

Loppiano International Centre

Loppiano, the first international Focolari “little town” is built on 260 hectares of land on the plateau that extends to the west of Incisa in Val d’Arno, a town 20 kilometres away from Florence.

History

It was in the 50’s when a group of people, who were attracted by the Focolare spirituality, started to get together to spend some time during the summer season on the Dolomites, in Northern Italy.

Chiara Lubich, the founder recounts: *“Persons from all walks of life, of all ages, of both sexes, of various vocations came together and gave life to a temporary little town characterized by the effort to live Jesus’ new commandment ‘Love one another as I have loved you’. I was on high ground admiring the green plain in the valley down below, when I seem to have understood that the Lord wanted a similar little town, but a permanent one, to be set up one day in some place”.*

In 1964 Loppiano was born; it is the first of the 25 Focolari “little towns” that are now found in different parts of the world. Their aim is to live permanently the continuous novelty suggested by the Gospel: universal brotherhood.

Today

Currently, Loppiano is the home of about **850 inhabitants**, men and women, families, young people and children, priests and religious, that come from 65 nations worldwide. More than half are permanent inhabitants; the rest live in Loppiano for a period of time that varies from 6 to 18 months to take part in the programme of one of its ten international schools.

The international and multicultural characteristics of Loppiano make it a “city laboratory” with over fifty years of experience, where experimentation of community life, communication and collaboration among people of different ages, social status, traditions, culture and religious faith is a daily matter. Since 1964, relationships with institutions, businesses and other cities in the Valdarno area have developed and increased, giving rise to a fruitful collaboration on all fronts: civil, economic and cultural. In 2000, when Chiara Lubich was given the honorary citizenship of Incisa in Valdarno, the Mayor acknowledged Loppiano as an important resource for the municipality and the whole area. The several Focolari communities present in Valdarno are a capillary presence that fosters brotherhood through everyday life.

Loppiano welcomes thousands of visitors every year. It is a meeting place for **peoples, cultures and religions** and indicates a style of community life that speaks even to the big multicultural cities of the third millennium.

Over the years, various economic activities have been consolidated. Loppiano's economy, in fact, depends on work. It is an economy that considers everyone's needs and invites each one to share one's own professional and personal skills, and thus contribute towards a full material and spiritual communion.

The **Loppiano Prima Agricultural Cooperative** was founded in 1973. Guided by the principles of the culture of giving, the cooperative caters for the cultivation of Loppiano's agricultural land and the marketing of its products, and it encourages community experiences that put man and nature at the centre of its activities. Today, this cooperative has more than 4,000 members all over the world. (www.loppianoprima.it)

The **Maria Theotokos Church, now a Sanctuary**, was inaugurated in 2004; it also houses an ecumenical chapel. The adjacent multifunctional complex, which includes an auditorium and other multipurpose spaces equipped for congresses and musical and multimedia events, has been operating since the beginning of 2007.

The **Polo Lionello Bonfanti** situated a few kilometres away from Loppiano, was inaugurated in 2006. It hosts businesses that base their activity on the principles of the **Economy of Communion** and it represents the main link for **more than 200 Italian companies (800 worldwide)** that adhere to this economy. It offers space for the sharing of ideas and projects. The catalytic principle of this economy seeks to combine communion and market; involving the enterprise, the basic structure of modern economy while encouraging the sharing of profits in favour of the poor, who populate the outskirts of our planet.

There are 7 Economy of Communion Business Parks in the world; they are in various stages of implementation. The Italian Business Park bears the name of Lionello Bonafanti, a magistrate, who was among the first ones responsible for the development of Loppiano. (www.pololionellobonfanti.it).

The latest achievement of Loppiano is the **Sophia University Institute (IUS)**, an academic centre that has been functioning since 2008. The IUS offers students Master's and PhD courses in "Culture of Unity", "Trinitarian Ontology" and "Economic and Political Sciences".

Promoted by the Work of Mary – Focolare Movement, the Institute was erected by the Holy See through a decree issued by the Congregation For Catholic Education on December 7, 2007.

Ten years after its birth, the Sophia project is now academically enriched by teaching, training and research centres. "Sophia Global Studies" focuses on global issues while "Evangelii Gaudium" is directly involved in the work of pastoral renewal necessary for an "outgoing" missionary Church, as announced by Pope Francis.

The International Ecumenical Chair "Athenagoras – Chiara Lubich", an aspiration even of Bartholomew I, the Patriarch of Constantinople was inaugurated last year on December 14. The Patriarch received an honorary doctoral degree in the Culture of Unity from Sophia in 2015. (www.iu-sophia.org).