

Dossier – October, 2015

A brief history of the relationship between the Ecumenical Patriarch and the Focolare Movement

Premise

In the course of the twentieth century the relationship between Rome and Constantinople was dominated by two major figures: Patriarch Athenagoras I and Pope Paul VI. The first historical meeting took place on January 5, 1964, with the first embrace after centuries between a bishop of Rome and a Patriarch of Constantinople. In July 1967, the first official visits: on July 25, Paul VI traveled to Istanbul and on October 26 Athenagoras I went to Rome.

Relationship between Patriarch Athenagoras (1886-1972) – Patriarch from 1948 to 1972, and Chiara Lubich (1920-2008)

In June of 1967 Chiara Lubich was asked to come to Istanbul by Patriarch Athenagoras I. He had heard about the Focolare Movement from Father Angelo Beghetto, a Conventual Franciscan who was pastor at the Church of St. Anthony of Istanbul. On June 13 Chiara traveled for the first time to the seat of the ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople. Over the following five years, until his death in July 1972, Chiara made that trip 8 times and met with Athenagoras 25 times during her visits there.

Athenagoras I understood that Chiara Lubich was the bearer of a charism and he found in her someone who shared his passion for unity. He had in his heart a great desire to reach full communion between the Roman Catholic Church and the Orthodox Church, as well for the unity among Christians overall. Years later Chiara commented, "Since it was possible for me to have personal contact with the Holy Father (Paul VI), without intending to, I found myself a means through which the Patriarch could communicate with the Pope in an unofficial way." In fact, Chiara always kept the Pope informed of all her contacts with Constantinople.

In 1967, responding to a desire expressed by Patriarch Athenagoras I, Chiara had opened a Focolare Center in Istanbul. Chiara attended the funeral services of Athenagoras I in July 1972.

Contacts with Patriarch Demetrio (1914-1991) – Patriarch from 1972 to 1991

The contacts continued with his successor, Patriarch Demetrio, who met with Chiara Lubich three times: in Istanbul on November 9, 1977 and June 9, 1984; and in the Vatican on December 5, 1987.

In 1984, Demetrio awarded Chiara with the Byzantine Cross: *"You want to put the theory into practice; you want love and life. Work, work not only in order to give a spirituality to people, but for the unity of the Church. The Movement builds bridges across every kind of breach."*

When they met in the Vatican on **December 5, 1987**, the Patriarch said to Chiara, "Thank you above all for the most precious gift of the spirituality, which you have always given us."

On July 1, 1978, Metropolitan Melitone from the ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople visited the headquarters of the Focolare Movement accompanied by Bartholomew, who was then Metropolitan of Philadelphia.

On July 16, 1983, Patriarch Demetrio welcomed about one hundred members of the Focolare Movement. He stated, *"(...) You have spoken about unity in these days and about this united world that everyone dreams of. This topic is the most relevant, most important one to deal with at this time. Heads of nations and of Christian churches meet, discuss, work and speak about unity, but this unity will never be reached unless we understand the conditions that are indispensable for this to happen: love, fraternity, simplicity, and family life – everything that the Focolare Movement lives and teaches."*

Relationship with Patriarch Bartholomew I (1940) – Patriarch since 1991

Patriarch Bartholomew first met Chiara when he was a young deacon at the time of Patriarch Athenagoras I. During the 80's he participated in meetings for ecumenical bishops, friends of the Focolare Movement.

Whenever he was in Rome, he visited the Focolare Center for Ecumenism ("Centro Uno"). In 1990 he offered a lesson on ecumenism at the Mariapolis Center at Castel Gandolfo (Rome).

On February 22, 1995 Patriarch Bartholomew I welcomed Chiara Lubich to Istanbul to confer on her the honor of the Byzantine Cross.

In June of 1995, Patriarch Bartholomew I was in Rome for his first official visit to Pope John Paul II. Chiara was invited to the Vatican for the farewell dinner.

