

International Eucharistic Congress

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“Communion in one Baptism”

Ten years ago I visited Ireland for the first time. I came to be with a dear friend, Lieta Betoño, who was dying. She was from Argentina and had spent thirty years of her life in Ireland in the Focolare community. I had often heard her speak of the warm welcome she had received in this country. During my brief visit here, I too, as well admiring the wonderful rainbows, enjoyed the warm family spirit in the communities I met.

I find the same spirit here among you and it is a joy to be here for this International Eucharistic Congress.

I have been asked to share a short testimony on the topic of “Communion in one Baptism”.

Baptism is the sacrament that links all Christians. It is the sacramental bond of unity.

As the Joint Working Group of the Catholic Church and the World Council of Churches puts it in their Eighth Report on the Ecclesiological and Ecumenical implications of our common baptism: “All Christians who receive the one Baptism into Christ’s one body have also received a radical calling to communion with all the baptized”.¹

So it could be said that baptism has given us not only the common right to the name “Christian” through incorporation into Christ, but it has also provided us with a specific task to build communion among one another through loving one another as Jesus loved us.

To say “yes” to this calling is our great chance in life. It’s not that we “have” to say “yes” but we “can” say “yes”! To be able to say this “yes” and say it together is the expression of our dignity as children of God.

And to do this, we Christians have in our hands a great treasure: the Gospel. I know that in many ways the Irish are a people born of the Gospel.

From the very beginning of the Focolare Movement, Chiara Lubich and her first companions discovered and chose the Gospel as their only lifestyle.

The Movement began in Trent (Italy) in 1943. The War was raging. There were constant bombardments. Every time the air-raid alarm sounded, they would run

to the shelters, bringing with them only a small copy of the Gospel. Chiara had understood that Jesus is the Truth and so she had to follow *him*, not books or theories but rather *him* by putting into practice his words.

They opened the Gospel. And then something amazing happened for them: those words they had heard so many times before, since they were already Christians, lit up as if a light was switched on beneath them. They understood them in a totally new way and felt prompted, certainly by the Holy Spirit, to put them into practice.

This is how Chiara put it: "To us these words seemed to have a revolutionary power, an unknown vitality, to us they seemed the only words capable of radically changing life; and of changing the life of us Christians in our times."²

Others who gradually wanted to live like Chiara plunged themselves into these words of the Gospel, nourished themselves on them. Moved and delighted, they experienced how all that Jesus has said and promised was coming true: "Give and you will be given".³ It was their daily experience: they gave, gave gave and received, received, received.

"Ask and it will be given to you".⁴ They asked for all kinds of things because of the great needs of the time. It was war time and there were many people in need around them. They asked and even though it was a time of great poverty sacks of flour, tins of milk, as well as wood, jam, etc. arrived and they would then distribute them to the poor in the city.

Soon the word about these experiences spread. It was like an echo of the words of the apostles who went out proclaiming to the world "Christ is risen". With their experiences, Chiara and her companions were saying: "Christ is alive! Christ is alive!"

The War sowed ruin, destruction, death. One day, during an air-raid alarm, Chiara and her companions were in a dark cellar, a copy of the gospels in hand. She opened it and in the candle-light read Jesus' prayer before he died: "Father.... may they all be one" (Jn 17: 11, 21). It was not an easy text to start with, but a strong conviction stirred in their hearts, that they were born for that page of the Gospel.

On the feast of Christ the King they said to Jesus: "You know the way to achieve unity. Here we are. If you desire, use us".

Today too, here, Chiara Lubich shows us again only the Gospel, nothing other than the Gospel because, as she said, in order to find meaning in life, humanity, "needs not so much cultured and learned people who have a lot of ideas but rather wise people filled with the Holy Spirit, men and women who are truly evangelical."⁵

In a time when knowledge of the Gospel was reserved for just a few people, Martin Luther wrote:

“We must be sure that our soul can do without everything, other than the Word of God, nothing is good without the Word of God. But when we have the Word of God... we have sufficient food, happiness, peace, light, intelligence, justice, truth, wisdom, freedom and every good in abundance.”⁶

It is the Gospel and the life of the Word that can evangelise first of all ourselves, making us then capable of lighting up the “dark cellar” which is the world that surrounds us, responding to the questions and challenges that life puts before us, and before each and every human being on earth.

Personally and together, we would like to repeat with Chiara: “If by some absurd hypothesis all the Gospels of the earth were destroyed, we would like to live in such a way that people could to some extent rewrite the Gospel by observing our behaviour.”⁷

We find an echo of this idea in an eighteenth century Evangelical-Lutheran theologian, Gerhard Tersteegen, who wrote:

“Open yourself totally [to Christ] in silence like a white page, in such a way that he may write his law in your heart by the Holy Spirit until you, in your being and in your life behaviour, become a sacred Scripture, a letter that everyone may read. Then Scripture will remain a precious witness to Christ, and we’ll believe not only because we have read it, but because we have listened to and known Him.”⁸

The Movement then development in accordance with a plan that was surely written in heaven and that was revealed to us step by step. Spreading in a way that was defined as “an explosion”, the Movement soon went beyond the borders of Italy, then Europe and reached all the continents. Today it is present in 198 countries with members in more than 300 churches and with members too of all religions and convictions.

