

## **The Focolare Movement's commitment to Christian unity**

### **Strengthen fellowship**

### **So as to witness together**

**By Jesús Morán**

*In an overview of more than 55 years of ecumenical experience by the Focolare, the Movement's Co-President considers the foundations and characteristics of this commitment. An "Ecumenical spirituality", "the dialogue of life", "the ecumenism of the people, "the exchange of gifts", and "ecumenical catholicity" are salient aspects of a charism which enables one to experience a foretaste of the unity that is to come. At the same time, it sets out a path that can enable the theological dialogue to be ever more fruitful.*

In this talk, I would like to identify some foundations, some tracks on which the ecumenical commitment of the Focolare has gone ahead and, in particular, the perspectives that have emerged over the last few years. Where does this commitment derive from? What pushes the movement in this direction and what are the characteristics of its commitment?

The basis of my contribution is the spirituality of unity that nourishes the life of the Focolare Movement. At the Second European Ecumenical Assembly held in Graz in 1997 it was called an "ecumenical spirituality". Christians of various Churches can share this "ecumenical spirituality" because it is based on the New Testament. By "spirituality", I mean a way of living Christian life, a way of translating Christian faith into life.

Before I enter into the subject, let me share some personal background. I met Chiara Lubich and the Focolare Movement in 1974. I was young and was fascinated by the way the people I met focused on the Sacred Scripture. As a Spaniard, I grew up in a Catholic setting; I knew that the Gospel was read and meditated on in church, but these new friends suggested that I put it into practice. I tried it out and made a discovery: living the Gospel meant to love, to let Jesus live within me. I wanted to change society but the first surprise was that the Gospel was changing me.

Later, when I heard about Chiara Lubich's contacts with people from various churches: with Patriarch Athenagoras I, with Archbishop Robert Runcie, who was then Primate of the Church of England ... I noticed that this charism also generated great interest in those who were not Catholic, indeed, sometimes even more interest than in Catholics themselves. My only ecumenical experience up to then had been spending Holy Week in Taizé, France. Then, in the Focolare Movement, I found an ecumenism lived in daily life. I realized that building up the "One" Church, which we all confess in the Creed, was also my concern; making it visible depended on me too. For this reason, I am particularly pleased to be here today with you, certain that even this meeting can be a small, but significant part of our journey together on the path that will lead us to the visible and full communion that we all ardently desire.

Perhaps it is not superfluous to dwell on a fundamental thought about the ecumenical nature of the Focolare Movement, taken from a speech made by Chiara Lubich to 7,000 priests and religious adherents of the Movement gathered in 1982 in the Paul VI Hall. It can offer a key to what I will say later:

“The Work of Mary does not belong only to the Catholic world. Mary brought it to life for Christians of other Churches as well. Together we form one reality, even within the limits that the still existing divisions involve. Nevertheless, in our deep unity, we can see foreshadowed in a certain way what will come to be.

Who urges all the Christian members of the Movement to dialogue with one another, to foster, day by day, that communion among them which is already possible, to establish among all the presence of Jesus, which our common baptism guarantees? Who urges Catholic priests to be united, as much as possible, with priests and ministers of other traditions? It is Jesus crucified who, in his cry of abandonment, took upon himself all the divisions of the world, all the consequences of our sin. It is because of Jesus crucified that we seek one another out, that we love one another, that we hope and do not give up, even when the endeavour appears arduous. He, who, in the heart of history, paid for every division in the world, including the division among us Christians, has not yet seen all the fruit of his immense suffering. Thus, he spurs us on to sow, even though we will not be the ones to reap. He urges us to look to the good of the Church, which will continue on after us; he convinces us that if no one begins, and perseveres, no one will conclude.”<sup>1</sup>

In these few very meaningful sentences, Chiara Lubich offered essential insights to better understand what we, the Focolare Movement, try to experience and offer in the ecumenical field. All that has happened over many years of ecumenical history depends, I think, on this essential affirmation. The charism given by God to Chiara cannot be confined to the sphere of institutional Catholicism but is rooted in an ecclesial dimension that can be shared by all traditions because its source is the heart of the Gospel, the centre of the original *kerygma*. This connects with the nature of the spirituality that arises from this charism: a spirituality of communion, in the image of the Trinity, a characteristic that is probably indispensable for a spirituality to be able to call itself Christian. This spirituality gives precedence to the “dialogue of life” in ecumenical relations; a methodology that we seek to live in meetings such as this that bring us here to Katowice.

