

## A Greater Love

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I too can personally bear witness to his saintliness. Often, after an audience with him, I was left with the impression that heaven had opened up. I found myself directly connected with God, in a very profound union with him, without intermediaries. This was because the Pope is a mediator. When he has joined you with God, he steps aside. I think I have understood in a much deeper way the specific charism of the Pope. He holds the "keys to the kingdom of heaven" (Mt 16:19) not only for cancelling our sins, but also for opening up heaven to us, by leading us to union with God.

Perhaps this is what explains the joy, the enthusiasm, the attraction that the Pope has always held for young people, and for the millions of men and women of every race, culture, religion and belief whom he has met all over the planet. And what about all the historic changes that he has brought about in these 27 years? This Pope communicated God, and God "makes all things new." As the burden of suffering became heavier, this presence of God in him became stronger, up to the last moment of his life.

At this time I also want to express my deepest gratitude for the many other doors that those "keys" opened. The Pope always opened wide the doors to the innovations of the Holy Spirit, whose action he also recognized in our Movement. He gave the Focolare his continual encouragement and support, acknowledging in it a gift from God that gives hope to humanity.

In his homily for the 25th anniversary of his pontificate, John Paul II wanted to share with the whole Church his intimate experience as Peter's successor. He confided how that same dialogue, which had once taken place between Jesus and Peter, re-echoed daily in his heart: "Do you love me? Do you love me more than these?" Although aware of his human fragility, he felt that Jesus himself was encouraging him to respond with trust like Peter did: "Lord, you know everything, you know that I love you!"

The Focolare Movement's experience during these last 27 years is proof of that "greater love" dwelling within John Paul II's heart. This "greater" love of his called for our love in return, thus the Pope entered into the depth of the heart of each member of the movement. Simple human words, therefore, cannot express who he was for us. I remember the private audiences with him, often during lunch in the Vatican; his presence at our large public events; his personal letters full of warm affection and his thoughtful phone calls in which during recent years, on St. Clare's feast day—and this year for my birthday as well—he wanted to personally convey his best wishes. All these moments are milestones in our movement's history.

Now, at the moment of the Holy Father's death, we are filled with awe and gratitude for so great a love. At the same time, we are grateful to God for having been able to be close to him, to help him as sons and daughters, and, in my case, as a "sister," as he referred to me in his last letter.

A few days after his election, wanting to meet me, he invited me to attend Mass in

his private chapel. On that occasion, I showed him a map that illustrated our movement's expansion throughout the world. In the following years he came to know with great joy our "Focolare people," as he called us, wherever he traveled. He often told us that our presence gave him comfort and support during his apostolic trips.

One unforgettable day, which remains among the most beautiful in our history, is August 19, 1984, the day he visited our international center, at Rocca di Papa near Rome. On that occasion he not only recognized love as "the source of inspiration for all that is done under the name Focolare." He expressed what we didn't dare say, affirming that he saw in our movement "that vision of the Church that the Church gave itself in the Vatican Council."

Another very significant episode occurred on September 23, 1985, when, just before leaving an audience with him, looking towards the future, I dared to ask him: "Would you think it possible that the future president of the Focolare Movement, of this "Work of Mary," might always be a woman?" "Yes," he answered, "if only it could be so!" His words, the sentiment that motivated that "yes," opened up for me for the first time a new awareness about the Church in its two dimensions—the "Petrine" or institutional dimension, and the "Marian" or charismatic dimension. "Both were present in the early Church," the Pope said, citing the theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar, "and they need to remain!"

This was the new element that the Holy Father mentioned again on several occasions. He didn't see the "Marian profile" of the Church as simply a spiritual or mystical reality. He saw it as an historical reality as well, and he bore witness to this conviction with his actions, by opening wide the doors to what the Holy Spirit wanted to work.

We lived through an extraordinary experience of this openness in the historic gathering of Ecclesial Movements and New Communities, held on the vigil of Pentecost 1998, in St. Peter's Square. On that occasion, the Pope affirmed that "the institutional and the charismatic dimensions (of which these new realities of the Church are an expression) are co-essential to the constitution of the Church, and co-operate in its life, its renewal, and in the holiness of God's people." Our joy was immense and indescribable.

Since the beginning of his pontificate, the Holy Father had recognized in the flourishing of the Ecclesial Movements, "one of the gifts of the Spirit given to our time." He had "launched" us to bring these gifts to the very heart of the Church, but we could never have imagined that one day he would assign us such a place as that.

I believe that if Christians accept with an open heart and adhere to the authentic revolution John Paul II brought in the field of ecclesiology, the world will see unimaginable developments in the Bride of Christ (as the Church is called). The Holy Spirit, with his charisms, is capable of constantly renewing and bringing forth new life in the Church, and making her more dynamic, more beautiful, acceptable, lovable and closer to everyone.

There are other episodes that regard our movement directly which also express the Holy Father's "greater love."

Throughout the years the same vocations that exist in the Focolare among Catholics, came to life among youth and adults of all walks of life belonging to the Anglican, Lutheran, Orthodox, and other Christian Churches. This was something new, and the canonists needed to study it over the years. I thought we would never find the appropriate way to include them. At one point I spoke about it with the Pope and he was very open to the idea.

At the next audience, once again as we were about to leave, he said to me with his usual cleverness, "I see now. I must say, 'Let the Work of Mary be, because it belongs to Mary!'" And the way opened up.

I remember that night an unexpected thought came to me, "In the ecumenical journey, if there is still a stumbling block it is the papacy. But who was it that 'welcomed' these men and women focolarini of other Churches? It was the Pope himself." This will remain in history.

The Holy Father went even further. At his suggestion, bishops belonging to different Christian Churches began to meet regularly (and have been for years now) to strengthen their ministry with the spirituality of unity, a spirituality already shared by many Catholic bishops. The Pope approved their bond, not a juridical one, but a spiritual bond with the Work of Mary.

It was to these bishops, on two occasions, that he emphasized how the "spirituality of communion," given by him to the whole Church through his letter *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, characterizes our movement, and how the Church itself is enriched by its experience of unity.

It is amazing to see what the Pope has accomplished for the Church and for humanity. His papacy had such magnitude, such bearing and influence that only time will reveal its full impact.

The providential and crucial role he played in the fall of the East European Communist regimes is evident. He had to undergo that painful attempt on his life when he, like the grain of wheat, nearly died in order to bear much fruit. It is part of a mysterious plan of God which gave the Pope, miraculously saved, back to us and bound him forever to Our Lady of Fatima.

How can we not remember his courageous initiative for peace by inviting the representatives of the world's major religions to gather in Assisi not just once, but twice? This was a true masterpiece of his pontificate, which marked a turning point in the history of interfaith relations.

And how could we forget his celebrations with the youth? These Youth Days more than once stunned the whole world with their extraordinary impact and worldwide participation. The youth of our movement had intuited the Pope's unwavering trust in them and they saw him as their leader.

Yes, we can be proud and grateful to the Holy Spirit for having given us such a Pope as John Paul II for so many years, and we are sure that the Church will quickly proclaim his sanctity.

Upon awakening after his tracheotomy surgery, the Holy Father wrote on a piece of paper, "I'm always *Totus Tuus* (All Yours)." The news reached everyone in the world.

His motto addressed to Mary, "*Totus Tuus*," was the truth he lived by. This truth embodied him with a distinct Marian feature and made him so great and so loving, so far above and yet so close to everyone—an authentic "servant of the servants of God."