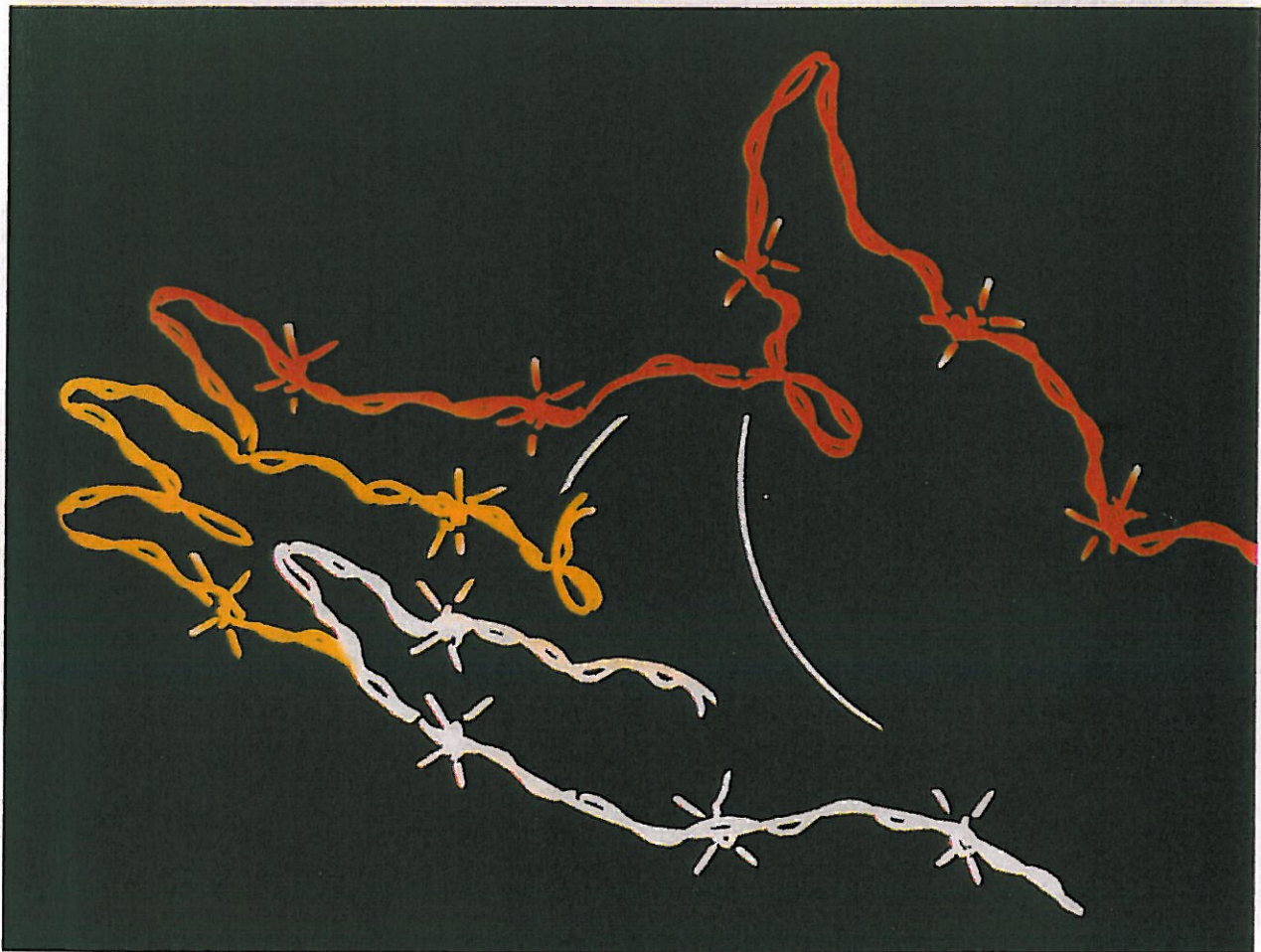


THE

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# TABLET



## Barbed welcome

Sue Gaisford on Britain's scandalous asylum system

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## Bloomsday 100 years on

Ireland has learned to love Joyce, says Brendan McCarthy

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## Company of strangers

Michael McMahon reaches Santiago

RETREATS AND  
PILGRIMAGES

under the other person's skin, really becoming one with the other; but to be one with the other, we must first become nothing." In this way, she says, we are open to perceiving what the Second Vatican Council called "seeds of the Word" in the faith of the other – "they are small seeds of the Truth which all belong to Christ." As the other feels understood and heard, so "mutual love comes to life", and true dialogue can take place. Each can then proclaim their truth while respecting the other, she says.