I myself met this experience in 1959. The year before that I had gone on a pilgrimage and had asked God to help me meet someone or something that would fill completely a void that I felt within me, one that I couldn’t even explain to myself because I could say I had everything: a good family, all I needed to live on, success in studies...

Then a year later, in 1959, I met a group of young people who were at Mass in the chapel in the University of Rome and I was very impressed by them. You could

see a joy among them, an “atmosphere” that was different. I became friends with them and they showed me a way of life that was totally new.

I remember my first visit to a focolare house (a community that lies at the heart of the Movement). When I asked: “But what should I do to be like you?” they said to me it was enough simply to live the Gospel because it was a question of living, not of an organization. Jesus was asking me to begin this new life with him.

My first experience was that of listening to my aunt out of love for Jesus – even if she was telling me things that didn’t really interest me – because in her, as in everyone, I could meet and love Jesus himself! The Gospel tells us that “whatever you do the least of my brothers and sisters, you do it to me” (Mt 25: 40).

In the Focolare communities in the early times of the Movement, just as today too, it was felt essential to share with one another the experiences we have lived, in other words, to communicate the fruits of the Word of Life lived out.

At that time it was a heartfelt need to do this. A spirituality of communion was coming to life, the spirituality of unity that prompted them to share all their goods, not just material goods. And could there be any better good to share than the fruits of the Word lived?

Considering the world in which we live, it seems to us that it was the Holy Spirit that suggested to us this practice, this method, let’s say, (of sharing experiences) because faced with the general relativism today that often makes it difficult to explain or demonstrate the truth logically, the evidence of a life-experience cannot be questioned. It may be understood or not understood, appreciated or not, but it cannot be questioned because it is experience, it is life.

This sharing of experiences in mutual love links all who are involved and bears witness, just as the Gospel says: “by this all will know you are my disciples if you love one another” (Jn 13: 35).

I spent 10 years in Turkey, responsible for the Movement in that geographical area. I knew neither the culture nor the language of that country. Often I didn’t know what to do there. News from the Christian world didn’t reach us. External signs of religion were absent. Churches were hidden. The Sunday Church bells were silent.

And yet, I recall many moments when I experienced the beauty of the family that Jesus came to create on earth.

For instance, in our desire to show others how we really wanted to be close to them, we went to meet with the leaders of the various Christian Churches there: the bishop of the Catholic Church of the Latin rite as well as the Armenian bishop. But also the Ecumenical Patriarch of the Greek Orthodox Church of Constantinople as well as the Apostolic Armenian bishop and the Jacobite Syrian bishop. All these

churches are very much minority churches and in all kinds of major difficulties within a hugely Islamic majority. For us it was a case of going to share suffering, to support hope and encourage initiatives. And the fruit of doing this was always a new ardour and joy.

We were linked with the Greek Orthodox Patriarch through a long and deep story of friendship that began in 1967 with various meetings between Chiara Lubich and the great Patriarch Athenagoras. This friendship then continued with his successors Dimitrios I and Bartholomew I.

I remember something we often noticed in people we came into contact with was that they weren't completely clear on belonging to a particular Church. They saw themselves generally as Christians and, while this was lovey and fruitful in building relationships, it could, however, generate confusion and misunderstandings among the leaders of the Churches. We wanted to help by trying to spread a healthy ecumenical spirit and we did so by encouraging people involved in our groups to establish relationships with their own churches to which they belonged.

I recall occasions when we accompanied some Orthodox groups who were involved in our Movement to meet personally with their Patriarch. They were always very warm, deep meetings with a family atmosphere in which the people in those groups rediscovered they had a father and they felt embraced by the maternity of their Church.

For his part, the Patriarch always expressed his affection and esteem for what we were trying to do and today too, every time he gets a chance, he expresses his gratitude to Chiara Lubich and to the Movement for a genuine ecumenism lived out.

The effects of the Word lived out in the Movement in these past seventy years have been innumerable. They cannot all be listed.

But one of the fundamental effects was ecumenical dialogue.

Right from the beginning of this new life, the unity that Jesus prayed for in his last will and testament was for Chiara and her companions their objective, to be achieved through living mutual love

First and foremost, unity among themselves as faithful of the Catholic Church without expecting any developments that might come in the future.

Soon, however, precisely because of an evangelising power that was a fruit of unity, the Movement spread throughout the world. God's providential guidance, led to contact with people of various churches and faiths, indeed also with people with no particular religion, and relationships of mutual love were established with them.

