

Celebration of the 40th Anniversary
of the Diocesan Ecumenical Commission

Malta, 5th May 2017
With simultaneous translation

Dialogue or dialogues? A lifestyle

Maria Voce
President of the Focolare Movement

Your Eminences, Your Excellencies, Religious and Civil Authorities, Ladies and Gentlemen, Sisters and Brothers,

First, I wish to thank Professor Reverend Fr Hector Scerri and the Diocesan Ecumenical Commission for their kind invitation. I also wish to greet all the members of the Maltese Ecumenical Commission. I'm glad to see that there is great passion for the ecumenical cause here in Malta. I am aware of the commitment and dedication of many people over many years to build up constructive relationships between Christians of different churches and the numerous ecclesial communities here.

I wish to talk on the subject, "**Dialogue or dialogues? A lifestyle**" in order to celebrate in thanksgiving with all of you, the 40th anniversary of the foundation of the Maltese Diocesan Ecumenical Commission.

In today's globalised and interdependent world, dialogue seems to be the only way that humankind can survive. Either we fight one another to the point of mutual destruction, or we dialogue. In fact, only openness to others and dialogue create life and bring life, because every action is then founded on having recognised one another as brothers and sisters, as children of God. I feel the Holy Spirit is at work everywhere, pushing our Churches in this direction: to dialogue so as to re-establish the unity broken over the centuries, so that Christians can give a shared witness to the world according to Jesus' prayer: "Father, that they may all be one, so that the world may believe" (Cf Jn 17:21-22)

Premise

I trust you will allow me to make a premise.

My experiences and reflections are the fruit of my meeting with Chiara Lubich, founder of the Focolare Movement, and with her charism when I was a young law student at university in Rome. Her authentic way of living for

God and for her brothers and sisters fascinated me immediately, to the point that, soon after, I followed her in the community life of the focolare.

From Chiara Lubich's charism, which is recognised by the Catholic Church and encouraged by leaders in many other Churches, a spirituality was born which has often been defined as a spirituality of unity, or spirituality of communion. At the Second European Ecumenical Assembly held in Graz in 1997, this spirituality was described as an *ecumenical spirituality*.

This afternoon I speak as a witness, given that while I was with Chiara, and in these last eight years as President of the Focolare Movement, I saw the spreading of a charism given by God to contribute to fulfilling the Testament of Jesus.

My personal ecumenical experience

I come from a traditional Catholic family and from the South of Italy, where very few Christians did not belong to the Catholic Church. In my town, people usually referred to them in a negative way. Like other young people at the time, I grew up with a suspicious attitude towards people of other Churches and was convinced I should avoid them.

Meeting Chiara Lubich's charism of unity opened up totally new horizons for me: God is Love, God is the Father of all and Jesus, His Son, the incarnate Word, taught us the measure of trinitarian love, a universal love; love that does not have preferences among people. It was a real turnaround for me.

In the 1960's, through Chiara's own experience, as she came into contact with members of the *Fraternity of a Communitarian Life* in Germany, this reality opened up for me too. We were impressed to see how much emphasis Christians of the Reformation placed on the life of the Word. They knew much Scripture by heart and applied it in their daily lives, as we try to do in the Focolare Movement. Their hymns not only expressed deep union with God but also raised up the soul. Prejudices fell away and we discovered many brothers and sisters in Christ

Little by little, this mutual knowledge deepened. In 1965, the Focolare Movement and the above-mentioned Fraternity decided – in agreement with their respective ecclesiastical authorities – to establish a little town at Ottmaring, in Germany, where even now Catholics of the Focolare and Evangelical Lutherans of the *Bruderschaft* give fruitful shared witness, while staying well anchored to their own spirituality and their own Churches. In that place, for over 50 years now, half an hour each day is dedicated to prayer together for Christian unity.

During the Second Vatican Council, through which the Catholic Church officially entered the great ecumenical movement, (especially with the Decree

on Ecumenism *Unitatis Redintegratio*), Chiara Lubich came into contact with some of the Council's Observers from other Churches, for example the Anglican, Canon Bernard Pawley, the Swiss Reformed Christian Lukas Vischer, the Russian Orthodox theologian Borovoy, and others. They were struck by the authenticity of life lived according to the Gospel and wanted to spread the charism of unity in their own Churches.

Chiara and all of us became ever more convinced that God had given rise to the charism of unity not only for Catholics but also for the whole of Christianity. In particular, Cardinal Agostino Bea, then President of the newly established Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity – now the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity – encouraged and supported Chiara in her first ecumenical contacts.

