



**FOCOLARE MOVEMENT - WORK OF MARY
80TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE FOUNDATION
ROME, DECEMBER 7, 2023 - BASILICA OF ST. MARY MAJOR
HOLY MASS**

HOMILY

**(Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception of Mary Most Holy:
Gen 3:9-15-20; Eph 1:3-6.11-12; Lk 1:26-38)**

Dear brothers and sisters,

With great joy, we gather today in the oldest Marian church in the West to celebrate the Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception and to commemorate the 80th anniversary of the founding of the Focolare Movement.

Here in this Basilica is preserved a precious relic of the Bethlehem manger, the poor but blessed place where Mary laid Jesus after giving birth. And it is precisely from the mystery of Mary's divine motherhood that all the privileges and special graces she has received have their source, including the Immaculate Conception we celebrate today. Since she was chosen to become the Mother of the Son of God, she was also preserved from original sin and any personal sin from the moment of her conception. The Church saw the privilege of the Immaculate Conception overshadowed in the words used by the angel in his greeting to Mary.

The angel Gabriel calls her “full of grace.” In Mary, by pure gift, there is a perfection of grace that no other creature has ever received on earth.

But what is grace?

In the Bible, it is primarily divine favor and benevolence. When God gives the gift of his grace to a creature, it means that he shows himself “well disposed” toward it, pours his gratuitous love into it, and therefore, when he encounters the sin of the creature, grace primarily takes on the aspect of forgiveness and mercy.

Grace, in biblical revelation, also indicates the beauty, charm, and loveliness that come precisely from divine favor. The creature is made beautiful by the Creator. In fact, His showing Himself benevolent toward man, His love, His nearness, when they are received, make the creature “gracious”, meaning precisely beautiful, charming, full of a special harmony and light that emanates from within, beyond a person's physical appearance. Grace, then, is God's “kindness”, his good disposition toward the creature and, at the same time, the beauty with which the creature is clothed when it accepts God's free love.

Both of these characteristics are present in Mary, and they are present “in fullness”.

1. In Mary we find first of all *grace* as *benevolence*. Toward Mary, God showed the highest level of favor, of closeness, of love. He communicated to her all his condescension, his tenderness toward humankind. Therefore, “full of grace” means first of all fullness of love received. Mary's “vocation” begins with the announcement of God's generosity, with the revelation of the divine gifts given to her. Mary lived her existence in awareness and gratitude for the gifts she received.

What happened in Mary is a model for every Christian. At the origin of the Christian life is not the demand for heroic commitment or the assumption of burdensome tasks or obedience to demanding laws. At the beginning of it all is the announcement of a gift.

It is the announcement of the new life given to us by the risen Christ through the Holy Spirit. This is grace for us.

The angel's greeting, then, precisely because it reveals the gift of divine grace, opens with an invitation to joy: 'Rejoice Mary!' Rejoice because God has given you so much, because God has enriched your being with wonderful gifts. Mary is the woman of 'divine joy'. She is the one who has lived immersed in that divine joy that fills the depths of your being and remains there even in times of trial and suffering, not being linked to passing emotions or to mere physical or psychic well-being.

Every missionary announcement of the Church, even today, must always start with an announcement of joy! It must say to people: rejoice, because God has set his benevolent gaze on each one of you! Rejoice, for God wants to make you his children!

2. In Mary we then find *grace as beauty*. The extraordinary closeness of God, the presence of the Holy Spirit in her, made her immensely beautiful. It is an inner beauty that makes the soul clear and transparent, but which also has reflections on the outside. All those who lived next to her must have noticed something unusual: the fact that from her came no anger, no vanity, no hatred, no lack of care, of charity, of understanding, no unbridled impulse of selfish satisfaction. In Mary, an entirely extraordinary fact, there was no shadow of evil. This made her extraordinarily beautiful, the '*tota pulchra*', as Church tradition likes to call her. The authority of which Mary enjoyed in the early christian community also came from this beauty of hers. What attracts, what persuades, what draws, is the inner power of grace, not arrogance nor evasiveness.

This second aspect of Mary's 'fullness of grace', her beauty, is also exemplary for every christian. The Immaculate Conception teaches us that sin, prideful rebellion against God, does not make life any better, but instead more miserable and dark. On the contrary, existence becomes all the more beautiful the more it is free from sin. Mary was completely preserved from sin and in fact had a fulfilled, happy life. She performed 'great works' that reached all future generations.

Dearly beloved, I think that you too, in encountering Chiara Lubich's charism, have experienced these Marian traits that we have considered. Your Movement is the “Work of Mary”, and therefore contains an essential “Marian charism”. I am sure that all of you have embraced the Focolarino ideal because it appeared to your eyes firstly as a great gift of grace, as a totally undeserved “favour from God,” as a gratuitous offering of divine benevolence that opened your hearts to new perspectives of knowledge of God, of prayer, of common life, and of charity towards those in need. This is how you experienced your first encounter with the Movement.

But you have also experienced how the encounter with the charism of the Movement, how adherence to it, has made the life of each of you more beautiful, more joyful, more free. Those of you who knew Chiara perceived her 'beautiful life', the discreet but profound charm of a woman inhabited by God and in love with Jesus. Her presence conquered hearts, especially those of the young.

Dear friends, on the day on which the Focolarino charism began 80 years ago, here, in the house of Mary, close to the manger and to the mystery of her divine maternity, we thank the Lord for the gift of Chiara Lubich and of the great family that came to life around her. I repeat to you the words of the Angel Gabriel to Mary: “Do not fear!”. You too “have found grace with God!”. From you too, from your apostolate, Jesus must “be born”, to be offered to the world as the Saviour of all. Reject, therefore, all forms of discouragement, and never doubt that the Lord inspired Chiara with a particular way of living the faith and following Jesus that is destined to remain and still bear much fruit.

The ideal that Chiara passed on to you remains ever relevant, even in today's secularized world, so different from that of the Work's beginnings. Your charism contains within itself a great vital charge, but as the Holy Father often says: “it is not a museum piece... it needs to come into contact with reality, with people, with their anxieties and problems. And so, in this fruitful encounter with reality, the charism grows, is renewed and also reality is transformed, is transfigured through the spiritual strength that such a charism brings” (*Address to the General Chapter of Schoenstatt Priests*, 3 September 2015).

I entrust you all to the maternal intercession of the Immaculate Conception, inviting you to “stand at the crossroads of today” (Pope Francis, *General Audience*, 29 November 2023) with the same trusting and generous attitude as Mary, certain that “nothing is impossible for God”.

Amen.