### **The dialogue of life**

Regarding the so-called “dialogue of life” we might ask, how useful is it? How important is it for ecumenism today? In 2001, Konrad Raiser, then General Secretary of the World Council of Churches, in an interview with the French newspaper *La Croix*, spoke of “an ecumenism of the heart, not only of the spirit and of the intellect, but an ecumenism, we might say, of life. This is what is needed.”<sup>2</sup> Cardinal Walter Kasper, in a talk on the Situation and Vision of the Ecumenical Movement, echoed him, saying, “We must fill the intermediate stage we have reached with real life, with a real even if incomplete ecclesial *communio*. ‘The ecumenism of love’ and ‘the ecumenism of truth’ should retain all their importance, but they must be practised through an ‘ecumenism of life’.”<sup>3</sup> Cardinal Kurt Koch, the current President of the Pontifical Council for the Promotion of Christian Unity, also emphasized this. He said, “Theological dialogue is not the only form of ecumenism.”<sup>4</sup> It is, of course, important, but we are aware that the divisions between the Churches occurred “not principally because of theological doctrinal issues, but because of a

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<sup>1</sup> Chiara Lubich, “Priests and Religious Today”, Vatican, 1982

<sup>2</sup> Interview published in *La Croix*, 23 January 2001

<sup>3</sup> Walter Kasper, *Prolusio*, in *Information Service* 109 (2002/I-II)

<sup>4</sup> Cf. M. Fontana, *A colloquio con il cardinale Koch dopo il viaggio di Papa Francesco in Caucaso – Cordialità e ospitalità*, [In conversation with Cardinal Koch after Pope Francis’ journey to the Caucasus- Cordiality and Hospitality] in «L’Osservatore Romano», 11 ottobre 2016 (<http://www.news.va/it/news/a-colloquio-con-il-cardinale-koch-dopo-il-viaggio>).

gradual shift at the level of mind-set and culture.<sup>5</sup> Therefore, the "dialogue of life" - and I mean "life" with capital L, Life lived in the presence of the Risen One, enables Christians to come together in a profound "exchange of gifts" that enriches all, creating a new climate of trust among them.

An important detail is that the "dialogue of life" highlights the urgent need for spirituality in the ecumenical movement. It is a matter, then, of supporting - as W. Kasper says - all institutional reforms and all theological agreements with a concrete commitment in this direction:

"A first and fundamental step on the path of renewal," says this well-known theologian, referring in particular to the dialogue between Catholics and Lutherans, could be to make spiritual ecumenism become the beating heart of ecumenism. We could establish binding appointments for regular shared prayer, for a spiritual reading of Scripture and Bible Study together between Catholic and Lutheran groups and communities, among Catholic and Lutheran bishops, parish priests and their collaborators. The fruit of such encounters would be the transformation and reconciliation of hearts."<sup>6</sup>

### **What contribution to the future of the Church?**

From what has been said so far, it is evident that our efforts in terms of existential dialogue lead us firmly forward and could be described as a journey towards Emmaus. A journey during which Christ in our midst will make us rediscover together the apostolic faith. By witnessing Christ together, we will learn to live "unity in diversity."<sup>7</sup> Pope Francis's speeches strongly reiterate this journey together: "I love to repeat that unity is achieved by journeying, to remind ourselves that when we journey together, meaning when we meet as brothers and sisters, pray together, collaborate together in proclaiming the Gospel and in serving the last, we are already united."<sup>8</sup> The unity we live and seek is not uniformity, the same Holy Spirit creates diversity, but, as Cardinal Walter Kasper says, we must look for "ecumenical catholicity"<sup>9</sup> in which all Churches find their place.

Unity and reconciliation begin in the heart, in the encounter between people, in welcoming openness. And who can stop us from appreciating one another's spiritual gifts even now? And to consider them as a gift for us too?<sup>10</sup>

Our unity "in" and "through" Christ in our midst, makes us then, in a sense, anticipate the gift of unity we are preparing to receive. This presence enables the faithful of many Churches present in the Movement to say they already feel we are one Christian family. A family that no one can separate because the love of Christ binds us together. This presence among us has opened a new dialogue, the dialogue of the people, of all the people of God, including bishops, cardinals, metropolitans and [other] Church leaders. "A dialogue that generates a *new life* for the full and

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<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> W. Kasper-Ulrich Wilkens, *Svegliate, ecumene! Come fare avanzare l'unità dei cristiani*, [Wake up, ecumene! How to progress Christian Unity] Queriniana, Brescia 2016, p. 81.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Pope Francis: Talk given at the Pentecostal Church of the Reconciliation, Caserta, 28 July 2014.

