

CREDIBLE WITNESSES

"What the world is in particular need of today is the credible witness of people...capable of opening the hearts and minds of many to the desire for God and for true life."—*Porta Fidei* #15

Servant of God Chiara Lubich

Heather King

Chiara Lubich (1920-2008), an Italian activist, founded the popular lay movement Focolare (meaning "hearth").

Born Silvia Lubich in Trento, at the age of nineteen she experienced an epiphany at the shrine in Loreto, realizing the profound importance of the lay vocation.

As she recounted in a 2002 interview, when she was twenty-three, "The real charism began to stir within me. I was teaching at a small orphanage. A priest...called me out of my class and said, 'Could you give me an hour of your time to help me in my ministry?' I had such faith in God, and in the Church, that I said, 'You can have a whole day, not just an hour.' That surprised him. He told me to kneel down and he blessed me. He said, 'God loves you immensely,' and I believed it. It was as if God were speaking to me through him.... I understood how everything is guided by him: the whole of history and the history of each one of us."

Around the same time, she became a Third Order Franciscan and took the name Chiara—Clare—after Saint Clare of Assisi. After consulting with her priest and receiving permission, on December 7, 1943, Lubich heard Mass at her local church and afterward consecrated herself fully to God, taking a vow of perpetual chastity.

Working as an elementary school teacher, she began meeting with other women, urging them to devote their lives to serving the poor. A small movement grew, which eventually included men. As bombs fell on Trento during World War II, Lubich asked herself, "Is there an ideal that

does not die, that no bombs can destroy, an ideal we can give our whole selves to?" She realized, "Yes, there is. It is God."

Lubich called her work with the poor a "divine adventure." Stressing the importance of living the Gospel, she encouraged her followers to pledge a secret monthly sum to be distributed to the destitute. Her most devoted adherents took vows of chastity and turned all their belongings over to the movement.

During her decades of public life, Lubich championed what she called "internationalism," encouraging the leaders of nations to "love the nation of the other as you love your own."

She tirelessly promoted ecumenicalism. She addressed Christians, Muslims, and Buddhists. She founded the Gen Movement for young people. She spoke at the UN, accepted awards from UNESCO and the Templeton Foundation, garnered fifteen honorary doctoral degrees, and authored over fifty books.

Focolare spread to one hundred eighty-two countries, and today has approximately two million adherents. Pope John Paul II described Focolare as "a people." Its mandate includes: "To cooperate in the consolidation of unity in the Roman Catholic world, with individuals and groups, movements and associations; to contribute to full communion with Christians of different churches; to move towards universal brotherhood with followers of various religions and people of other persuasions, including atheists."

Lubich died at her home outside Rome on March 14, 2008. Her cause for beatification is underway.

(Heather King is a contemplative laywoman and the author of several books. She blogs at www.heather-king.com.)