

Dossier - December, 2013

**CHIARA LUBICH**  
Foundress of the Focolare Movement  
(1920-2008)  
*Biographical Notes*

**Early Years** – Chiara Lubich, the second in a family of four children, is born in Trent on January 22, 1920. She is baptized “Silvia”. Her mother is a practising Catholic and her father a socialist. Her brother Gino, a communist, an anti-Fascist resistance fighter, later on works as a journalist for the daily newspaper *L’Unità*. At a young age, Silvia attends Catholic Action meetings.

In 1938 she qualifies as a primary school teacher and for several years she teaches at Castello d’Ossana and Varollo di Livio, small villages in Val di Sole near Trent; later she teaches in Trent itself. She would have liked to study philosophy at the Catholic University of Milan, but the outbreak of the Second World War constrains her to enrol for a course in Languages and Literature at the University Institute of Venice. Soon she is forced to abandon her studies.

**Her Vocation** – At the age of 19, during a course for Catholic Action female youngsters, she visits the Marian shrine of Loreto, which, according to tradition, contains the house of the Holy Family. There, she discovers her future vocation: a community in the image of the family of Nazareth, “a fourth way”, new in the Church when compared to the traditional vocations (the convent, marriage, consecration to God while remaining in the world). Intuitively she understands that many others will follow her. When invited to animate the Franciscan Third Order in Trent, Silvia is struck by the radical choice of Clare of Assisi, and she takes the name of Chiara as her own. On December 7, 1943 she consecrates herself to God by a perpetual vow of chastity. This date has come to be considered the birth of the Focolare Movement.

**The beginnings of the Movement and the birth of a new spirituality** – Hatred and destruction caused by the war put a question into Chiara’s heart and with it comes an answer: is there an ideal that cannot be destroyed? Yes there is. That ideal is God. Chiara and her first group of friends decide to choose God as their ideal, who in the midst of war manifests himself to them as Love. They begin to put into practice the words of the Gospel, read in the shelter during air raids. On May 13, 1944 Trent is badly hit by violent bombings. Lubich’s house is damaged and the family leave the city to seek refuge in the mountains; but Chiara decides to remain there to sustain the new life growing up around her. After a short time she is offered an apartment in Piazza Cappuccini where she takes up residence with some of her first companions. They call it “casetta”, which recalls “the little house of Nazareth”. This, in fact, becomes the first “focolare”.

They begin to share their belongings with the poor of Trent and realise that Jesus keeps the promises found in the Gospel (“Ask and you shall receive”, “Give, and it will be given to you” ...) through the abundance of food, clothing and medicines they receive, which they immediately redistribute. In the New Commandment of Jesus, “Love one another as I have loved you”, they rediscover a law of life and try to live it. Jesus on the cross crying, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” reveal to them the measure of this love; and in the words of the testament of Jesus, “That all may be one”, they find both the reason and the purpose of their lives. Thus, gradually, a new spiritual current, the spirituality of unity, a distinctly communitarian spirituality starts taking shape, and is recognized by the Catholic Church and by other churches as one of the charisms given by the Holy Spirit in our times.

***Second half of the '40s***

**Developments and first diocesan approval** – Young people, workers and professionals, families and religious join the first group. And after a few months, there are about 500 people who, like the first Christians, live a spontaneous communion of material and spiritual goods. Msgr. Carlo De Ferrari, Archbishop of Trent, to whose judgment Chiara entrusts the reality that starts to flourish, says: “Here, there is the hand of God” and he gives the first diocesan approval (1947). In 1948, the first men’s focolare opens in Trent.

**Meeting with Igino Giordani** – In September 1948 Chiara meets the Honourable Igino Giordani in the Italian Parliament building in Rome; he is an elected representative, writer, journalist, scholar, and an ecumenical pioneer. Giordani becomes the first married focolarino and is considered by Chiara as co-founder of the Movement because of his contribution to the spirituality of unity's incarnation in society. Giordani is a Servant of God and the process of his beatification is in the Roman phase.

**Summer '49; "Mariapolis"** - In Summer 1949, Chiara and her companions go for some rest on the Dolomite mountains in Trent, and there begins for Chiara a time of enlightenment and contemplation, in which, through a special grace, she understands God's plan for the Movement and its future developments. In subsequent summers, Chiara and her first companions are joined by an increasing number of people coming from different backgrounds and conditions. Thus, the *Mariapolis*, the city of Mary is born. In 1959 more than 10,000 people from 27 countries participate in the Mariapolis at Fiera di Primiero.

### **The 50's**

**The study of the Church** - Since the beginning of the 50's, the Movement is subjected to a long and thorough study by the Holy Office and, for a time, by the Italian Episcopal Conference. This is a period of suspension and trial for Chiara and her spiritual family, marked by obedience and absolute confidence in the Church.

The first pontifical approval *ad experimentum* of the section of men focolarini arrives in March 1962, while the section of women focolarini is approved a year after.

The general Statutes that define the composite aspects of the Focolare Movement are approved in June 1990; further updates are made in December 2007.

**Pasquale Foresi** - In 1954, Pasquale Foresi, the first priest focolarino, is ordained by the Archbishop of Trent. Chiara also sees Foresi as co-founder because of his contribution towards the development of the Movement, as for instance in furthering studies, in drawing up the statutes, in setting up the publishing house, and in establishing the small town of Loppiano.

