

The origins of the Focolare Movement

Dublin, February 22, 2004

The Origins

I've been asked to recall, re-living it with all of you, the early days of the Movement in Trent, and I will do so, of course, following what Chiara herself has often told and also drawing on my own personal experience, having had the grace of being chosen by God to be part of that first group of girls to whom Chiara communicated the Ideal.

In 1943-1944 I was working with my sister Ginetta on a large estate. The owners, aristocrats and wealthy, had become very fond of us and intended to leave us a large part of their riches provided we would continue working for them.

It was a rich world in great contrast with the poverty around them.

One day, I received two postcards from a former classmate in Trent, my hometown, telling me of a friend who spoke to her about God in a new way: she said that He is everything and that all the rest is nothing, that everything is vanity, that He alone remains....

While sitting near the riverside, this phrase: "Everything is vanity..." resounded forcefully in my soul. It seemed that Jesus was asking me to choose Him and so I decided to leave everything there and to follow Him.

I returned to Trent, where, shortly afterwards, this friend of mine introduced me to Chiara. I don't remember what she said to me, but from then on, I never left her.

Chiara had already given herself to God forever on the 7th of December 1943, the date which was then considered as the birth of the Focolare Movement.

She herself recounted, a few years ago in Florence, some details of her adventure and ours. We'll read what she said:

"Our charism," said Chiara, "began to manifest itself in 1944. The Second World War was raging, even in Trent, my hometown, sowing bombs, rubble, death. I was there with some companions (I was one of them).

"Among all the things that were disappearing, there were also the people or things that formed the small or big dreams of our young hearts. One of us wanted to form a family, but her fiancé never returned from the front; another wanted to complete and furnish her home, but it was damaged: I – Chiara recalls – was focused on studying, but the war prevented me from attending the university. All that happened affected us deeply. It seemed to me that God was offering us a lesson through these circumstances: everything is "vanity of vanities" (see Eccl.

1:2; 12:8), and I told this to my companions.”

But against this background of death and destruction, God was preparing a gift for Chiara and for all of us. He was bringing down from heaven a very new charism, the charism of unity (of communion, as the Pope calls it) which was at the same time light and strength: new light to better understand the Gospel and new strength to live it with determination.

“Almost at the same time,” continued Chiara, “a question arose in my heart: is there a dream, an ideal that will not die, that no bomb can destroy, to which we can give the whole of ourselves? The answer came at once and it appeared logical: yes, there is. It is God. In that moment, there, in the midst of the destruction of the war, fruit of hatred, I was dazzled by the truth of who God is: “God is Love” (1 Jn 4:8). God is Love, as affirmed also by the Evangelist John. But the light of the charism gave me a very new and profound understanding now of God as Love.

“We believed in His love with a deeply ardent faith. Consequently, if before we had thought of God as being distant, inaccessible, now we felt that he was very close: He illuminated and transformed with His love all the circumstances of our life, whether happy, sad, or indifferent.

“We didn’t hesitate for a moment to choose Him as our reason for living.

“But if we had found the one to live for, God Love, what attitude were we supposed to have now? How could we put this new ideal into practice? It was immediately clear to me, to us: each one of us had to be love as He was, almost like little radiant suns alongside Him, the Great Sun. And we felt urged to search in the Gospel for the way we would be able to be love, how we could love.”

Chiara brought that little book into the air-raid shelters each time the sirens sounded. She opened it and those words, which we were already familiar with, were illuminated, as if they were lit up in lights, they enflamed our hearts and we felt urged to put them into practice. We were attracted by all the words of the Gospel, but especially by those that spoke of the commandment that sums up all the Law: love towards our neighbor.

We opened the Gospel and read: “Love your neighbor as yourself” (Mt19:19). Our neighbor. Where was our neighbor? Our neighbor was right there beside us, in all those who had been affected by the war, the wounded, the homeless, the naked, the hungry, the thirsty, the orphans. We immediately devoted ourselves to them.

The Gospel assured us: “Ask and it will be given to you” (Mt 7:7; Lk 11:9). We asked on behalf of the poor and – what a wonder! – we were filled each time with all kinds of goods. How was it possible during the war?

“Give and gifts will be given to you” (Lk.6:38), we read. We read: “Give and gifts will be given to you” (Lk6:38). We gave and each time we received something in return. There was only one apple in the house. We gave it to a poor man who asked for something to eat. On that same morning, a dozen apples arrived. After having given those too to the poor, a suitcase of apples

arrived.

These episodes, one after the other, amazed and fascinated us. Jesus had made promises and now too he was keeping them. So he wasn't a reality of the past but of the present. The Gospel was true

However, the air raid shelters offered little protection; death could have come at any time. So another question arose in Chiara's heart: is there a sentence of the Gospel that is particularly dear to God? If we were going to die, we wanted to be able to put that very thing into practice, at least in our last moments in order to make Him happy. The Gospel immediately revealed it where it speaks of a commandment that Jesus says is *his* and *new*, therefore, special: "This is my commandment: love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends" (Jn.15:12-13).