Cardinal Bea pointed out that the more deeply Christians from various denominations live the Gospel, the more they will draw close to one another because in this way they will become more like Christ.

We find the same idea, even if expressed in other words, in a document of the theological dialogue between the Catholic Church and the Lutheran World Federation which states: "... the common way of listening to the word of God and the faithful attachment to the one Gospel (see Gal 1:6-10) are essential steps on the way towards full unity.'⁹

In these almost 70 years of the Movement's life, we have noticed that the communitarian and ecumenical spirituality that we strive to live, itself a fruit of a charism sent by the Holy Spirit for our time, links all those who live it so that in a certain sense we already feel we are one – one Christian people.

In this way, what we have called "a dialogue of the people" comes about, that is, a "dialogue of life" among Christians. And this dialogue is ever more urgent because history has shown that the conclusions and even the most forward-thinking positions taken among theologians are not enough if the people are not prepared.

United by this spirituality, we would like to be a leaven among the churches and contribute to speeding up their journey towards full, also visible and also Eucharistic, communion.

A concrete experience that bears witness to this dialogue, one that is bringing it forward is the "Together for Europe" project. This is an extraordinary reality of communion and fellowship among Christian communities and movements from various denominations from almost all the countries of Europe. About 250 movements take part, including some in Belfast and other parts of Ireland. Together they are committed to a journey of sharing, mutual recognition, welcome and collaboration, in favour of the true good of the continent of Europe and beyond.

In my testimony today, I have tried to show how the Gospel when lived together, with a sharing of experiences, makes us one.

From the beginning of the Movement, in the long hours spent in the air-raid shelters, the sentences of the Gospel that spoke most about love, came to light: "Love your neighbour" (Mt 19:19); "Love your enemy" (Mt 5:44); "Love one another" (Jn 15:17); "Above all let your love for one another be sincere" (1 Pt 4:8)...

Now, if there are many of us trying to live like this and if we try to put into practice Jesus' commandment par excellence, "As I have loved you, so you should love one another" (Jn 13:34), love becomes reciprocal.

And reciprocal love lived out has an effect, it is a cornerstone in the communion and fellowship among the baptised – it makes possible the presence of

Jesus among Christians united in his name: “For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them” (Mt 18:20).

His presence among us inserts us more completely, more vitally, into the presence of Jesus in the Church; it makes us Church.

Jesus between a Catholic and an Anglican who love one another, between an Anglican and an Orthodox, between an Armenian and a Reformed Church member, between a Methodist and a Quaker...

This presence of the Jesus Risen is a very powerful impetus to the journey of Christians towards full communion and fellowship. It enlightens us on what steps to take; it gives us courage to put our proposals into action; it makes us share joys and sufferings.

As well as this, Jesus among us, urges us to look together at the world as he did: to love it, to save it, to help people experience the peace and light that he brings.

In this way, the Church goes beyond the confines of our buildings of worship. In full communion and fellowship among all, it draws closer to today’s humanity in order to respond to all its needs and questions with the answers that only the Gospel can offer.

I would like to conclude with a sentence from the late David Stevens, a Presbyterian from Northern Ireland and ex leader of the Corrymeela community. He spoke of the space that the Risen Christ opens for us when we live the Gospel together. He wrote: “The Gospel invites us into the space created by Christ and to find there those who were previously our enemies.... This is a vision of a new humanity reconciled in Christ and living together in a new community”.¹⁰

May the Risen Christ grant that, through baptism and the Gospel lived, we may contribute to rendering the enchantment of this vision real and visible and may he give us the joy of experiencing ever more his presence among us.

¹ Joint Working Group (Geneva-Rome 2005), p.69

² See C. LUBICH, *May They All Be One*, London, 1977, p. 37.

³ *Lk* 6:38.

⁴ *Mt* 7:7.

⁵ C. LUBICH, *Essere tua Parola*, Rome 2008, 19.

⁶ Source: WA 7,20,7-25,4. Italian translation. *La libertà del cristiano* (Christian freedom), by G.Miegge, Turin, Claudiana 1982, pp.25-36 In : Emidio Campi, *Protestantesimo nei secoli*, Fonti e documenti (*Protestantism throughout the centuries*, Sources and documents), Turin, Claudiana 1991, p. 35

⁷ See C. LUBICH, *May They All Be One*, London, 1977, p. 62.

⁸ In Albert LÖSCHHORN, *Ich bete an die Macht der Liebe*, Gerhard Tersteegens christliche Mystik, Basel, 1948, Brunnen-Verlag, p.120-121 (Our translation from the Italian translation)

⁹ World Lutheran Federation Ökumenische Beziehungen des LWB, Genf 1977, n.171

¹⁰ David Stevens, *The Land of Unlikeness* (Dublin: Columba, 2004), p. 80