject more closely afterwards, but I never found the opportunity to do so. Today it might be worthwhile to spend a few more words in order to explain those affirmations and to consider them in the light of an experience of life.

The Movement I represent has more than 50 years of experience, and yet we are always surprised to see that God has led us along a spiritual pathway that intersects with all the other spiritual ways, and, while maintaining its own identity, it enables us to meet and come to a mutual understanding with all the great religious traditions of humanity.

In other words, as we listened in obedience to the Spirit, we learned an art which is sorely needed in the world today: the art of loving.

Fromm, a great psychologist of our times said: "Our civilization very rarely seeks to learn the art of loving; despite the desperate search for love, everything else is considered to be more important: success, prestige, money and power. We use almost all our energy in pursuit of these goals and almost none in learning the art of loving."<sup>2</sup>

This was not the case - thanks to help from Above - for me and millions of people I know. Therefore, I would like to share with you some key points of that art of loving which we have learned and tried to put into practice in families, societies, States and international relations.

It is an art which needs to be constantly revived and lived, in order to give more meaning, indeed, full meaning to all the work awaiting us.

The first step, the first illumination with regard to this new lifestyle dates back to World War II. Face to face with the crumbling of ideals and the loss of all our material goods, we felt that we had to cling to something that would not pass and that no bomb could destroy: God. We chose him as the only ideal of our life, believing, in spite of everything, in his love as a Father, his love for all men and women on earth.

But obviously it was not enough to believe in the love of God, not enough to have chosen him as our Ideal. The Father's presence and loving care calls each person to be a true daughter or son, loving the Father in return and living, day by day, according to the Father's loving plan; in other words, doing his will.

And we know that a father's first desire is for his children, all his children, to treat each other as brothers and sisters, to care for and love one another.

This art of loving requires us to love everyone, as God does, making no distinctions. No choice is to be made between those who are pleasant or unpleasant; beautiful or ugly; fellow-citizen or foreigner; black, white, or yellow; European or American, African or Asian, Christian or Jew, Muslim or Hindu.... To use a familiar expression, we can say that love knows no form of discrimination.

For a Christian, moreover, everyone must be loved because it is Christ whom we love in each person. He himself will tell us: "You did it to me" (Mt. 25:40).

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<sup>2</sup>. E. Fromm, *L'arte di amare. Il saggiaiore*, Milan, 1971, p. 18.

We found this same faith in the love that a God has for his creation in many brothers and sisters of other religions, beginning with those that trace their roots back to Abraham, religions which affirm the unity of humankind, God's care for all humanity, and the duty of every human being to act, like the Creator, with immense mercy toward all.

A Muslim maxim affirms: "God forgives a hundred times, but he reserves his greatest mercy for those whose piety has spared the smallest of his creatures."<sup>3</sup>

And what should we say of the boundless compassion for every living being taught by Buddha, who said to his first disciples: "Oh Monks, you should work for the wellbeing of many, for the happiness of many, moved by compassion for the world, for the wellbeing ... of men and women."<sup>4</sup>

This then is the first point of the art of loving: to love everyone, without distinction. ...

But this love has another characteristic which is known by many because it is affirmed in all the sacred books. If it is lived, this point alone would be enough to make the whole world one big family: To love each person as ourselves, to do to others what you would have them do to you, and not do to others what you would not have them do to you. It is the so-called Golden Rule, very well expressed by Gandhi when he affirmed: "You and I are one and the same thing. I cannot hurt you without harming myself."<sup>5</sup>

From this principle flows a norm which, if applied, could on its own provide the greatest impetus towards bringing harmony among individuals and groups, within families as well as States. Just think what the world would be like if not only individuals, but also peoples, ethnic groups, and States were to practice the Golden Rule. For example, "Love the other's country as your own."

I was able to communicate this dream of ours to people involved in politics and to statesmen and women of many nations. The fruits confirm that this message touched many hearts.

But politicians themselves and all those who have responsibility for the common good need our support. They need to see that there are people of different traditions, cultures and convictions who are in contact with one another, beyond all the barriers, who look after one another, concretely helping one another to face the problems of everyday life.

Another step in the art of loving is perhaps the most demanding of all. It tests the authenticity and purity of love, therefore its real capacity to generate peace. It is to be first in loving, that is, not waiting for the other person to take the first step, to be the first to move, to take the initiative.

This way of loving lays us open to risks, but if we want to love in the image of God and to develop this capacity to love, which God has put in our hearts, we must do as he did. He did not wait for us to love him in return. Rather, he showed us always and in thousands of ways that he loves us first, whatever our response might be.

We have been created as a gift for one another and we fulfil ourselves by striving to love our brothers and sisters with a love that is ready to take the first move without expecting any gesture of love on their part. This is what all the great founders of religions teach us with their lives. Buddha, for example, "not only taught non-violence and peace, but he presented himself on the battlefield itself and personally intervened to prevent war between peoples and religions."<sup>6</sup>

The greatest expression of being the first to love is the offering of oneself: "No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends" (Jn. 15:13), as Jesus taught and did.

