

If the guide is female

Interview with Maria Voce, President of the Focolare Movement

We were keen that the new insert of "L'Osservatore Romano" dedicated to women would begin with an interview with you: you are the only woman who heads a movement of such great importance. Is this unique feature a burden to you in your contacts with the ecclesiastical hierarchy?



Not only is it not a burden but it is a peculiarity that is increasingly recognized by the Pope and by cardinals and bishops, in accordance with its original meaning, as John Paul II expressed it: to be a sign and a guarantee of that Marian profile which declares the primacy of supernatural love and of holiness, coessential to the apostolic and Petrine profile. These dimensions compete with each other, Wojtyła said, "to make the Mystery of Christ and his saving work present in the world". This is not how it was in the first 20 years of our history: it was such an innovation! Behind the scenes is a long journey that was not devoid of suffering.

Your succession to Chiara Lubich was also different from the usual practice: no designation but a democratic vote. Moreover in its decisions too the Movement seems to follow this method. Did this also happen when Chiara was alive?

The succession took place with an election but it cannot be said that it followed a democratic process. Had this been the case we should subsequently have had to accept a compromise in order to settle the polarization which would have been in contrast with our charism that demands unity. From that moment we understood better the meaning of Chiara's legacy: Jesus makes himself present when "two or three are gathered in my name". In that crucial period we experienced the power that transforms and the light that guides. That reciprocal love which does not measure, indeed which aims for the very measure of Jesus was asked of us: to give our life. Today we know no other way of taking decisions: it means listening, sharing burdens, successes, experiences, viewpoints, while being prepared to lose everything in the other person. It means above all fidelity to the espousals with the crucified Jesus in order to transform sorrows, doubts and divisions and to recompose unity. When Christ is present the gifts of the Spirit are resplendent: peace, fresh strength, light; equality shines out but in no way diminishes the "gift of authority".

It seems to me that among the movements you are the most reluctant for publicity: "humility and reticence, never putting oneself on show", Chiara used to say. Therefore people get to know you when they come into contact with one of you through a personal relationship. This modesty makes you little known to the outside world. Does it have anything to do with having a woman in charge?

We are disinclined to publicity, not to communication. Significantly Chiara wanted the great satellite dish for intercontinental communications to be set up in her garden: she saw it as the "monument to unity". It is true, there was a long period of silence while the movement was under examination by the Church. However, in the following years there was no lack of international demonstrations broadcast throughout the world by satellite, magazines and website increased and a press office came into being. What motivates us is not seeking to be in the limelight but rather the Gospel saying that tells us not to put the lamp under a bushel but to set it on the table to make the house light.

The Focolare spirit is affected by its female matrix. What other feminine characteristics can be traced in your charism?

The Focolare Movement has a female matrix because it is a "Work of Mary" – Mary, the loftiest expression of

redeemed humanity, the model of Christians and of the whole Church, as sanctioned by the Second Vatican Council. It is she who impressed her tone upon the whole movement: an interiority that leaves room for God and for the brethren, fortitude, faith, the word lived, the singing of the *Magnificat* which announces the most powerful social revolution, the motherhood that is possible today in generating the mysterious but real presence everywhere of the Risen One who makes all things new.

The Movement includes exponents of the ecclesiastical hierarchy as members or friends. How do you solve the confrontation between the authority of the Movement's guidance and the authority of the hierarchies they represent?

In our relations with bishops there has never been a conflict of authority but rather an exchange of gifts: bishops draw from the charism of unity that spirituality which has been so much encouraged by Popes to give the Church the face outlined by the Second Vatican Council, the Church-communion. In the charism proper to the ecclesiastical hierarchies we recognize the evangelical words: "those who listen to you listen to me".

In addition to the Foundress' writings by which you are obviously inspired, what relationship do you have with the saints and with the texts they have written?

Two examples: Chiara took the name of the saint of Assisi because she was fascinated by her evangelical radicalism. For years, on the saint's feast, we examined in depth parallel aspects of the two spiritualities. Teresa of Avila provided the enlightenment to interpret, in the new charism given to the Church, an authentic path of holiness, whose goal is not only to build the "interior castle" but also the "exterior castle" in whose centre is the presence of Jesus in the community.

"Our uniform is a smile", is one of your most inspirational sayings. Chiara, the model of reference, seems to be achieved better by the women, who all resemble her not only in the way they dress and in their hairstyle but also in the affectionate luminosity of their faces. Does this seem more difficult for the men?

It is not a question of difficulty but of diversity: "man and woman he created them". They are called to be a gift to each other so that they may achieve that "fullness of the human being" which is only possible in the "complementarity between femininity and masculinity". The Movement itself can be regarded as a training ground for this unity: if the president is a woman, even though she has a specific function in the whole of the Work of Mary, she has a Co-President beside her. Every other level of responsibility is shared with full equality. It is only in the unity between the two that the charism is expressed in its authenticity. It is a dimension of unity that is rooted in the crucified Jesus and requires a measure of love that can contain differences without blotting them out. And a consequence of this is also the light which shines on faces.

You have fraternal relations with the believers of other religions in which women are often oppressed and deprived of freedom; have you ever touched on this subject with them?

The matter is very complicated because it is rooted in 1,000-year-old cultures. Moreover our Western categories do not always apply. It is life rather than words that is effective. One episode is significant. At Fontem, in the heart of the forest of Cameroon, polygamy is still practised. One of the wives of a village chief had failed to obey an order he had given. His reaction was violent and public. Immediately afterwards the man took part in a meeting in which the Gospel approach, "as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren you did to me", was being discussed. In contrast with the tradition, the chief gathered his extended family and in front of everyone he knelt before the woman to offer her his apology. This stunning event was to have far-reaching echoes beyond the village and to have an effect in change.

Chiara gave you the most beautiful name, Emmaus. It is the name of a place, of an encounter. How do you think you put it into practice?

Emmaus is the name of a place and of an encounter which coincides with the heart of the charism: it is my specific duty to keep it alive. My priority commitment is to seek first to live myself the demands of love that make it active. I tangibly feel a grace that exceeds me by far with ever new wonder.

In recent years the Church has had to surmount periods of great difficulty. Do you believe that a different role and presence of women might have made this any easier?

It is hard to tell. I would say look at today, when a profound crisis is not only passing through the Church but through all humanity. If, as the Pope repeats, there is a crisis of faith at the root of the crisis, women, wherever they may live, have the specific vocation to be heralds of God, of that supernatural love which is the greatest and

most effective value for renewing both the Church and society.

From 7 July 2008 Maria Voce has been President of the Focolare Movement whose official name is Work of Mary. Chiara Lubich founded it in 1943, with the aim of achieving the unity among people that Jesus desired. In 1962 John XXIII gave the Movement its first approval and its Statutes were approved by John Paul ii in 1990. In particular, the Work of Mary obtained from the Pope the rare privilege of always being able to be directed by a woman. Having spread on all the continents, today the Movement has more than two million members.

LUCETTA SCARAFFIA

May 31, 2012

L'Osservatore Romano, 00120 Città del Vaticano. All rights reserved