<sup>8</sup> Talk by Pope Francis to the Plenary meeting of the Pontifical Council for the Promotion of Christian Unity, 10.11.2016

<sup>9</sup> W. Kasper, *Martin Luther. An ecumenical perspective*, Queriniana, Brescia 2016, p. 59. By using this expression, W. Kasper echoes the idea of Carl. Andresen who in his essay *Handuc der Dogmenund Theologiegeschichte* identifies three phases in the development of the doctrine of the Church: «the time of catholicity (Patristic times and Middle Ages), the time of confessions[denominations] and that of ecumenicity» (*Ibid.*, 53).

<sup>10</sup> Cfr. *Evangelii gaudium*, n.246

visible communion to which we want to contribute.<sup>11</sup> Paolo Ricca, a well-known Waldensian theologian and pastor said:

"The Focolare Movement is a group that anticipates, I think, in its reality, in its composition, what we hope Christian unity is and will be. It is what the present Pope has described, albeit briefly, as reconciled diversity [...]. The focolares are exactly this, "reconciled diversity" because there, members of different Christian churches not only coexist, but also live a unity among them that is practically Christian unity. [...] So if I understand you, you are the front liners, at the frontline of the Ecumenical Movement precisely due to the way you are constituted and how you live your vocation."<sup>12</sup>

### **A spirituality of communion for a Church communion**

In presenting the latest convergence document prepared by the Faith and Constitution of the World Council of Churches: "The Church: Towards a Common Vision" (2013), the then director Dr John Gibaut introduced himself as follows:

"The great Italian witness to Christian unity, Chiara Lubich, was deeply aware of the importance of ecclesiology on the path to the unity for which Christ prayed, "that they may all be one"(Jn 17:22). During a visit to the World Council of Churches (WCC) in 2002, Chiara said, " As we know, Jesus founded his Church as one, and all Christians in the world profess in the Nicene-Constantinopolitan creed: "I believe in one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church."

There is only one Church of Christ, then, which we enter through baptism, which is "the sacramental bond of unity existing among all Christians." We know, however, that it is not enough to be united spiritually in our common baptism. "The ultimate goal of the ecumenical Movement is to re-establish full visible unity among all the baptised."

(Ut unum sint, No 77; EV 14/2829). This hoped-for reality highlights the fundamental role of ecclesiology. It really does. But what kind of ecclesiology do we mean?" Dr Gibaut concluded his talk saying, "This is the fundamental question for the ecumenical movement today."<sup>13</sup>

In answering this question, Chiara presented the spirituality of communion as it grew, not as a theory, but as a living experience of gospel love, which includes Christians belonging to more than 300 Churches. It is a spirituality that enables people to live in communion with Christ; a spirituality lived in accordance with Trinitarian life, with brothers and sisters grafted into the Mystical Body of Christ by their common baptism. At the same meeting, Konrad Raiser, then General Secretary of the World Council of Churches, stated what our attitude and ecumenical action should be at this stage: "Our search for unity is not an effort to construct an edifice. But it is rather a process of divesting, emptying ourselves of all that keeps us apart from Christ and thus from one another."<sup>14</sup>

For the church-as-communion to develop, it is essential to live it. As the Lutheran theologian, Minna Hietamäki of the Faith and Order Commission wrote:

"The discovery of theological convergences is possible through growth in mutual trust. By developing mutual trust, the Churches also develop the doctrinal convergence towards

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<sup>11</sup> Chiara Lubich, *Dialogo e' vita* [Dialogue is life], Rome, 2007, p.27

<sup>12</sup> Notiziario Mariapoli n.03 – 2016, p.18-19

<sup>13</sup> "Regno-Attualita" 58 (2013) p 204

<sup>14</sup> Chiara Lubich: *Il dialogo è vita*, p.73

consensus. Consensus includes the element of doctrinal agreement, but it is primarily rooted in the experience of living together in one community."<sup>15</sup>

This "living together" is what the Focolare Movement can offer as in an "ecumenical laboratory". Our contribution is to help to remove distrust in order to create trust among Christians. Chiara Lubich said in 1997 at the opening of the Second European Ecumenical Assembly:

"During the centuries each Church has, to a degree, become set in its ways, because of the waves of indifference, lack of understanding and even of mutual hatred. What is needed in each Church is a supplement of love; or rather, Christianity needs to be invaded by a torrent of love. So we need love and mutual love between Christians, and mutual love between the Churches. The love that leads people to put everything in common, each Church becoming a gift for the others, so that we can foresee in the Church of the future that there will be just one truth but that it will be expressed in different ways, seen from different viewpoints, made more beautiful by the variety of interpretations."<sup>16</sup>

