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The Focolare Movement and interreligious dialogue

Contributing towards the realization of a united world, while discovering that all men, as brothers and sisters, can work together for peace and universal harmony, was the dream of Chiara Lubich (1920 – 2008 and is the goal of the Focolare Movement.

The Templeton Prize for Progress in Religion, awarded to Lubich in London in 1977, proved to be an important event for the interreligious dialogue of the Focolare Movement. Narrating her experience during this event, Lubich had a deep sensation that all those present, though of different faiths, were one family.

Since then, the widespread Focolare Movement has helped to open dialogue with orthodox, conservative and reformed Jews; with Muslims, Sunnis and Shiites; with Hindus of different traditions; with Buddhists, Mahayana and Therevada, and with followers of the traditional religions. Contacts with Taoists, Shintoists, Sikhs and Baha'is have also been established.

This dialogue is based on the central importance of love, charity, mercy and compassion, summarised in the "Golden Rule", which invites all to "*Do unto others as you would have them do unto you*", and found in main religions and cultures. Deepening one's relationship with God or the Absolute and one's openness to others, promotes the common search for what unites. The experience of fraternity strengthens the common commitment towards this, especially where violence and religious intolerance prevail, thus contributing towards improving relationships in society, by healing tensions and integrating communities in conflict.

Agape-Compassion: bridge of encounter between Buddhists and Christians

In 1981, Chiara Lubich went to Tokyo (Japan) where she spoke of her experience to twelve thousand Buddhists. She was invited by the Rev. Nikkyo Niwano, founder of the Rissho Kosei-kai, a lay Buddhist renewal movement, and this marked the beginning of a deep friendship between members of both Movements, which developed during the following decades.

Over the years, other paths of encounter were opened with other Mahayana currents in Japan, and important meetings were initiated with the Venerable Etai Yamada of the Tendai School. Today one can speak of fruitful relationships established with the Nichiren School and with representatives of the Yakushiji and Kiyomizudera temples; with Chinese Buddhists of Fo Guang Shan Monastery and of Dharma Drum Mountain Monastery in Taiwan; and with Won-Buddhists in Korea.

Thanks to two Thai monks – the Gran Master Ajahn Thong and Phramaha Thongratana – paths of encounter have also been opened to the world of Therevada Buddhism.

Since 2004, five Christian-Buddhists symposia have been held.

Unity and Mercy: Muslims and Christians in dialogue

"Today, here in Harlem, New York, a new page of history has been written". With these words, the Imam W. D. Mohammed, founder of the American Muslim Society and a charismatic leader of Afro-American Muslims, described Chiara Lubich's visit to Malcolm X Mosque in New York (United States) in 1997. On that occasion the two leaders made a pact, in the name of the One God, to work together for peace and unity. Since then there have been regular encounters between Christian and

Muslim communities, white and black, that involve mosques and Focolare communities in various cities of the United States.

In the 60's, in Algeria, a deep bond of friendship blossomed between Christians and Muslims. This led to building the Focolare community which is almost entirely Muslim.

In Europe, the Focolare Movement promotes friendly relationships with Muslims, individuals and communities. A very significant experience is lived in Macedonia, where a multiethnic nursery school has been set up. A number of initiatives are taking place in Italy to encourage and support dialogue and integration.

Nine international conferences have been held to deepen the Christian-Muslim dialogue promoted within the Focolare circles.

Hindus and Christians: a dialogue of hearts and minds

The contacts of the Focolare Movement with Hinduism started in the 80's, and one of the first contacts was with Dr. Aram, an exponent of the Gandhian founder of the Shanti Ashram. In 2001 Chiara Lubich went to India to receive the prize "Defender of Peace 2000" awarded to her by Shanti Ashram and Sarvodaya Movement, another Gandhian institution.

On this same occasion, Professor Kala Acharya, from Somaiya Sanskriti Peetham Cultural Institute, invited her to a gathering at Somaiya College of Mumbai (India). 600 people were present. Since then, a number of symposia have been organized.