What happens when this does not work? "The obstacles are often more within ourselves than in the others – not knowing how to really love, to make yourself one with the other, suffering if they are suffering, rejoicing if they rejoice," she says firmly, adding: "We are the obstacle, if there is any." Human beings, says Chiara, have been created in the image and likeness of God: "The law of love", she has said in the past, "is written into the DNA of every person."

**F**IRED BY this premise, the movement has created networks of fraternity like concentric circles – communion firstly among Catholics, then among Christians of different traditions, then with the faithful of various religions, then with agnostics and atheists. Even this last dialogue draws strength from *Gesù abbandonato*: "In a certain way", Chiara writes in her spiritual testament *The Cry*, the forsaken Jesus "made himself atheism."

The movement became ecumenical in the Sixties, when in Germany Lutherans began living in community with Catholics, each remaining faithful to their own tradition. From 1967 Chiara developed a close spiritual bond with the Orthodox Patriarch, Athenagoras I, who became a great supporter of Focolare among the Orthodox in the Middle East; Chiara found herself, in turn, a kind of unofficial intermediary between the Patriarch and Pope Paul VI.

Chiara's contact with Anglicans began during the Vatican Council, since when she has met every head of the Anglican Communion. Part of the purpose of next week's visit is to greet Dr Rowan Williams, whom she refers to, with a Roman eye to eternity, as the "new Archbishop of Canterbury".

I explained to Chiara some of the strains over homosexuality in the Anglican Communion, and the difficulties personally for Dr Williams, who is a liberal Anglo-Catholic convinced that church teaching on homosexuality will change, yet who opposed the consecration of Gene Robinson in the United States because he cares deeply about the Anglican Communion. It all poses problems, I say, for Anglican-Catholic dialogue. Chiara listens attentively, but remains resolutely convinced, as mystics are, that the unity is already there. "What can separate us?" she asks. "It is Christ himself that unites us."

She points to the experience of Catholics and Anglicans living together in focolare houses. Communion has enabled them to discover the great treasures they have in common, she says. "Before starting to love one another, we could not count on these common riches", she adds, "but now we have discovered them to be so vast that it looks to us as if



Chiara Lubich's movement began in wartime

there is little missing to unite us juridically as well."

This common experience she describes as "the dialogue of people, a people which in a way finds it is already one" – even though institutionally and juridically there remains much to grapple with. This ecumenism of life impressed Dr Williams when he met *focolarini* in Rome in October last year. They showed, he said, that even at a time of uncertainty and waiting, as far as sacramental communion was concerned, "we are still able to grow together in extraordinary ways, together in witness and in prayer and in silence."

Apart from the charism of unity and the contemporary church theology of communion, Chiara's other great contribution may

well turn out to be a kind of Catholic feminism. Focolare's real name is the "Opera di Maria", the "Work of Mary". So keen is Focolare to preserve this female identity that its statutes insist that the movement's president must be a woman.

Chiara sees her movement's task as bringing to birth Christ in the world, just as Mary did. The Pope at the massive Pentecost meeting of the movements in 1998 took his cue from Chiara when he referred to the movements – in a departure from the standard "institutional vs. charismatic" dichotomy – as belonging to the "Marian profile" of the Church alongside its "Petrine profile", an idea which forms the basis of Chiara's talk next week at St Mary's, Strawberry Hill, in west London. The Petrine dimension, the Pope said on that occasion, "expresses the apostolic and pastoral mission Christ committed to it", while the Marian "expresses its sanctity and its total adherence to the divine plan of salvation". It is clear which, in temporal terms, precedes which; the position of women in the Church is unique, and not conditional on that of men.

Chiara's address on 22 June to Westminster MPs is entitled "Liberty, equality ... What happened to fraternity?" She believes that the third guiding principle of modern politics "has been announced but not put into practice". If you love your adversary, she will explain at a meeting hosted by MPs and peers, you will discover that he must have a reason to make his party different from yours – "and so it's good not to destroy it, it is good

## THE TABLET INTERVIEW

## Chiara's quiet revolution

The 84-year-old founder of Focolare, who is in London next week, presides over a global movement. Austen Ivereigh asked her to explain her vision

ON THE way to Rocca di Papa, the hillside village outside Rome where the Focolare movement has its worldwide headquarters, it occurs to me that, unlike the religious orders, there are no light-bulb jokes about movements. So I think up a few. How many members of Taizé does it take to change a light bulb? Answer: 1,000 – one to take out the light bulb, one to replace it with a candle, and 998 young people to stand in a field and chant *Lumen Christi*. How many Neocats? Answer: a group of 15 people about 20 years – because true change takes time. Sant'Egidio? About 200 – one to change the light bulb, and 199 to organise an interreligious conference to express solidarity with the disused bulb. Opus Dei? Two – one to call

the butler and another to say crossly: "We are *not* a movement". And so on.