"We looked one another in the eye and declared: "I am ready to give my life for you." "And I for you." "And I for you." Every one of us for each of the others. It is a solemn pact. It would become the foundation on which the entire Movement rests. But if we were not asked to die at once, we lived this pact by sharing everything with one another: our few material belongings, spiritual treasures, sufferings, trials, joys."

From that moment everything changed. What had happened? Having lived mutual love, our spiritual life took a qualitative leap forward. We were filled with a new trust, a joy and peace never experienced before, a fullness of life, a greater abundance of light. Why? It became evident at once: through this love we had set mutual charity into motion and the words of Jesus were fulfilled among us: "Where two or three are gathered in my name, [The Fathers of the Church say: "in my love"], there am I in the midst of them"(Mt.18:20).

"Jesus," explained Chiara, "our invisible Brother, had very quietly joined our group spiritually. And now the source of love and of light was present there in our midst. We never wanted to lose his presence again."

In these sixty years of the Movement's life we can affirm that our one constant effort has been to never lose the presence of Jesus in our midst.

"On another day," Chiara continued, "seeking shelter from the bombs, we found ourselves in a dark cellar with a lighted candle and the Gospel in our hands. I opened the Gospel and read: "Father... that all may be one" (Jn 17:21). It was Jesus' prayer shortly before he died. Always because of the gift we mentioned earlier, the charism, I had the impression that I could understand something of those difficult and strong words, and they instilled in my heart the conviction that we were born for that very page of the Gospel. It was almost like the *magna charta* of our Movement. We were born for unity, that is, to contribute to the unity of people with God and with one another, and on a broader scale, to universal brotherhood.

In that same prayer, Jesus continued: "May they also be one in us... so that the world may believe" (Jn17:21). It is what happens also around us, united in this way through mutual love: people who no longer believe, regain their faith; others feel strengthened in their faith. More and

more people change their lifestyle, people convert to God; they find the strength to follow his calling which they perceive in their hearts or to remain faithful to choices they have already made.”

I remember very well that a few months later about 500 men and women of all ages and vocations, from the most varied social backgrounds, shared our Ideal and there, in the midst of the world, they formed a community similar to that of the early Christians.

The words of the Gospel set the pace of our common journey. We immersed ourselves in them, we nourished ourselves with them, we re-evangelized ourselves, and through them, the Christian revolution spread and the community grew.

Chiara tells another episode:

“One sentence of the Gospel touched us in a special way. “Anyone who listens to you (the Apostles) listens to me” (Lk10:16). We wanted to put it into practice at once, so we introduced ourselves to our bishop, Carlo De Ferrari, seeing in him a successor of the Apostles. He listened, smiled, and then said: “The hand of God is here,” and his approval and blessing accompanied us for the rest of his life.

Those words of Jesus which encouraged us to go to the Bishop, gave us a greater understanding of what the Church is: it is His presence on earth throughout the centuries, a continuation of Him. This led to our always nurturing a sincere and filial love for the Church.

Happiness, discoveries, graces, conquests. These are certainly one aspect of Gospel life. But right from the start we understood that everything also had another side to it, that the tree had its roots. “Unless the grain of wheat falls to the earth and dies,” we read in John, “it remains only a single grain; but if it dies it yields a rich harvest” (Jn12:24). The personification of this is Jesus forsaken, whose fruit was the redemption of humanity.

Jesus crucified! This is the way Chiara recalls the first time she discovered Him:

“Due to a particular circumstance – foreseen, we believe, by God – we learned that Jesus’ greatest suffering, and therefore, His greatest act of love, was when on the cross He experienced the abandonment of the Father: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Mt 27:46). I was deeply touched by this fact. Our youth and enthusiasm, but above all, the grace of God urged me and my companions to choose Jesus in His abandonment as the way to accomplish our Ideal of love. From that moment on, we seemed to discover His countenance everywhere.

Because He had personally experienced the separation of us human beings from God and among ourselves, and had felt that the Father was far from Him, we recognized Him not only in all our personal sufferings, which were not lacking, and in the sufferings of our neighbors, who were often lonely, abandoned, forgotten... but we also recognized Him in all the divisions, tragedies and gaps, in the reciprocal indifferences, big or small: in families, between generations, between rich and poor, even in the Church itself at times. Later on, we recognized

Him in the divisions among the various Churches; among the different religions as well, also between those who believe and those who do not have any religious belief.

But all these divisions did not frighten us; on the contrary, because of our love for Him forsaken, they attracted us. It was He who taught us how to face them, how to live them, how to contribute towards overcoming them when, feeling abandoned by the Father, He re-abandoned His spirit into the hands of the Father: “Father, into your hands I commend my spirit” (Lk23:46), thus making it possible for humanity to be recomposed within itself and with God.”

Jesus forsaken and unity are the two foundation stones upon which our entire life has been based, from the origins up to today.

The war ended. The people who had adhered to the Movement were able to move around the country to study, to find work or in order to bring this life to others. From the north to the south of Italy, Christian communities flourished like the one that began in Trent – because Jesus was in our midst; He is the one who does these things – the Movement crossed the borders of Italy and then of the European nations. Today it is present in 182 nations of the world.