In the south of India, social projects are carried out together with other Gandhian movements. As a result of this collaboration, the Super Congress 2009, an international event organized by the Teens for Unity of the Focolare Movement, was held in Coimbatore. 700 participants, from different religions in various parts of the world, lived this experience of dialogue and unity, and it was shared with more than one thousand five hundred other teenagers.

Jews and Christians in dialogue: a journey towards brotherhood and unity

The Jewish-Christian dialogue started to develop in various cities in Europe, Israel, Argentina, Uruguay, Mexico, Brazil and the United States in the '70s and '80's.

In recognition of her efforts towards peace, in 1995 Chiara Lubich received an olive tree from the Jewish Community in Rome, Italy. The tree was planted at the Centre of the Focolare Movement.

In 1998 the founder of the Focolari was received at the headquarters of B'nai B'rith in Buenos Aires (Argentina). She was invited to light the seventh candle, the candle of truth. She lit this candle together with Dr. Jaime Kopec, president of B'nai B'rith Argentina. All those present made a pact of unity, described by Dr. Kopec as "*a pact to love one another, to have faith in the future, to bury centuries of intolerance*".

Various international conferences were organized; the first one was held in Rome, Italy in 1996. The highlight of this meeting was the "pact of love and mercy", proposed by Norma Levitt, a Jew from New York (USA), for reconciliation between Jews and Christians and between Jews of various traditions.

In 2011 Maria Voce lectured on dialogue as a way to promote peace at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem.

Dialogue of life –Traditional Religions

Chiara Lubich's first intuition about the Movement's openness to interreligious dialogue came with the birth of the small town of Fontem (Camerun, 1966). The providential meeting between the

Focolare and the Bangwa people, who belong to the traditional religion, took place here. Chiara's idea was consolidated through her meeting with the King-Fon Defang.

In 2000 the Bangwa people conferred the title of 'Mafua Ndem' (queen sent by God) to Chiara for what she did for them and with them.

In 2009 a conference on the relationship between African traditional religion and Christianity was held in Fontem. The participants came from Africa, Europe, Asia and America. A school for inculturation has been operating in Nairobi (Kenya) since 1992.

Other experiences of dialogue with traditional religions developed in Latin America: in Bolivia and Peru with the Aymara, in Ecuador with the African people of Esmeralda, in the North of Argentina with the descendants of the aboriginal "calchaquies". In New Zealand this dialogue is lived with people of Maori tradition.

Significant dates and events

1966 – First insight on openness to non-Christian religious traditions at Fontem (Camerun).

1977 – Chiara Lubich receives the Templeton Prize for Progress in Religion at the Guildhall in London (Great Britain). This marks the official opening of dialogue with followers of other world religions.

1981– Official dialogue begins in Tokyo (Japan) between the Rissho Kosei-kai and the Focolare Movement.

1992 – First international conference of the Movement with Muslims. Eight others followed.

1994 – Chiara Lubich is named one of the honorary presidents of the WCRP (the World Conference on Religion and Peace). Today this bears the name: 'Religions For Peace'(RfP).

1997 – At Bangkok (Thailand) Chiara meets the Supreme Buddhist Patriarch of Thailand, H. H. Somdet Phra Nyanasamvara, who encourages dialogue and collaboration between Buddhists and the Focolare Movement. Chiara speaks at the Malcolm X Mosque in Harlem, New York (United States).

1998 – At Buenos Aires (Argentina) Chiara is welcomed by the Jewish community.

2001 – In Coimbatore, India Chiara receives the "Defender of Peace Prize" from two Gandhian organizations, the Shanti Ashram and the Sarvodaya Movement.

2002 – The first Hindu-Christian symposium is held at Castelgandolfo (Italy). This is the first of a series of academical bilateral conferences (with Hindus, Buddhists, Muslims and Jews) that take place in Rome (Italy) and in other parts of the world between 2004 and 2013.

2009 – First conference with the African Traditional Religion at Fontem (Camerun).

2013 - Maria Voce is named one of the Co-Presidents of 'Religions For Peace' (RfP).