**The spreading of the Movement** – Various fortuitous circumstances help the Focolare Movement to spread to other European countries. Since 1958 it has started to spread in countries outside Europe, and since 1967 it is present in all five continents.

### **'50's - '80's**

**Structure and works** – Over the years, Chiara has founded various branches: married focolarini, diocesan priests, religious men and women, the *volunteers of God* committed in various fields of society, the new generations. Since 1977, there are also bishops interested in the spirituality of communion and in living an "effective and affective collegiality" with the Pope, among themselves and with other bishops, as hoped by the Second Vatican Council. Branches with widespread membership, namely *New Families, New Humanity, Youth for a United World and Teens for Unity, the Priests and the Religious Movements, and the Parish and the Diocesan Movements* have also developed.

The '*little towns*' or *permanent Mariapolis* are born. The inhabitants of these settlements that vary in size are people of all ages who seek to live the love of the Gospel in their workplace and in every aspect of their life. Thus these "little towns" offer a living witness to the spirituality of unity. Today there are 24 of them in 20 countries

To clarify and spread the culture of unity, Chiara founds an interdisciplinary study Centre, the *Abba School* and the *Sophia University Institute*.

The publishing house *Città Nuova* has been functioning since the 50's (currently there are 38 editions in 23 languages). There are also audiovisual productions and websites.

**The way of dialogue** - Some particular dialogues develop over the years: within individual Churches, between Churches, with followers of other religions, with persons who have no particular religious conviction. Some hints.

**Dialogue within the Churches** has a new beginning on the eve of Pentecost 1998 when Pope John Paul II speaks to 300 thousand members of ecclesial Movements about the charismatic aspect of the Church, which he describes as constitutive of the Church and co-essential with its institutional aspect. Today the Movement has a relationship of communion with approximately 500 movements, associations and new Catholic ecclesial communities, both internationally and locally.

**Ecumenism** – 1961 marks the beginning of the Movement's ecumenical dialogue which starts through the relationship with a group of Evangelical Lutherans in Germany. Chiara Lubich gradually receives encouragement to spread the spirituality of unity, recognized as an ecumenical spirituality from leaders of different Churches, whom she meets in Istanbul, London, Germany and elsewhere. She personally takes on this commitment and by the end of the 90's she promotes the project *Together for Europe* which is shared also by movements of different Churches. Today there are 25 thousand people in the Movement who belong to 350 Churches and ecclesial communities.

**Interreligious dialogue** - Chiara herself starts the interreligious dialogue that proves to be particularly fruitful on the level of spirituality. In 1981, she was the first woman to narrate her Christian experience to 12,000 Buddhists in a temple in Tokyo, and 1997 she spoke to Buddhist monks and nuns in Thailand. In the same year she was invited to speak to 3000 African-American Muslims at the historic mosque *Malcolm X* in Harlem (New York). Dialogue with Muslims in the Middle East and North Africa has a very significant dimension.

Interreligious dialogue has developed in many other countries, even with Jews and people of other religious traditions, including Hindus, Taoists, Sikhs, animists. About 7000 members of other religions belong to the Movement.

**Dialogue with persons of no religious conviction** - It has also been through her initiative that the Movement is open to dialogue with people who do not subscribe to any particular religious conviction, and with whom one can collaborate to achieve fraternity while promoting the human being in all its values. Today, about 10,000 persons who have no religious conviction adhere to the Movement.

#### **Years 1990 - 2000**

**The culture of unity** – In the 90's Lubich opens a dialogue between the sapiential dimension of the charism of unity and the different fields that touch on human knowledge and life. International networks of scholars, professionals and students from various fields (theology, sociology, law, communication, psychology, medicine, education, art, architecture, sport and others), engaged in a work of cultural development inspired by the charism of unity, in dialogue with contemporary research, have been set up. In the field of economics this developed through the Economy of Communion ([www.edc-online.org](http://www.edc-online.org)), which inspires the management of about 800 firms, while in the political sphere there is the "Movement for Unity in Politics" ([www.mppu.org](http://www.mppu.org)) which proposes fraternity as a political category.

**Awards** - In 1977, in London Chiara Lubich receives the Templeton Prize for Progress in Religion. Since 1995 the awards received from international organizations and from academic and public administrations continue to increase, among them the UNESCO Prize for Peace Education received in Paris, in 1966. She receives honorary citizenship from many cities, including Buenos Aires, Rome, Florence, Turin and Milan and sixteen honorary degrees from universities in four continents. These awards highlight her contribution towards peace and unity amongst peoples, religions and cultures and towards the diffusion of universal brotherhood.

**The last days** – At the beginning of February 2008 Chiara Lubich is admitted to the Gemelli Hospital. Pope Benedict XVI sends her a personal letter. She is visited by the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople Bartholomew I (who happens to be in Rome on the occasion of his meeting with the Pope at the Vatican). On March 14 Chiara dies at the age of 88 in her home at Rocca di Papa, surrounded by her spiritual family. Her funeral on March 18, in the basilica of St Paul Outside the Walls is presided by Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, the Secretary of State, who concelebrates with 16 other cardinals, 40 bishops and hundreds of priests. Among the thousands of people of all ages who attend the funeral service, there are many politicians of various political parties, representatives of many religions, of different Churches and of Catholic movements.