That was how a series of meetings, called *Ecumenical Weeks*, began, in which every year Christians of different churches shared their experiences of living the Word of God with one another, highlighting above all Jesus' new commandment, "Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another" (Jn 13:34).

We felt how urgent it was to know one another, to have an *exchange of gifts*, sharing the spiritual treasures that each person has within them.

We went from one discovery to another. As Pope Francis emphasised in *Evangelii Gaudium*, "It is not just about being better informed about others, but rather about reaping what the Spirit has sown in them, which is also meant to be a gift for us."¹

I had a particularly significant ecumenical experience in the ancient city of Constantinople, now Istanbul in Turkey, where I was responsible for the focolare between 1978 and 1988.

On the 13th June 1967 – in a month's time it will be the 50th anniversary of that occasion – Chiara Lubich was invited by the then Ecumenical Patriarch, Athenagoras I, who had heard about her through a religious priest. This was the first of 25 meetings Chiara had with that great charismatic figure. Patriarch Athenagoras spoke of himself as *her disciple* and wished to have a focolare in Constantinople.

In Turkey, I was able to get to know at first hand the beauty and richness of the Orthodox Church, especially the Greek Orthodox Church. I discovered their love for the Fathers of the Church, their faithfulness to tradition, without which this Church would not have been able to survive in

¹ Pope Francis, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, n. 246, 24 November 2013.

difficult past centuries. I met Patriarch Demetrios I, the successor to Patriarch Athenagoras, who came to visit us during a focolare event, and the then Metropolitan Bartholomew, the present Patriarch of Constantinople. I had the grace to be able to build a relationship of esteem and, I would say, of brotherly friendship with him. He appreciates Chiara Lubich's spirituality and takes forward the spiritual legacy of his own great predecessors. It was not by chance that he accepted the first honorary doctorate in the *Culture of Unity* awarded him by our Sophia University Institute in October 2015 at Loppiano, near Florence.

With Church leaders

In recent years, on my journeys as President of the Focolare Movement, I had the joy of meeting several Church leaders personally. For example, the Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr Rowan Williams of the Church of England; the President of the Lutheran World Federation Bishop Dr Munib A Younan, in Jerusalem; the General Secretary of the World Council of Churches, Rev Dr Olav Fykse Tveit, and other leaders.

Those meetings had a strong spiritual impact. I met people of God who have at heart the cause of Christian unity in a world torn by conflict and new closures. Every meeting brought new encouragement to make further progress in mutual collaboration, putting our spirituality of communion ever more at the service of unity.

With members of Movements from various Churches

Christians from the most diverse Churches have chosen to share the spirituality of unity and a number of them have felt called to the specific vocations within the movement, while each remains well rooted in their own Church. Often in fact they rediscover and revitalise their own roots and spiritual treasures.

*** Amongst us (Catholics, Anglicans, Lutherans, Reformed Christians, Orthodox and members of the Oriental Orthodox Churches) there are many differences connected with our culture, our background, our way of thinking and expressing ourselves. Our Churches' history has forged us and influences us to some extent. Nonetheless, on every occasion, at every meeting and as we live our lives together, we experience that if we practice reciprocally the love that Jesus asks for in John 15:13, "No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends", we can share everything. We can pray, suffer and rejoice together; and we achieve, in miniature, the reality of one single Christian people.

Yes, we realise that unity is a gift of God for which Jesus prayed to the Father. It is not something that we can achieve. However, our continual

mutual love can create the conditions whereby Jesus himself wishes to dwell amongst us as he promised in the Gospel, “For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them” (Mt 18:20).

Dialogue or dialogues?

Dialogue is not only done at the level of meetings between people of different denominations, different religions or with people who do not have religious beliefs. We don't dialogue between cultures, but between people. Or rather, we live in dialogue.

In the Gospels, we often hear of Jesus dialoguing with the apostles, with the people he met and with his mother, Mary. But first of all, he dialogues with the Father. The words he heard from the Father, he gave to us, engrafting us into the life of the Trinity. He shared his own lifestyle with us. We too are called to live according to the Trinity. Jesus taught us to say, “On earth as it is in heaven”.

It is clear then that God is the foundation of dialogue, God who is love and Father of us all. He makes us all children in the Son, all brothers and sisters, all one single family.

Right from the start Chiara made the Jesus' prayer, “May they all be one”, - which we can translate into “make all humanity become one family” - the motto of her life, and she invited millions of people the world over, to dedicate their lives for its fulfilment. “May they all be one” is the specific aim of the Focolare Movement, the reason why the movement began and lives.