Today, the concept of the Church-as-communion, the ecclesiology of communion, *koinonia*, is seen in theological dialogues between Churches as the way of conceiving the Church and ecclesial unity, "The Church finds its own model, its origin and its own fulfilment in the mystery of God, One God in three Persons."<sup>17</sup>

Bishop Brian Farrell, secretary of the PCUC, in his speech to the already-mentioned "Ecumenical Week" last May said:

"Precisely because an ecclesiology of communion is not possible without a spirituality of communion, the Focolare Movement truly has a providential place at the heart of what the Spirit of God is saying to the Churches in this historical time of transformation. Chiara exhorts us: "So, we must treat one another as brothers and sisters; we need communion, solidarity; there is not enough sharing... We need to see a great fraternity rise up in the world and — given that the problem is universal — a universal fraternity." So, in the Movement, the spirituality of communion is also an ecclesiology of communion. As Chiara exhorts us: "it is our conviction that also the Churches themselves must love one another with this love. And we strive to work in this direction."<sup>18</sup>

To confirm this, as the Focolare Movement, we wanted to give an official response to the document published by the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches: "The Church, Towards a Common Vision", a response that was worked on by focolarine and focolarini of various Churches. We wrote:

"In short, it seems fundamental - as has emerged increasingly in the World Council of Churches - that the path to a common vision of the Church relies on ecumenical spirituality. Hence it relies on a commitment to a life that seeks to seal, also on the existential level, what has already been given to us by Christ through His Word and the Sacraments. We are convinced that by focusing our lives on the crucified and risen Christ, it will be possible, despite the barriers still existing, to grow in an experience of *koinonia*

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<sup>15</sup> Citato da Regno-Attualità, 8-2013, p.206

<sup>16</sup> Chiara Lubich, Una spiritualità per la riconciliazione, (A spirituality for reconciliation) Graz, 23 June 1997

<sup>17</sup> Catholic-Orthodox Dialogue, "Il mistero della Chiesa e dell'Eucaristia alla luce del mistero della Santa Trinità", [The mystery of the Church and of the Eucharist in the light of the Mystery of the Blessed Trinity] in *Enchiridion Oecumenicum* vol.1, n.2190.

<sup>18</sup> From, Il dialogo è vita, Roma, 2007, p.40 e 42.

that will eventually lead to full visible unity". [...] We not only assure our prayer, but also the active commitment of the Focolare Movement to increasingly strengthen the bonds of communion among all Christians, to bear witness together and foster fraternity among individuals and peoples, religions and cultures, thus contributing to a more just, ecologically sustainable world and a lasting peace."<sup>19</sup>

To build unity, a personal and collective renewal is needed. In the document "For the Conversion of Churches" (1991), the Dombes Group addressed a theme that has become a key to ecumenism today: conversion to Christ and His will.

What I consider fundamental for this "return to the centre", are two terms in the spirituality of the Focolare Movement: *kenosis* (Jesus crucified and forsaken) as a way to *koinonia*, communion with Jesus in the midst. We can offer this as a "vision" for the journey we are experiencing today, with complete and most sincere humility. Indeed, if I have mentioned the various quotes above, it is not to boast, with a superficial triumphalist attitude, but to highlight a gift of God.

### **What is the impact of this "new life" for the cause of unity of Christians?**

There are countless fruits of the "new life" arising from the spirituality of communion, which has now spread, at least as ecclesial self-awareness, within the various Churches. Here, I want to mention only a few. In particular, God is calling people from various Churches to share a life of self-giving to Him in the small communities that are the focolares. There are about 80 focolarini and focolarine of various Churches and God continues to call even today. For us, these are miracles of God's love; he calls people to give their lives for unity.

The dialogue of life is also fruitful in and among the parishes of various Churches: in twinings that help them know each other better, overcome prejudice, and find new forms of collaboration for social and cultural projects. Many young people in the focolare, who are of various Churches, are actively engaged together in supporting projects that help those in need close to them, for example in the Philippines and Cuba.