But when it comes to how many *focolarini* it would take to change a light bulb, I get stuck. It could be any number of 2 million members in 198 countries, with as many as 5 million associated with it informally. But what do they *do*? A journalist friend who once tried to write a story on Focolare came away frustrated after weeks of visits and interviews ("I just don't get it", she told me).

The difficulty is partly structural: the movement is mostly lay, yet includes 800 bishops and countless clergy; it is Catholic, and heavily Marian, yet its communities are ecumenical – embracing, it is said, members drawn from as many as 350 Churches. And while its charism is centred on the figure of Jesus Christ crucified and forsaken, it embraces people of all religions and none.

Focolare describes itself as a tree with many branches, or movements-within-the-movement. *Focolarini* (men) and *focolarine* (women) are the core, celibate members who live together in the community; "volunteers" live out Focolare spirituality in the world, whether single or married. Young people belong to the New Generation, for example, and married people to the New Families Movement. Lay people committed to working for unity in their workplace are known as the New Humanity Movement, while those working for unity in politics are called, unsurprisingly, the Movement for Unity in Politics.

The 442 women's and 279 men's *focolares* – as their houses are known – are the hubs of an astonishing diversity of states of life. Celibate *focolarini* live in a community under vows of chastity, poverty and obedience; married members live in their own houses, but attached to the *focolare*; others are associated with the movement through monthly Word of Life groups. Most are lay people, but quite a number are ordained priests, and a few work full-time for the movement. The men's *focolare* in west London, for example, is a mixture of lay and clerical, Anglican and Catholic.

Movements usually start small, developing the charism of their founders. Born in the north Italian city of Trent in 1920 to a pious mother and socialist father, the second of four children, Silvia Lubich was a primary school teacher and – until war intervened – a student of philosophy at Venice University. At the age of 20 she became a Third Order Franciscan, taking the name Chiara (Clare). She felt a call to give herself to God, but not in a convent or in marriage. One morning in December 1943, she consecrated herself to God for life with a vow of chastity. When her family fled to the

mountains after the Lubich house was struck in a violent bombing raid, Chiara stayed behind to live in an apartment with other young women to tend those suffering around her. They read the Gospel in the air raid shelters, and put it into practice, helping the war-stricken citizens of Trent to find food and shelter, and comforting the bereaved. Their warmth earned them the nickname of "focolare", which means "hearth" or "fireplace" in English. Within a few months, more than 500 people became associates.

Amid the human wreckage of war, the *focolarine* clung to a belief in the permanence of God's love: mutual love became the "rule" of their life, focused on Jesus crucified and forsaken. In 1948, the first men's *focolare* was founded in Trent. The movement spread to other cities around Italy. In the Fifties, *focolare* houses began to appear in France, Belgium and Switzerland, and in 1958 in Latin America. More opened discreetly in eastern Europe, where members held meetings in private houses so as not to attract attention. In 1964, the first house opened in Britain, in Liverpool; others followed in Leeds, London, Glasgow, Edinburgh and Welwyn Garden City.

At the heart of this explosion is a spiritual insight which seems, at first, frustratingly simple – like the Gospel itself. In the Forties, the theology of atonement focused – as did Mel Gibson's recent film on the Passion – almost exclusively on the redemptive character of Jesus's physical agony. But his greatest suffering, Chiara understood, lay in Jesus's forsakenness rather than his physical agony. This was the key to unity.

I asked her to explain. "He who had given his mother to John, he who had lost all his disciples except John at the foot of the Cross, he was losing his life," she says. "And in that moment he also believed he was losing his unity with the Father – he who had said: 'The Father and I are one'. How can this be explained? By the fact that he wanted to reunite all people with the Father and all people to each other."

Chiara, who arrives in London next week for a series of talks and meetings, sits straight-backed in an armchair, smilingly answering my questions in quick-fire Italian. She is dressed as any Italian woman of her age might be, her grey hair coiffeured above a shiny suit, but exuding the famous Focolare warmth.

Jesus, she explains, puts aside even his oneness with the Father in order to be totally obedient to the will of God. *Focolarini* similarly "must do things in such a way that we put aside our way of thinking, of willing, of loving, when we listen to a neighbour, to enter into him or her and really understand what that person is saying. Then unity can come about."

I have seen this for myself visiting a *focolare* house. *Focolarini* practise a kind of asceticism of the heart – emptying themselves for the sake of the other, offering, in a strange way, the hospitality of themselves. This spiritual quality comes from meditating on Christ forsaken.

But how does this work in dialogue with those of other faiths? "You can understand another's religion", Chiara says, "by getting