In this perspective, dialogue, experienced in its infinite dimensions, is fundamental and essential for the Focolare Movement. Indeed, it is the only path offering hope of success for those who want to contribute to universal brotherhood. **Dialogue is a lifestyle**, a new culture, which the Movement can and wishes to offer people today.

We learned to see God as the Father of all, and therefore to see every person we meet as his son or daughter, as our brother or sister. Chiara herself said this, perhaps not fully aware of its true meaning, when she wrote to her companions way back in 1947:

“We must keep our gaze fixed on the one Father of so many children, and then consider all people as children of that one Father. Our thoughts and

affections must go beyond every human limit and acquire the habit of aiming constantly towards this universal brotherhood in our one Father: God.”²

If this is the foundation for dialogue, the method Chiara taught us cannot be other than love! It is a dialogue among brothers and sisters, therefore dialogue among people, not between ideologies or thought systems. This dialogue must necessarily be sustained by, and imbued with, mercy, compassion, and charity. This is summed up in the Golden Rule, a principle found in every culture and religion. It is found in St Matthew’s Gospel, chapter 7 verse 12: “In everything do to others as you would have them do to you.”

In 1970, Chiara reminded us:

“If we don't have charity, we will not have the light of God and any kind of dialogue will become sterile and go nowhere. It becomes merely a conversation, or worse, a lot of empty words. No, dialogue must be love. We have only one thing to do in life: to love, because only the Holy Spirit in us can really help us to respond, to know how to dialogue, to give the right answer, to build.”³

Love and mercy, placed at the foundation of dialogue, not only allow us to see those beside us in a new light, but make us discover diversity, any kind of diversity, as a gift. Chiara wrote:

“The person next to me was created as a gift for me and I was created as a gift for the person next to me. On earth, all things are in a relationship of love with all things: each thing with each thing. We have to be Love, however, to discover the golden thread among all that exists.”⁴

Nowadays, contacts between people are increasing, given the great opportunities offered by means of communication, but they become brief, ephemeral and devoid of meaning, while relationships break down or diminish. Only when the I-you relationship contains the kind of love that goes beyond a purely natural dimension, can contacts be transformed into relationships and we can build networks of true fraternity.

The art of loving

This is the kind of love that Chiara Lubich lived and that she spread to all those who felt inspired by her.

² Cf. C. LUBICH, *The art of loving*, New City Press, New York 2010, p. 31.

³ C. LUBICH, *Unpublished talk of Chiara to the focolarini*, 5 December 1970. Cited in Vera Araújo, *Il quinto dialogo del Movimento dei Focolari. Cosa è, cosa vuole, cosa fa (The 5th dialogue of the Focolare Movement. What it is, what it wants, what it does)*.

⁴ C. Lubich, *Essential Writings*, “Thoughts, Nothing is small if it is done out of love,” New City Press, New York, 2007, p. 87

Christ's love is not any kind of love; it is an art. Chiara called it the 'art of loving'. She herself summed it up in a few key points:

To love everyone: this means not allowing discrimination. It means not only loving our relatives and friends, but everyone. It means loving those who are white and black, those of our own country and foreigners, our friends and our enemies, the rich and the poor, VIPs and beggars, those of our own religion, those of other religions and atheists.

To love always: this means not slackening, stopping or making excuses. It urges us to love in every circumstance.

To be the first to love: This means always taking the initiative, without waiting to be loved or receive something in return.

Chiara summed up another point in three words, "Make yourself one". It refers to "becoming all things to all people" which St Paul spoke about (cf 1 Cor 9:22). This means entering as deeply as possible into the soul of the other person; listening to them right to the end; understanding their problems, their needs; sharing their sufferings. It means our 'becoming' that person somehow. In this way, our neighbour feels understood, accepted and helped.

Jesus forsaken

How is it possible to live *this art*, which is not based on feelings or good intentions, but practised according to the measure Jesus desired, to the point of giving our lives? Is there a key, a secret, which enables us to live more and more according to this measure?

We know that during his passion and death, Jesus not only suffered physical pain but also experienced a climax of suffering expressed in the cry, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Mt 27:46).

However, Jesus abandoned himself once more to the Father, saying, "Into your hands I commend my spirit! (Lk 23:46) and so overcame that immense suffering, bringing humankind back into the bosom of the Father and into fellowship with one another.

How can we live this mystery of Jesus forsaken and risen? How can we make progress on the ecumenical journey when we clash with one another on the issue of truth?