I imagine you would be interested to know if this "new life" also has an impact on theological dialogue. Before giving three examples, I would like to quote Bishop Klaus Hemmerle, who first began these ecumenical meetings of bishops, who had a deep understanding of the spirituality of unity. When asked if it could contribute to the theological dialogue, he replied:

"On the basis of mutual love we have special access to the truth. This does not replace theological work but makes it possible. Otherwise, all I would do is respond to one formula with another formula, instead of understanding why the other person thinks in that particular way. I should think what I think with great faithfulness (to my Church), but I have to explain my position to the other person with love and understand the reasons why theirs is different from mine. Thus, new ways of communication are opened to give truth in reciprocity, maturing together in the knowledge of the whole truth."<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> M. Voce – J. Morán, *Il contributo del Movimento dei Focolari* [The contribution of the Focolare Movement, in *Nuova Umanità* 38 (2016) n. 223 pp41-52.

<sup>20</sup> Quoted in Viviana de Marco, *Amare la Chiesa dell'altro come la propria* [Love your neighbour's Church as your own]. Klaus Hemmerle e l'unità dei cristiani, [Klaus Hemmerle and Christian unity] in *NU*, XXXIV novembre-dicembre, 2012/6.

This way of working can be a source of great light in theological dialogue. In fact, some experts in the Focolare Movement have been called upon to be part of official theological dialogues. At the regional and above all diocesan level, many people in the Movement are committed to creating, first and foremost, new relationships of mutual trust.

Another initiative is the theological symposia that have taken place between professors of the Romanian-Orthodox Faculty of Cluj (Romania) and those at the Sophia Institute of the Focolare Movement, based in Loppiano, near Florence. At the Sophia University Institute, an ecumenical Chair of Studies will be inaugurated on 14 December, dedicated to Patriarch Athenagoras and Chiara Lubich. It came about following the conferral of an Honorary Degree in the Culture of Unity to His Holiness Patriarch Bartholomew, by the Sophia Institute. Metropolitans and theologians from the Ecumenical Patriarchate will collaborate in its work.

Other collaborations have come about with the World Council of Churches and the Ecumenical University "Hope University" in Liverpool (Great Britain). This latter wanted to award Chiara Lubich an Honorary Degree just a few days before she passed away. It was the last of many she received. She was awarded this because of her long and ongoing contribution to "bringing together ecumenically, Christians of all denominations".<sup>21</sup>

We have also seen that the above-mentioned response of the Focolare Movement to the document of the World Council of Churches: "The Church: Towards a Common Vision" has been well received by the ecumenical world.

In essence, I believe that because the spirituality of unity is formally trinitarian, and rooted in the deep mystery of the kenosis of the Word (Cf Phil 2), it can and is already contributing to the "trinitarian-eucharistic-ecclesial syntax" which represents the most complete image (yet to be explored and lived) of the unity between the Churches we are struggling to find.

Finally, I would like to share what I personally have received from my many contacts with brothers and sisters of various Churches. I can say that, trying to love each one of them with this measure of love in Christ, every meeting has given me a new union with God, with Christ. I learn something from every brother or sister; I am enriched by the life of the Holy Spirit expressed them. I no longer see the face of a brother or sister of another Church, but rather the face of Christ in each one. I have experienced in my Christian flesh the paternity of Orthodox Patriarchs and Lutheran bishops, to the point of considering them as "my" patriarchs and "my" bishops. In this sense, in the multiplicity of relationships in various, even regular meetings, I have been able to experience the truth of the "shared ecumenical growth" that the theologians W. Kasper and U. Wickens wished for at the conclusion of their recent ecumenical essay.<sup>22</sup>

I see that, silently but steadfastly, God is outlining an irreversible path to achieve his design for humanity, which is universal fraternity. The fact that, in our own small way, we can help prepare the way for him, together with so many brothers and sisters of various churches, makes me happy and constantly confirms my vocation. That is why I emphasize the words in the "Ottmaring

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<sup>21</sup>Centro Chiara Lubich - Istituto Universitario Sophia, *Dottorati honoris causa conferiti a Chiara Lubich*, Città Nuova, Roma 2016, p. 409.

<sup>22</sup> W. Kasper-U. Wilckens, *Svegliati, Ecumene!*, cit., p. 188. Cf. Pontificio Consiglio per la Promozione dell'Unità dei Cristiani, *Direttorio per l'applicazione dei principi e delle norme sull'ecumenismo*, n. 55.

Declaration”<sup>23</sup>, which we as Focolare Movement felt urged to make during the year when the 500<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Reformation was commemorated:

"With all of our strength we would like to support the Churches in their commitment to reach full and visible communion and to serve humanity together. We will do our utmost to ensure that our activities, initiatives and meetings, international and especially local, be rooted in this open and fraternal attitude among Christians."

**Jesús Morán**

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<sup>23</sup> <http://www.focolare.org/en/news/2017/02/22/nuovo-impegno-ecumenico-dei-focolari/>