

(English translation)

Rome, Capitoline Hall, 22 January 2000

The Focolare Movement's contribution to the city

From the speech in occasion of the conferment of the honorary citizenship of Rome

...

Today I have become a Roman citizen. (Applause)

I certainly feel small and insignificant in relation to this indescribable and extraordinary city, so immensely rich in history, art, culture, and blessings, as it encloses, like a precious jewel case, the pulsating heart of universal Christendom.

I feel insignificant in front of the celebrities who have preceded me in this honour, even though I know that what could have drawn the attention of the administrators of Rome was first and foremost a gift of God, a charism which has given life today to the worldwide Focolare Movement.

In any case, I know that Mother Theresa of Calcutta, my close friend and a meritorious recipient of Roman citizenship, is here spiritually with me.

...

I, we, members of the Focolare Movement, have been present in Rome since 1949.

An article of mine appeared that year in the "*La Via*" weekly publication directed by the Honourable Igino Giordani. It is entitled: "The Resurrection of Rome" and it is remembered even today by the focolarini. It clearly expressed my thoughts of the city at that time. It began more or less like this:

"If I look at this Rome and the way it is, I feel my Ideal (which is to bring the fire of the love of Christ into the world) is as distant as the times in which the great saints and martyrs illuminated with the eternal light even the walls of these monuments which still stand to bear witness to the Love which united the first Christians. And now, in striking contrast, the world with its coldness dominates this city."

In this article I expressed the strong desire to cooperate with its leaders and with other groups and Movements inspired by God, to rekindle the fire of divine love in its houses, streets, places of study and work, in Parliament, everywhere.

I believe that this thought of mine, as Mother Theresa of Calcutta said, was a sort of "vocation in a broader vocation," that of cooperating with the Church towards accomplishing unity on our planet, the unity that Jesus asked for when he prayed: "May they all be one."

During those years, in fact, I would have liked to use our best energies toward restoring the fire of love to Rome. But there was another divine plan for us at that time. The project of a Work of God is in heaven, like a musical score which is then played out on earth. The will of God, during many of these past years, has been to spread the Movement around the globe and to weave a network of love among people of many nations, of different races and languages, of every Christian denomination, with baptism as our common ground; and among those of various religions, giving great importance to the so-called "Golden Rule" which is present not only in the Gospel, but also in the sacred books of the major religions of the world. It says: "Do to others what you would have them do to you, and do not do to others what you would not have them do to you." Both are synonymous with love of neighbour.

God urged us to weave a network of love also with people of all convictions - men and women of good will who are engaged in safeguarding human values within themselves and who do all they can to promote them in society.

Thus we saw the birth, development and diffusion of "a people" (as the Holy Father likes to see and call our Movement) in all nations, silently but decisively living the Gospel in depth and inundating with its light and strength the different spheres of human endeavour: from politics to economics, from culture to art, from education to medicine, law, and still others.

And all this is aimed at building up in the world, through universal brotherhood, a new civilization, the civilization of love.

But, of course, Rome did not stand still. As the years passed, I have seen this city gradually shine forth with renewed splendour: it has risen up step by step, through the efforts of worthy and competent civic authorities in every environment and field, and under all aspects, through the commitment of many holy religious dignitaries who zealously work to raise up their communities ever more intensely, and of many Romans who have now become agents of their city's renewal. Thus Rome can hardly be recognized any longer, and today in particular, also because of the special care with which it has been beautified externally, to the joy of many pilgrims of the world who visit it and who will continue to do so during this Jubilee year. Certainly, as in all things on earth, negative points are not lacking and something can always be innovated so as to respond to new situations, to new problems that evolve in society, so as to give new lustre to the unmistakable countenance of this city.

Therefore, I would like to seal this day, which concerns the Focolare Movement and me personally, with a commitment on our part: from this day forward, to increase and improve our efforts in this city. I would like to potentiate in Rome what our charism can offer: love, mutual love and a deeper unity among all, everywhere. Through words and example, I would like to communicate to many people "what loving truly means" because, as one scholar said: "Loving is fine; knowing how to love is everything."¹ Yes, "knowing how to love," because Christian love is an art and one must know this art.

