

CHIARA LUBICH (1920-2008)

Founder of the Focolare Movement

Origins. Silvia Lubich, the second in a family of four children, was born in Trent on January 22, 1920. Her mother was a practising Catholic, her father a socialist; her brother Gino was a communist, an anti-Fascist resistance fighter, a journalist for the daily newspaper “L’Unità”. At a very young age, Silvia started to frequent the Catholic Action. In 1938 she qualified as a primary school teacher and began to teach in some schools in the Trent region. Meanwhile she enrolled for a course at the University of Venice, but the outbreak of the Second World War prevented her from continuing her studies.

Vocation. At the age of 19, during a programme for Catholic Action youth, Lubich visited the Marian shrine of Loreto, which according to tradition contains the house of the Holy Family. There, she discovered her vocation: a new vocation when compared to the ones known till then (marriage, convent life and a consecrated life in the midst of the world). At Loreto, Silvia envisaged “a fourth way”, on the model of the family of Nazareth: single and married people who completely offer themselves to God and live in small communities in the midst of the world. These were later called “focolari”.

As a member of the Franciscan Third Order, Lubich was fascinated by the radical choice of God by Chiara of Assisi and she took the name “Chiara” as her own.

At the age of 23 she felt the strong call to give herself completely to God, and on December 7, 1943 she consecrated herself to him with a vow of chastity.

A new spirituality. The horrors of war eradicated all certainties and aroused an urgent question in Chiara’s young mind: is there an ideal that no bomb can destroy? She found the answer in her heart: yes there is, that ideal is God. In the midst of war, the fruit of hate, God manifested himself to her as Love.

She shared this discovery with other young girls and together they started to put into practice the words of the Gospel, the small book they carried with them even when they rushed into air-raid shelters. On May 13, 1944 a violent aerial bombardment damaged Lubich’s house and the family had to seek refuge in the mountain valleys, but Chiara decided to remain in the city of Trent to sustain the small community that was growing up around her. She went to live in a small apartment in Piazza Cappuccini and gradually some of her first companions joined her. They called their small abode “casetta”, which recalled the little house of Nazareth. This became the first “focolare”.

Chiara and her companions shared all they had with the poor and they received the hundredfold in food, clothing, medicine... These were immediately redistributed to those who needed them; they realized that Gospel’s promise “Give and it will be given to you” was being kept. They rediscovered Jesus’ new commandment: “love one another as I have loved you”, and Chiara identified the measure of this reciprocal love in the cry of Jesus crucified and forsaken. In Jesus’ prayer, before he died “Father... may they all be one”, she understood the specific charism God was giving her to contribute towards universal brotherhood through a constant and dynamic life of unity.

A new spiritual current, the spirituality of unity or the spirituality of communion was emerging. This spirituality, which is characterized by its communitarian aspect has been recognized by the Catholic Church and other Churches as a charism inspired by the Holy Spirit, particularly fit for our times.

Beginnings of a movement. Young people, workers and professionals, families and religious started to join Chiara and her first group and share in their way of life. After a few months there were about 500 people involved in a spontaneous communion of material and spiritual goods, like the first Christian communities. Carlo De Ferrari, Archbishop of Trent, to whose judgement Chiara submitted this flourishing movement, said: “Here, there is the hand of God”, and in 1947 he gave the first diocesan approval. The first men’s focolare opened in Trent in 1948.

Meeting Igino Giordani. In September 1948, Chiara met Igino Giordani, an elected representative, a writer, a journalist, a pioneer of ecumenism and a father of four. Being a scholar and an expert on Church history, he discovered in her “a sign of the times” and decided to follow her. Their extraordinary spiritual affinity led Chiara to experience more luminous revelations on the charism during summer 1949. Giordani’s profound spiritual depth and openness to humanity made Chiara invite him to be an integral part of the focolare. Many others in the world followed him in this original path: a consecrated life open also to married people. Chiara declared him co-founder of the Movement. He is now Servant of God and his cause for beatification and canonization is currently in its Roman phase.

Paradise ’49. After a very intense period of activity, in summer ’49 Lubich and her first companions went for some rest to Valle di Primiero on the Dolomite Mountains. Here, a very particular period of illumination awaited Chiara: a grace generally reserved for founders or others to whom a special plan of God is revealed. During this mystical experience that lasted for several months, “entering in the bosom of the Father”, she penetrated, in as much as this is possible for a human being, into the secrets of Heaven: the mystery of the Holy Trinity, Mary’s splendour, creation as a new heaven and a new earth. She also understood God’s plan for the Focolare Movement and for its future development.

The Movement studied. The Holy See began a careful study of the Movement in the 50’s. For Chiara and her spiritual family this was a long period of trial and suspension. In March 1962, the Movement received its first pontifical approval *ad experimentum* of the (men) focolarini; the approval of the (women) focolarine came the year after; these two sections form the backbone of the Movement.

The Statutes that define the composite physiognomy of the whole Movement were approved in June 1990. Further amendments were approved in October 1994, February 1998 and March 2007.

The Movement spread. Since 1950, an increasing number of people coming from all walks of life converged to Valle di Primiero for the summer. This gave birth to the Mariapolis, the city of Mary. In 1959, more than 10 thousand people from 27 countries took part in the Mariapolis.

The Movement first spread all over Italy. Random circumstances made it reach the rest of Europe and other countries. Since 1967, it is present in the five continents.