In June 2004, Patriarch Bartholomew I was once again in Rome for the Feast Day of Saints Peter and Paul and to consecrate the church of Saint Theodore at Palatino, that John Paul II had given to the Greek Orthodox community in Rome to use. On July 1, the Patriarch received Chiara Lubich in a private audience, where she greeted the other members of the delegation: Metropolitan Chrysostom from Ephesus, as well as the Metropolitan of Italy and Malta, Gennadio. Both of them have known Chiara for many years. Patriarch Bartholomew I offered Chiara a precious icon that had been painted at Mt. Athos representing Mary, Mother of Tenderness. It was the 60th anniversary of the birth of the Focolare Movement and the Patriarch wanted *"...to express in a concrete way my esteem for the ecumenical work for unity that the Movement is engaged in."* This icon can be found also now is the chapel where Chiara Lubich lived in Rocca di Papa (Rome).

On March 6, 2008, just a few days before she died, Patriarch Bartholomew I went to visit Chiara Lubich at the Gemelli Policlinico Hospital (Rome). His patriarchal blessing brought with it his gratitude to her for having given to the churches a spirituality through which all Christians could re-discover that they are brothers and sisters in Christ and live as such.

On June 12, 2008 Patriarch Bartholomew I received the *Klaus Hemmerle Award*, which is given every two years by the Focolare Movement in Germany to individuals who are committed to "building bridges" for unity. Cardinal Lehmann, in his commendation remarks, expressed his gratitude to the Patriarch for his work for ecumenism, aiming always "at serving your neighbor and contributing to the healing of wounds in others, and allowing yourself to be healed." The Patriarch underscored, "We cannot stop, but go ahead, precisely as the Focolare Movement aims to do."

March 14, 2009 marked the first anniversary of Chiara's departure. On this occasion Patriarch Bartholomew I presided over solemn vespers in the Orthodox Church of Panaghia in Istanbul, celebrated for the first time for a deceased Catholic woman. In his talk, he spoke of Chiara's *"...role in bringing about the restoration of communion among the Churches of the ancient and the new Rome."*

In 2010, during a School on ecumenism promoted by the Focolare Movement in Istanbul, Patriarch Bartholomew I affirmed, *"We have certainly rejoiced for the long and fruitful relationship with your blessed Movement, particularly with your founder, whose memory we conserve always in our hearts as a treasure. We remember her life lived so admirably, to be remembered also with admiration. As all know, Chiara was dedicated not only to the Gospel, to the unity of the Church and to universal fraternity, she also had immense respect and care for the great Church of Constantinople, especially for its leaders and their dedication to the "dialogue of love" and the "dialogue of the truth." In fact the late Athenagoras I affectionately called her "Tecla," the name of St. Paul's collaborator (...). She was always in our prayers, and she was always thinking of us."*

On December 27, 2010 Patriarch Bartholomew I received Maria Voce at the Fanar, as the elected President of the Focolare Movement after the death of the founder. He gave her a warm welcome, *"Thanks be to God! Thanks be to God for your visit, for the fruits of your Movement, for the continuing work of this work of God that render glory to His name."*

In March of 2013, Bartholomew I participated in the celebration in Istanbul on the anniversary of Chiara Lubich's death. He remarked, "Here I would like to add that the deceased Chiara was a great friend to all of us. She has been a friend of our Patriarchate. During her lifetime, she did everything she possibly could do for peace, for unity. There was a special grace of God with her. And she did not keep this grace for herself. She gave it to everyone. She worked for unity among people and among religions."

In October 2014 at Salonicco and in Athens, Greece, Chiara Lubich's first book in Greek, *Meditations*, was presented to the public. The preface was written by Patriarch Bartholomew I. There he wrote: *"We welcome the Greek edition of this book that coincides with the 50th anniversary of the meeting between Patriarch Athenagoras and Pope Paul VI in Jerusalem. We hope that these Meditations may be beloved reading and may benefit all those seeking the way of love and peace in our modern world."*