Hubertus Blaumeiser, a German theologian who is an expert in ecumenism and a member of the Movement, says, "Unity in truth cannot be imposed 'from above'. Nor can it be demanded by some kind of ultimatum. In this sense, the Second Vatican Council chose explicitly to renounce doctrinal condemnations. The only way to smooth the path to unity in truth is by bowing before others in an attitude of washing their feet rather than by reproaching them. This might sometimes mean losing face in order to find

grace perhaps at the feet of others. What is needed is much patience and humility, and, first of all, great generosity towards others.”⁵

St Paul wrote to the Philippians, “Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness” (Phil 2:5-7).

However, with this attitude we can convey Christ’s truth in a credible way. Christ emptied himself of everything, as a gift of love. We cannot run the risk of contradicting this truth with our behaviour.

Blaumeiser goes on, “At root, ecumenism is a journey with Jesus, from death to resurrection. Christ generated the Church when he took on the sins of all on the cross, to the point of experiencing being forsaken by the Father; and from that abyss he poured forth the Holy Spirit.”⁶

In his cry of forsakenness, Jesus took on all the sufferings of humankind, all the divisions of the world, all the legacy of our sin. Therefore, for us, our meetings with suffering, problems and difficulties can become meetings with Jesus forsaken and risen. Out of love for him we seek out one another, we love one another, we hope, we don’t give up even if the task, including that of Christian unity, seems hard and we are inclined to be discouraged.

Ultimately, unity begins wherever we enter into the wound of division together with Jesus; where we don’t allow ourselves to be discouraged by disappointment, nor even by the hurts or failings we experience. Unity can grow if we don’t step aside from difficulties, but persevere together with the Crucified Christ and welcome one another even when that can cause pain. Then, there can be a transformation, a resurrection.

Jesus in the midst

At the end of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, on the 25th January this year, Pope Frances said, “As Jesus teaches, it is only when we lose our lives for love of him that we truly save them (cf. Lk 9:24). This was the revolution experienced by Paul, but it is, and always has been, the Christian revolution. We live no longer for ourselves, for our own interests and “image”, but in the image of Christ, for him and following him, with his love and in his love.”

⁵ H. Blaumeiser, “Unity as we journey”, the Netherlands, 18th March 2017.

⁶ Ibidem.

He went on to say, “Authentic reconciliation between Christians will only be achieved when we can acknowledge each other’s gifts and learn from one another, - learn from one another - with humility and docility, without waiting for the others to learn first.” The Pope concluded, “If we experience this dying to ourselves for Jesus’ sake, our old way of life will be a thing of the past and, like Saint Paul, we will pass over to a new form of life and fellowship.”

Chiara Lubich called this new form of life and fellowship, “Jesus in our midst”. Those words refer to Jesus’ promise to be present among those who are gathered in his name, which means in his love (Mt 18:20). It is a presence of Jesus that we can truly experience – and that we have often experienced – as did the disciples on the road to Emmaus, for example. They said to one another, “Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road?” (Lk 24:32). This presence of the Risen Lord among his people is decisive for ecumenism.

There was an experience of this kind in November 1996, when Chiara met with over 1,000 Anglicans and Catholics in the Logan Hall, London, which led her to exclaim, “Even if we belong to different Churches, if Christ is among us, who can divide us?”

Considering the ecumenical effect of this way of living Christianity, from that time onwards Chiara began speaking of a new type of ecumenism. She called it the dialogue “of the people”, emphasising by those words that every Christian is called to live for unity, to make his or her contribution by loving their neighbours in the different areas of their lives, not only in church environments. When love becomes reciprocal, Christ himself unites us beyond the boundaries of our own traditions.

Together for Europe

Another experience of this kind is the fascinating story of “Together for Europe”. I know that here in Malta there have been activities in conjunction with the significant events that have marked the development of this reality.

“Together for Europe” is fellowship and collaboration among over 300 movements and communities of various churches. Given that they are spread across the entire continent, through the unity experienced among them in the spirit of “ecumenism of the people”, we can see this network as a model for a united Europe, without diminishing its great diversity, but instead enabling appreciation of the different identities. “Together for Europe” is a unifying power, specialised in building bridges among different realities. When Cardinal Walter Kasper retired from his role as President of the Pontifical Council for the Promotion of Christian Unity, he said that his great hope for ecumenism is “Together for Europe”.

I would like to highlight just three key steps in this experience that help us to understand his hope.

