

MEN AND WOMEN IN THE CHURCH

*Excerpts from Talk given by Maria Voce,
President of the Focolare Movement*

(...)

Before practically tackling this topic, I think we need to set an important premise: the role of man and woman should be seen and understood in the light of God's plan for humanity. "Created by God in His image and likeness" (Gen 1:27), they are called to participate in His intimate life and to live in reciprocal communion of love like that of God who is Love and Trinity. Hence, the dignity of men and women is founded on God the Creator.

If the woman does not have access to an ecclesiastical career, on the other hand she holds the greatest charism and gift: love. The woman may mirror herself in Mary, the greatest created being that exists, who lived love perfectly.

(...)

The Focolare Movement gives more importance to life than the structures, although we know that they are helpful. We want to emphasize the quality of relationship – which must be of mutual love - rather than the supporting structure. Nevertheless, the Movement has gradually become an international organization, with its center in Rome, which is repeated in a similar way in different parts of the world where it has taken root. The central structure, elected by the General Assembly of the Movement, is composed of two co-leaders - a man and a woman - for every reality of the Movement. They form the General Council of the Movement or the Zone Council at the local level. There is the President at the head of the Movement, who leads it together with the Co-president, as first and most direct collaborator.

There had been several phases from the first diocesan approval, which dates back to 1947, until the final Pontifical approval of the Statutes of the Movement in 1990¹. I will not dwell now on how the Focolare Movement has developed and has spread throughout the world.

I would simply say that during all these years, the Church has put it to the test, especially with regard to the presence of a woman, Chiara Lubich, as founder and president. There were many attempts to annex it or put it under the guardianship of the hierarchy of the Church. In the beginning, it seemed that the head of the Movement should have been a man and possibly a priest. Chiara, together with the whole Movement, always manifested an unconditional obedience to the Church in its institutional aspect. In fact, for Chiara, the phrase of the Gospel establishing the authority of the hierarchy, "who hears you, hears me" (Lk 10:16), should be absolutely respected, even if she thought that a man possibly leading this Movement would have altered its nature. Chiara knew, better than anyone else, that this came from God and not from human planning.

This is to emphasize that the recognition of women in the Church requires a kind of "struggle", which is fidelity to oneself, to one's own conscience and, ultimately, to God's plan. But it is a "struggle" that for Chiara, in this case, had the characteristics of an "Easter", a death and a resurrection, which allowed the full manifestation of God's plan and His will on the role of women.

Chiara Lubich, who had always wanted a woman President of the Focolare Movement, spoke directly to John Paul II, asking him if it was possible to insert this provision in the General Statutes. The Pope's answer was absolutely clear: "Indeed, I would!"²

This female presidency, as established in the Statutes, is very significant: it indicates a distinction between the power of government and the importance of the charism. It clarifies that in order to govern a Movement, it's essential to have a charism, and not so much qualities of authority or organization. This is a sign given to the Church to emphasize the priority of love, a priority which is not the monopoly of women. Therefore, such a position offers to the universal Church some innovative directions: more than knowing how to organize, what matters is to love, and this is something that a woman can do just as well as a man. It's a fact that women, given their capacity to motherhood, have a great ability to love. It's an intimate and physical ability that makes them understand within them what the others are experiencing and feel what the others feel, as only mothers can.

Therefore, the presidency of the Focolare Movement is not a question of power. The "real" power lies in the mutual relationship of love that generates the presence of Jesus in our midst, as it is written in the preface of our Statutes: "Mutual and constant love, that renders unity possible and brings the presence of Jesus among all, is for those who are part of the Work of Mary, the basis for their life in every aspect: it is the norm of norms, the premise to every other rule."

(...)

Shortly after being elected, I stated that I had no other desire than to establish profound relationships of unity with all the people of the Movement, at all levels, from the Center to the zones, so as not to be the one to lead the Movement but it must be the charism that Chiara has left us.³

We are aware that this is not a foreseen situation because of the many differences that exist, and the one between men and women is no lesser. So the fact that, in the Movement, men and women are placed in absolute equality is not easy. But when you build something based on this unity, it works a complete change in men and women themselves.

I had the opportunity to talk about the man-woman relationship within the Movement. I wanted that the focolarine (committed women) realize always more that it is heroic for men, after centuries-old practice, to acknowledge an absolute equality with women.

We know that we are only at the beginning of this path. The unity between man and woman is still in an unstable footing. One must always rediscover the value of the other, and both must not forget that diversity is an asset. They must not also get tired of starting again each time to retrace the royal path of dialogue.

(...)

This is the outline of a path that opens the Christian community to a deep and harmonious cooperation between men and women. It is a collaboration that comes from living the Gospel, which offers to both men and women some models with whom to comply: Jesus and Mary.

(...)

I could still draw your attention on some essential elements in the man-woman relationship: the necessity in this field never to place it in terms of power but of service, a service of communion. At the same time, paradoxically, one must be able to maintain his/her identity and continue without expecting recognition and approvals. We must also bear in mind that any ecclesial structure does not live just for itself, but for the good of humanity in which it is immersed. It cannot think only of itself, but it must look beyond and see to what service it is called and what testimony it wants to give.

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¹ The Statutes were updated and approved in 2007.

² During the audience on 23 September 1985 cf. *Work of Mary, General Statutes*, art. 98, note 23.

³ The Statutes of the Work of Mary state: “The President is to constantly strive to personify the ideal of the Work of Mary reflecting the role of Mary, Mother of unity, in her care for all those entrusted to her and for all those who are called, in whatever manner, to be part of the Work of Mary.

Hers is to be, above all, a presidency of love, because she must be the first in loving and, therefore, in serving her own brothers and sisters, remembering the words of Jesus: “(...) whoever wishes to be first among you will serve all” (*Mk 10:44*).

As guardian of the flame in every community of the Work of mary, she must be ready to give even her life so that unity in it may never diminish.”(*Work of Mary, General Statutes*, art. 82).