Pasquale Foresi. He was among the first who consecrated their life to God in the way of the focolare. In 1954, he was ordained priest by the Archbishop of Trent, Carlo De Ferrari and he became the first focolarino priest. Foresi was also considered by Chiara as a co-founder who contributed, among others, to the Movement’s cultural dimension, the drafting of the statutes, the setting up of the publishing house and the building of the small town of Loppiano.

Structure. Since the initial setting up of the Focolare, Chiara started to found other branches of the Movement: diocesan priests, religious men and women, the “volunteers of God” (men and women radically committed in the life of society), the Gen (the new generations). Since 1977, there are also bishops.

She also initiated movements with widespread membership: New Families, New Humanity, Youth for a United World and Teens for Unity, Priests Movement and Men and Women Religious Movement, Parish Movement and Diocesan Movement.

Chiara founded the small town of Loppiano and subsequent “permanent Mariapolis”, where inhabitants of all ages try to live the gospel’s reciprocal love in their study, work and every aspect of their life, thus making these small towns significant places of witness.

She also founded the publishing house Città Nuova.

Her desire to clarify and spread the culture of unity, made her set up the Abba School, an interdisciplinary study centre, which she directed personally.

The last project she founded is the Sophia University Institute, based in Loppiano. (December 2007).

A sanctity of the people. The variety of works and branches and the exponential spread of the Focolare Movement did not distract Chiara from her primal aim: to follow God alone. Besides the statutes, the regulations, the special graces of '49, she felt that she had to leave something more: her holiness. Not only her personal holiness – she explained – but a community holiness, a sanctity of the people. In 1980 she embarked on using the Swiss service of a collective conference telephone call to offer new spiritual inspirations and life energizing proposals to members of the Movement worldwide. Thanks to developments in telecommunications, this spiritual support was later given via satellite and then via internet. Chiara, who was very faithful to this monthly appointment, transmitted to the whole Movement her yearning to become saints together through love.

CHIARA AND THE DIALOGUES

Within the Catholic Church. Chiara gave a new impetus to dialogue within the Catholic Church on Pentecost 1998, when in the presence of 300,000 members of Movements and new ecclesial communities gathered at St. Peter’s Square, she promised John Paul II “... since our specific charism is unity, we will do our utmost to contribute towards achieving it” by mutual communion amongst all. Lubich’s charism proved effective also in intensifying dialogue within other Christian Churches.

Christian Churches. The initial encounter with a group of Evangelical Lutherans in 1961, gradually led to receiving encouragement also from other Church leaders, whom Chiara met in Istanbul, London, Zurich, Germany and elsewhere to spread the spirituality of unity that was recognized by these leaders as an ecumenical spirituality. She was personally committed to this dialogue in various ways, and in the late 90’s she started to promote the project “Together for Europe”, which is shared by communities and movements of different Churches.

Great religions. Lubich was the first woman to narrate her Christian experience to 10,000 people in a Buddhist temple. This happened in Tokyo in 1981. In 1997 she presented her spiritual experience to Buddhist nuns and monks in Thailand. In the same year, she was invited to speak to 3,000 African-American Muslims in the historic Malcom X Mosque in Harlem, New York. Dialogue with Jews and Muslims in the Middle East and North Africa is of significant importance. Interreligious dialogue with people of various religious traditions, including Hindus, Taoists, Sikhs and animists has developed in many countries.

Non-religious convictions. Chiara’s initiative also led the Movement to be open to dialogue with people who do not subscribe to any particular religious conviction and collaborate with them to achieve universal brotherhood, while promoting the human being and all his human values.

Contemporary culture. In the 90’s Lubich encouraged dialogue with representatives from different fields of human knowledge and life. This gave rise to international networks linking scholars, professionals and students in various disciplines (theology, sociology, law, communication, psychology, medicine, education, art, architecture, sport and others), engaged in a work of cultural elaboration inspired by the charism of unity in dialogue with contemporary culture. In the field of economy, this dialogue is developing through the

Economy of Communion project (www.edc-online.org). The Movement for unity in politics (www.mppu.org) emerged in the political field; it proposes fraternity as a political concept.

Acknowledgments. London 1977- Chiara received the Templeton Prize for Progress in Religion. From 1995 onwards, the number of awards began to increase. She received awards from international academic organizations and also from public administrations. One of these awards was the UNESCO Prize for Peace Education received in Paris in 1996.

She received honorary citizenships from many cities, which include Buenos Aires, Rome, Florence, Turin, Milan, and 16 honorary doctoral degrees from universities in four continents.

The motivations for these awards highlight her contribution towards peace and unity among peoples, religion and culture, and spreading universal brotherhood.

Last days. In February 2008 Chiara was admitted to the Gemelli Hospital in Rome. Pope Benedict XVI sent her a personal letter. The Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople, Bartholomew I went to visit her.

On March 14, at the age of 88, she passed away in her house at Rocca di Papa, surrounded by her spiritual family.

Her funeral took place on March 18 in the Papal Basilica of St. Paul Outside the Walls. The main celebrant was Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, the Secretary of State; 16 other cardinals, 40 bishops and many priests concelebrated. Many politicians from various political parties, representatives of many religions, of different Churches and of Catholic Movements were among the thousands of people of all ages present for her funeral.

Servant of God. “As with the passing of time, her fame for holiness continue to increase...” , these words were said by Bishop Raffaello Martinelli of Frascati on January 27, 2015 when he read the Decree to introduce the Diocesan Cause for the beatification and canonization of Chiara (Silvia) Lubich, founder of the Focolare Movement. Pope Francis wished to be present for this occasion through a message in which he urged “to make known to the people of God the life and works of one, who accepting the Lord’s invitation, has lit a new light for the Church on the path to unity”.