The first is conversion to a life more according to the Gospel, a step that each member makes personally, when he or she encounters a charism and joins a community or movement. This conversion is important also from an ecumenical point of view. In fact, *Unitatis Redintegratio*, the Decree on Ecumenism of the Second Vatican Council, in paragraph 7, says, "There can be no ecumenism worthy of the name without a change of heart."

Another foundational occasion in the fellowship among these movements and communities occurred in the year 2,000 at a meeting of about 150 leaders from about 60 Movements and Communities of different Churches. Unity among Christians is a condition whereby people can meet God, according to the prayer of Jesus, "Father, that they may all be one" (Jn 17:21).

In a deeply spiritual atmosphere and with greater awareness of this responsibility, true reconciliation came about spontaneously among all present. After praying together, a Catholic suddenly stood up, moved by the strong desire to re-establish unity, and publicly asked forgiveness for the prejudices he had towards Lutherans. After a short silence, a Lutheran stood up and granted this forgiveness to the Catholic, also in the name of the other Lutherans present, and with tears in his eyes asked forgiveness of the Pentecostals for having spoken badly of them. Others did the same and this went on for almost half an hour, all quite spontaneously and freely. In that half hour, they experienced the healing and liberating effect of asking forgiveness and being forgiven.

On that day, it became obvious to all that without true reconciliation we cannot make progress on the path towards unity. This reconciliation remains characteristic of the fellowship among movements up to the present.

In fact, one of the main aims of the "Together for Europe" event held last year in Munich, in view of the 500th anniversary of the Reformation, was exactly that, to share the experience of true reconciliation, with all its effects, and so promote unity among the Churches and in society. A significant number of bishops attended the event.

A third foundational occasion was the pact of mutual love made not only among individuals but also as a commitment among Movements and Communities. This pact too, made on the 8th December 2001, was not in the programme of the meeting of 700 leaders of Movements and Communities of various Churches. It happened thanks to a strong experience of the presence of Jesus, according to Matthew 18:20 and with the intention of taking up our responsibility to contribute towards Christian unity, putting Jesus' new commandment as the foundation of all that is done in the name of "Together

for Europe". This pact is renewed in every important meeting of "Together for Europe".

The Ottmaring Declaration

This year, following all that happened in Lund on the 31st October 2016, when Pope Francis and the President of the Lutheran World Federation, Bishop Dr Munib Younan, chose to commemorate together the beginning of the 500th anniversary of the Reformation, I felt it was necessary to give new impetus to the ecumenical commitment that characterises our Movement.

In Lund, we witnessed a very important gesture by those responsible at the highest level, as they signed the Joint Declaration calling for growth in mutual trust and shared witness to the Gospel message to make known God's love for all people. However, if what happened there does not affect the concrete life of communities, it remains a happy and historic memory, without impacting on today's situations.

Last February I was able to spend a week in the little ecumenical town of Ottmaring (Germany) together with the whole General Council of the Focolare Movement.

As I said at the start, a permanent ecumenical witness is given at Ottmaring by two communities that have been living side by side since 1968. One began in the Catholic Church, the other in the Lutheran context; both have members from various Churches. It was there that I chose to invite all the members and friends of the Movement to a conversion of heart.

The *Ottmaring Declaration*, which I made public on that occasion, seeks to help us think ecumenically, remembering that the brother or sister I meet, whether they belong to my Church or another Church, all belong to the Body of Christ, the body Jesus died for. This is an absolute commitment that we take on as the Focolare Movement and that we can bring into every aspect of life.

Ecumenism is a need of our times. It must make progress. It responds to the need for God that all people have, even without knowing it. If people have the opportunity to meet Jesus present among Christians who love one another, faith will be born in them, they will change their behaviour, they will seek peace and seek just solutions and they will commit to solidarity among peoples.

Only if we Christians are united, will the world encounter God. Otherwise, we are committing a serious omission.

We sent the text of the Ottmaring Declaration to Church leaders to give them an extra reason for hope on the journey towards unity.

Your Eminences, Your Excellencies, Religious and Civil Authorities, Ladies and Gentlemen, Brothers and Sisters,

I truly thank you for having given me this opportunity to be with you and for having listened to me with an open heart.

I offer my best wishes to the Diocesan Ecumenical Commission and thank God, together with you, for all that you have contributed to strengthen the spirit of unity among Christians here in Malta, together with the Maltese Ecumenical Council.

Let us together ask Mary, mother of all people and mother of the Church, to accompany us, to help us and encourage us on the ecumenical path until Jesus' prayer, "That they may all be one" (Jn 17:21) is fulfilled.

