

Conference Call CH  
Mollens, Switzerland, August 9, 1990

### **The art of “removing”**

(prepared text)

Here we are at the second<sup>1</sup> worldwide conference call. We thank God today that we can all be together, united all over the whole world. May Jesus be in our midst!

Two days from now we will celebrate the feast of Saint Clare and, as has been our custom every year, everyone will meet together wherever they are, for a family celebration, full of joy. It will be the same for many of us here, too, in Switzerland.

However, this year we would like to give this day a more precise meaning. Without neglecting the best wishes that we extend now to all the people in the Movement who are named after Saint Clare, from now on we would like August 11<sup>th</sup> to be a feast day of the Work of Mary, in which we can thank God for the past year. It can be a celebration – of course, with songs, dances, skits, artistic performances, pastries and so on – in which we can remember all the many graces God bestowed on us during the preceding months. This will also encourage us to improve constantly.

Of course, all this will be done under the protection of the great Saint Clare of Assisi, who from the early days of the Movement, has always been very close to us. In fact, every year we recall one aspect of her life that can help us better understand our own spirituality. And we want to do the same this year, too.

Clare became a saint for many reasons. And certainly not least among these were the very severe penances she practiced. She was a daughter of her times, when people thought that a person achieves union with God by practicing penance, even though, when she met Saint Francis, she modified her thinking and behavior, and strived to go to God by imitating Christ. In any case, she did many kinds of penance, to the point of becoming ill.

What does this detail of Saint Clare of Assisi’s earthly life teach us? Is doing penance really necessary to achieve holiness? What does Jesus think, what does the Church think?

“Christ, who always practiced in his life what he preached, before beginning his ministry spent forty days and forty nights in prayer and fasting...”<sup>2</sup> Therefore, Jesus did not abolish fasting. Nevertheless, he insisted more, and above all, on self-denial and

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1 Before this, the calls were divided into various groups since the telephone company could only do a certain number of connections at a time. Afterwards, technology developed so that there was no limit to the number of places connected. Thus the “worldwide” conference call began.

2 Pope Paul VI, *Paenitemini*: The Apostolic Constitution on Fast and Abstinence, Vatican, February 17, 1966. Ch. 1.

carrying one's cross.<sup>3</sup> The Church, for her part, invites all Christians, whatever their vocation, to make some voluntary act of penance.<sup>4</sup>

We all know that our way is the way of love. We follow the path of loving God by being totally focused on doing his will, even when it is painful, and loving our neighbors. In particular, we go to God *through* our neighbor. It is here that we find the greatest opportunity for denying ourselves and carrying our cross. By thinking of others and caring for them we do not think about ourselves, we deny ourselves, we are detached from ourselves. And we do this when others are sensitive to our love and respond to us, but in a particular way, when they do not.

If our neighbor is very often the cause of our joy, the divine joy we experience when we love, at times he or she is also a "cross" for us, our Jesus forsaken whom we have to embrace with all our heart. And this is true penance.

Nonetheless - I have said this before, but I want to repeat it now because it is so important - in order to deny ourselves, to become totally dead to ourselves, it might not be enough to love, making God's will our own every day, even when it's painful, and loving our neighbors, suffering for others. Something might still remain in us, like being attached to our own ideas, for example, or to a personal preference, or to something satisfying, or to useless thoughts or words, or to a book, or money, or a television program that's not necessary, or to people, and so on.

So we have to "lose," cut away. And this too is renouncing; this too is the cross. Saint John of the Cross says that the person who does not cut off attachments is like someone who wants to reach God - to take the holy journey - by dragging a cart up a hill.<sup>5</sup> They go ahead very slowly, if they go ahead at all.

Yes, because going towards holiness is a little like sculpting. Michelangelo said that sculpting is the art of "removing," of chipping away at the marble or clay, piece by piece, so as to produce a work of art. It is said that once, looking at a block of marble, he said, "Inside that block there is an angel; I want to bring him out." And he sculpted the angel by removing all the rest.<sup>6</sup>

Similarly, Jesus is hidden in us and we have to bring him to birth over and over again. We certainly need to remove from the rough block of our ego all that should be eliminated. Ninety-nine percent is eliminated by loving, and the rest by losing, by taking away, by removing. Let's try again and again to live in this way during this period.

Dear friends, holiness cannot be reached by being haphazard about it! It's necessary to concentrate on the fine points. Therefore, let's practice the art of "removing," by loving, of course, and particularly in this period, by losing.

Chiara Lubich

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3 See Mt 10:38-39

4 See Pope Paul VI, *Paenitemini*, Ch. 3.

5 Saint John of the Cross, *Sayings of Light and Love*, no. 53

6 Raniero Cantalamessa, *Mary, Mirror of the Church*, Liturgical Press, Collegeville, 1992.