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Focolare founder preaches unity in loving thy neighbor

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HYDE PARK, N.Y.—Drive down the Circle of Love, take a left at the Crossroads of Joy and you will run right into Holy Spirit Square at the center of Mariapolis Luminosa—where a Catholic religious community tries to live the Gospel command to love one's neighbor as oneself.

Waiting for a visitor in a simple house in this "spiritual little city" in upstate New York is Chiara Lubich, the diminutive 77-year-old founder of the Focolare Movement.

Begun in a bomb shelter in northern Italy during World War II, the Focolare Movement now embraces about 2 million adherents in more than 180 nations throughout the world.

Yet its founder and the movement itself remain relatively little-known. There were no banks of television cameras or large crowds of reporters following

Lubich around during her recent trip to the United States, which included visits to the United Nations and a Harlem mosque.

In a church where the hierarchy often takes center stage, her work is based on building lay-church from below, enlisting lay-people to take seriously Jesus' command in the Gospel of John: "Love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends."

And that commandment includes Lutherans, Buddhists, Jews, Muslims and others desiring to live in harmony with one another.

"Unity is the 'charism'—that is the gift of God—that underlies all that has come to life under the name Focolare Movement," Lubich said during a visit to Malcolm Shabazz Mosque in Harlem.

There, at the mosque formerly led by Malcolm X, she pledged to Imam Warith Deen Muhammad,

son of the late Muslim leader Elijah Muhammad, that she would be willing to lay down her life for him.

Those were the same words she exchanged 44 years ago with a group of young women enduring heavy bombing in Trent, in Northern Italy.

The Focolare Movement began with Lubich and some of her friends reading the Gospel in the bomb shelter, and then trying to put the words into practice.

Whether it was reassuring a child or making the dangerously slow passage to the shelters with an elderly woman, Lubich said, "Every neighbor we met was helped as if we were ourselves."

From that small group, other followers came. And over the next few decades, it would spread to nearly 200 nations.

Communities of men would be formed alongside communities of women. Although it was a lay movement, bishops and priests

also would embrace the movement's philosophy.

Focolare remains a Catholic movement, but people of other Christian denominations and other faiths stand with the *focolari* in attempting to bring about peace through mutual love.

In addition to the communities such as the one in Hyde Park, where they try to model the early Christian communities in sharing goods and affection, the movement is involved in about 700 social projects throughout the world.

There are a lot of reasons to be discouraged in a century of two world wars and massive acts of inhumanity, Lubich said in an interview.

There are 27 wars going on now and there always is the risk of new acts of terrorism, she said.

But she also sees signs of hope. The continued existence of the United Nations, political moves toward unity in Europe and, in the religious field, organizations

such as the World Conference of Churches and the World Conference on Religion and Peace stand as testimony to an ongoing desire for peace.

But she said religious leaders cannot do it alone. Back in the Council of Florence in the 15th Century, church leaders were able to reach agreement on reunion with the Greek Orthodox Church.

The union fell apart shortly afterward, partly for political reasons but also in part because the people were not ready.

In her movement, Lubich said, she is trying to prepare the people to live together in mutual love so union reached by church leaders will be accepted by people in the pews.

It may be humanity has reached a special moment in history, she said.

"One of the signs of our times," she said, "is this movement toward unity in spite of everything that is happening."



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Chiara Lubich, the movement's founder