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, power. We use almost all our energy in pursuit of these goals and almost none in learning the art of loving."²

The true art of loving emerges completely from the Gospel of Christ. It is the first inevitable step we can take in unleashing a revolution which is peaceful but so incisive and radical that it changes everything. It is the secret of that revolution of love which enabled the early Christians to invade the world known at that time. It is a demanding art, with challenging requirements. In speaking of it today, I would like to offer it for your consideration, Ladies and Gentlemen, because, if you wish, we can help one another to spread it everywhere, so that Rome may become for the world that hearth of fire and light that it must be if it is to cooperate in bringing unity to the world.

It is an art that wants us to surpass the limited horizons of a simply natural love, often directed almost exclusively to family and friends. This love is directed to everyone: to the pleasant or unpleasant, attractive or unattractive, fellow-citizens or foreigners, those who share my religion or another, my culture or another, friend or enemy. It is necessary to love everyone just as our Father in heaven makes the sun shine and the rain fall on the good and on the bad.

It is a love that urges you to be first in loving, always, without waiting to be loved, as Jesus did with us. When we were still sinners, when we were not loving, he gave his life for us.

And it is a love that considers the other person as oneself, that sees in the other person another self. Gandhi once stated: "You and I are one and the same thing. I cannot hurt you without harming myself."³

This love does not consist only of words or sentiments. It is expressed concretely. It requires that we make ourselves one with others, that "we live the other" in a sense, sharing his or her sufferings and joys, in order to understand him/her, to help him/her in a real, concrete way. Making ourselves one. We cannot love without making ourselves one, without entering into the life of the other person.

¹ Chateaubriand, in *Aforismi e citazioni cristiane*, Casale Monferrato 1994, p. 17.

² Eric Fromm, *L'arte di amare, Il saggiatore*, Milan, 1971, p. 18.

³ Quoted from Wilhelm Mühs, *Parole del cuore*, Milan, 1996, p. 82.

This art wants us to love Jesus in every person. Even though our love is directed toward a man or woman, Jesus considers the good or evil done to them as being done to him. He said this and repeated it, speaking of the majestic scene of the last judgment: “You did it to me” (Mt. 25:40).

Finally, when this art of loving is lived by two or more persons, love becomes mutual: in the family, at work, in groups, in all realms of society; mutual love, the pearl of the Gospel, the “new commandment” of Christ, which builds unity.

Your Excellencies, Ladies, Gentlemen and Friends, may the Lord inflame all of us with true love! It is what matters the most. Without it, everything loses meaning, even knowing the language of the angels – as Paul says – even giving everything to the poor, even giving one’s body to the flames.

Love is the life of the world. We ardently desire that those who see Rome will be able to say of its citizens what was said of the early Christians: “Look at how they love one another and how they are ready to die for one another.”⁴ Because it is by living words like these that our city will be crowned with the glory that is most consonant with its lofty vocation. Such an unconditional and radical love will make Rome a luminous testimony of the only One who can totally fulfil it on a spiritual level and, because he is Man and not only God, also – through his children – on a social level.

Thank you, Mr. Mayor. Thanks to the civic and religious dignitaries. Thanks to all those who are present, for this day and for this gift that is being offered to me, to us today. May the Lord make us worthy of this honour. (Applause)

(Greeting to the group of the Movement gathered in the square)

Dearest everyone, first of all thank you for coming. You were out here in the cold, despite the chill.

Today is a day of celebration, a joy within the greater joy of the Jubilee, because of this Roman citizenship which was conferred on me, but you know that it was given to the charism - therefore it’s a gift of the Holy Spirit – to our Movement, which you belong to or from which you have received a ray of this charism. So, I feel that this is a collective citizenship.

We must thank God and be ready.... (applause)

We must thank God and be ready to correspond with all our life, also for the benefit of this city where, in front of everyone, I committed myself to increase and improve our efforts, naturally with the help of you who are here in Rome.

Good-bye to everyone, ciao! (Applause)

⁴ Tertulliano, *Apologetico*, testo latino, traduzione e note di Anna Resta Barrile, Zanichelli, Bologna 1980, cap. 39,7, p. 145.