

INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE

The Focolare Movement, founded on a deep spirituality centred on unity and fraternity among all people, discovered its vocation for interreligious dialogue more than fifty years ago. We find, however, the foundation of dialogue in a text that Chiara wrote in 1946: *"We must fix our gaze on the one Father of so many children. Then we must consider all people as children of the one Father. Our thoughts and affections must go beyond every human limit and acquire the habit of turning constantly to universal fraternity in one Father: God."*

Chiara Lubich had the intuition that the movement would have something to do with people of other faiths in the 1960s, when she visited the Bangwa tribe in a remote valley in Cameroon. Of that first understanding, Chiara Lubich recalls: *"One day, their chief, the Fon, and thousands of his people gathered for a celebration, in a wide clearing in the midst of the forest, offering us their songs and dances. It was there that I had the strong impression that God, like an immense sun, was embracing everyone, us and them, with His love. For the first time in my life, I sensed that we would also have something to do with people of non-Christian traditions."* (Chiara Lubich - *Celebration of Vespers at the Cathedral in Aachen, Germany, November 13, 1998 - Talk on the theme "My experience with Interreligious Dialogue: our points of the Spirituality for Religions"*)

However, the founding event for the official beginning of interreligious dialogue took place in 1977 (London, UK), on the occasion of receiving the Templeton Prize for Progress in Religion.

Since then, the Focolare Movement has established - through the international Centre for Interreligious Dialogue (CID) and its centres in various countries - strong and fraternal relations with thousands of believers and numerous institutions, associations, movements, and organizations of different religions. We are convinced that friendship among people of different faiths is a vital force for building universal fraternity. The formula that Chiara gave for creating a fraternal world is: *"Whoever is near me was created as a gift for me, and I was created as a gift for whoever is near me."* (Chiara Lubich, *Essential Writings*, New City, London)

It is a dialogue, therefore, among sisters and brothers. A dialogue sustained by listening, communion, and collaboration. It is a dialogue that helps us discover diversity, of any kind, as a gift. It is a journey of knowledge and discovery, to be undertaken together, daily and in a great spirit of welcoming one another. It can elevate the level of our relationships to a profound spiritual dimension and encourage us to live the deepest human values, to work together to spread Good and fraternity.



The interreligious relationships and collaboration of the Focolare embrace Buddhists (Theravada and Mahayana), Muslims (Shiites and Sunnis), Jews (conservatives, orthodox, and reformists), Hindus (of various currents), and followers of traditional African religions. There are also contacts with Shintoists, Sikhs, and Bahá'ís. With a large number of these religions, a path of dialogue has been initiated that goes beyond mere respect and tolerance, leading to relationships that testify that the spirit of goodness makes us all one family.

In addition to the formation activities of the CID at an international level and those of the centres of the Focolare scattered around the world, there is a permanent school for interreligious dialogue based in the small town of the Focolare called "Peace" in Tagaytay (Philippines). This is a centre for the outreach of the Focolare spirituality in Asia.

Contacts - Centre for Interreligious Dialogue - Focolare Movement
Via Frascati, 306 - 00040 Rocca di Papa (Rome-Italy) – email: inter.rel@focolare.org

Some founding interreligious events

1966 – A visit to the Bangwa people in Cameroon. There Chiara Lubich had her first intuition that the Movement would also have something to do with people of other faiths.

1966 - A Focolare was opened in Tlemcen, Algeria. Today, the community there is composed mainly of Muslims.

1977 - Chiara received the Templeton Prize for Progress in Religion at The Guildhall in London (UK), where representatives of numerous faiths were present. This marked the official beginning of our dialogue with followers of other religions.

1981 – Chiara was invited by Rev. Nikkyo Niwano, founder of the lay Buddhist renewal movement Rishso Kosei-kai, to Tokyo, Japan. She spoke about her Christian experience to ten thousand people gathered in their large temple. This marked the beginning of a fruitful relationship of dialogue and collaboration in humanitarian activities and in working for peace.

1982 - Collaboration began with the multi-religious forum of the WCRP (World Conference of Religions for Peace).

1994 - Chiara Lubich was appointed an honorary president of the WCRP.



1997 - In Bangkok (Thailand), Chiara met the supreme patriarch of Thai Buddhism, H.H. Somdet Phra Nyanasamvara, who encouraged dialogue and collaboration between Buddhists and the Movement. In Chiang Mai, in northern Thailand, invited by the Grand Master Ajahn Thong Sirimangalo, Chiara spoke to a large number of Buddhist monks, nuns, and laypeople, sharing with them her spiritual experience.

1997 - Chiara shared her testimony with three thousand African American Muslims of the American Society of Muslims, at the *Malcolm X Mosque*, in Harlem, New York (USA), invited by its founder Imam W. D. Mohammed.

1998 - Chiara met members of the B'nai B'rith (Children of the Covenant) of Buenos Aires, in Argentina, one of the oldest Jewish humanitarian organizations in the world. A dialogue developed that culminates in an Annual Day for Peace.

1999 - In Amman, Jordan, Chiara Lubich addressed the 7th WCRP Assembly entitled "Global Action for Living Together", with a talk on the theme: "*Spirituality for Living Together*".

2000 - In Washington D.C. (USA), Chiara spoke at a conference with over five thousand people, Christians from the Focolare and African American Muslims of the American Society of Muslims. It marked a new stage in a dialogue that is continuing in various cities in the United States.

2001 - Chiara received the "Defender of Peace" Award from the Shanti Ashram and the Sarvodaya Movement, two Gandhian institutions, in Coimbatore (Tamil Nadu), India. She also presented her spiritual experience in Mumbai, at the Somaiya University.

2002 - The first Hindu-Christian Symposium of the Focolare was organized in Castel Gandolfo (Rome, Italy) between members of the Movement's Study Centre and distinguished Hindu scholars. Since then, numerous symposia have been held with Hindus, Buddhists, Jews, and Muslims in various countries around the world.

2003 - In India, Chiara and her collaborators continued the dialogue with Hindu representatives at the Somaiya College, with the Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, with the Swadhyaya Family, with Gandhians of the Sarvodaya Movement, and with the Gandhigram University.

2004 - In London (UK), Chiara was invited to address the open meeting held at Westminster Central Hall on the theme: "What future for a multicultural, multi-ethnic, and multifaith society?"

2008 - Christians and Jews met in Jerusalem to offer a new perspective on some age-old issues among the three monotheistic religions.



2010 - Maria Voce (President of the Focolare Movement 2008-2021) met in Tokyo, Japan, with Rev. Nichiko Niwano, President of the RKK Movement, and Kosho Niwano, the President-elect, to reaffirm and confirm the bond between the two Movements, and the commitment to work together in society and to collaborate for peace.

2014 - An International Interreligious Conference was organized in Castel Gandolfo (Rome, Italy) with over 400 participants from various religions who are in contact with the Focolare Movement, from all over the world.

2018 - Christians and Muslims met in Castel Gandolfo (Rome, Italy) for the International Interreligious Conference "Together to Give Hope," a very special moment with 400 participants from 24 nations.

2019 - In Birmingham (UK), Maria Voce, (President of the Focolare Movement), signed the "Charter of Peace for Forgiveness and Reconciliation" with Bhai Sahib Bhai Mohinder Singh, Sikh spiritual leader, and Chairman of Guru Nanak Nishkam Sewak Jatha.

2024 - In Castel Gandolfo (Rome, Italy), the second International Interreligious Conference entitled "One Human Family" will be held this year with participants of various religions. It aims to be a space of communion and reflection on the challenges and on the commitment to peace: peace among people and peace with creation.