Furthermore, when two or more persons live this characteristic of love, ready to make the first move towards the other, love becomes mutual, and it is the most solid foundation for peace and unity in the world. It is capable of giving life to that universal human family which goes beyond the limited

<sup>3</sup>. G. M. Guzzetti, *Islam in preghiera*, Rome, 1991, p. 136.

<sup>4</sup>. Mahagga, 19.

<sup>5</sup>. Quoted from Wilhelm Mühs, *Parole del cuore*, Milan, 1996, p. 82.

<sup>6</sup>. W. Rahula, *L'insegnamento di Buddha*, Rome, 1996, p. 102.

concept of an international society, because within this family, the relationships among individuals, groups, and nations are designed to break down whatever divisions and barriers exist in any age.

Certainly whoever wants to move the mountains of hatred and violence in today's world faces a huge and heavy task. But – this is important - what is beyond the strength of millions of separate, isolated individuals begins to appear possible when people have made reciprocal love, mutual understanding and unity the motivating force of their lives.

There is a reason, a secret key, and a name for all this. When we enter into dialogue among ourselves of the most various religions, that is, when we are open to the other in a dialogue made of human kindness, reciprocal esteem and respect, we are also opening ourselves to God and, in the words of John Paul II, “we let God be present in our midst.”<sup>7</sup>

This is the fruit of our mutual love and the secret force which gives vigour and success to our efforts for peace. It is that which the Gospel announces to Christians when it says that if two or more are united in genuine love, Christ himself, who is Peace, is present among them and therefore in each one of them.

And what greater guarantee than the presence of God, what greater opportunity can there be for those who want to be instruments of brotherhood and peace?

This mutual love and unity gives great joy to those who practice it. However, it calls for commitment, daily application and sacrifice.

And this is where one particular word, in the language of Christians, appears in all its brilliance and power. It's one that the world does not want to hear, a word it considers foolish, absurd, futile.

This word is the cross.

Nothing good, nothing useful, nothing fruitful for the world can be achieved without meeting and accepting weariness and suffering; in a word, without the cross.

Dedicating one's life to the cause of peace is a commitment not to be taken lightly! It calls for courage, knowing how to suffer.

Actually, was it not the memory of the pain and suffering of World War II that gave rise to the United Nations?

And was it not the memory of the absurd sufferings inflicted on people by the wars of religion, and the incentive to heal all the conflicts precisely in the name of the religious faiths that gave life to the World Conference on Religion and Peace?

But let's return to our “art of loving”. There is one last point I would like to tell you about which teaches us how to put into practice true love toward others.

It is a very simple formula made up of three little words: make yourself one.

“Making ourselves one” with others means making their worries, their thoughts, their sufferings, their joys, our own. ...

“Making ourselves one” applies first of all to interreligious dialogue. It has been written that: “to know the other's religion implies putting yourself in the shoes of the other, seeing the world as he or she sees it, grasping what it means for the other to be Buddhist, Muslim, Hindu, etc.”<sup>8</sup>

But this “living the other” embraces all aspects of life and it is the greatest expression of love because:

- by living in this way we are dead to ourselves, to our ego and to all attachments;
- we can achieve that “self-nothingness” to which the great spiritualities aspire and that emptiness of love which is accomplished in the act of welcoming the other;

<sup>7</sup>. John Paul II, Discourse to non-Christian representatives in Madras, India, February 5, 1986, *Osservatore Romano* (Weekly English Edition) February 10, 1986, p. 14.

<sup>8</sup>. Cf. F. Whaling, Christian Theology and World Religions: A Global Approach, London, 1986, pp. 130-131.

- we give space to the other, who will always find a place in our heart;
- we relate to others always with an attitude of learning, because we really do have something to learn.

...

Clearly, all this is not only kindness and understanding; it is not a technique for “interpersonal relationships”, a tactic for reaching agreements, for selling one’s ideas. Love has only one goal: ... one loves solely in order to give oneself completely and without any personal interest.

What I have explained is not a utopia but a reality lived for more than half a century by millions of people, a pilot experience of that common living in the name of religion which is the characteristic of this Assembly.

I have endeavoured to share with you the cornerstones of a spirituality, which, although born in one Church, in one particular religion, is universal and can be lived, in one way or another, by everyone.

In fact, this spirituality has given rise to a number of fruitful dialogues: with Christians from many Churches, with believers of various religions and with people of the most varied cultures. Together we move toward that fullness of truth that all of us strive for.

Because of this spirituality, men and women of almost every nation of the world, are slowly but surely trying to be, in their environments, seeds of a new people, of a more united world, a world at peace, one committed especially to those who are the weakest, the poorest.

Because of this spirituality, we felt the responsibility to be present here in this meeting among believers of various religions, and to contribute to the efforts which all men and women of good will are making in favour of a peaceful co-existence.

This is all. Thank you for having listened to me.

May God, the Father of all, bless those who are working “at the closing of the century and for the coming millennium, to build a civilization worthy of the human person,”<sup>9</sup> a civilization of love.

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<sup>9</sup>. John Paul II, *Osservatore Romano* (Weekly English Edition), October 11, 1995, p. 10.