

## THE CONTRIBUTION OF THE CHARISM OF UNITY TO A SYNODAL SPIRITUALITY

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I greet His Eminence, Cardinal Mario Grech, Sister Nathalie Becquart, Father James Hanvey, and express my heartfelt thanks for the invitation to speak at this seminar.

After listening to those who have preceded me with the richness of their traditions, we in the Focolare Movement are aware that we have much to learn. Our tradition of synodal journey and community discernment is certainly young and still to be consolidated.

Here, to begin with, are a few brief outlines of the "Spirituality of Unity" born from the charism given by God to Chiara Lubich.

### 1. Some outlines of the spirituality of unity.

From the very beginning the path of the Movement has developed in a way that today we might call "synodal", because the rediscovery of God Love - the "inspirational spark" as John Paul II called it - opened up a way of **going to God together**. The two main points of spirituality that have accompanied this development are: unity and Jesus forsaken.

**Unity.** It was around 1946 when Chiara Lubich and her companions, who were committed to living the Gospel, read the Testament of Jesus together. Those difficult words became clear one by one: "That they may be one as we are one", v.11b; "That they may all be one", v.21. It was the discovery of God's plan for all humanity. And this desire of Jesus was translated into a firm commitment: "We were born for this page". This gives rise to a sense of responsibility that is first of all personal, that of living the Word in daily life, in order to become "another Jesus". [...] To act 'like Jesus' on earth"<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> A writing dated 2nd December 1946: C. Lubich, *L'unità* [Unity] in «Nuova Umanità» 29 (2007/6) 174, p. 605.

It is not only a personal commitment, but also a collective one, which reminds us of the new commandment, to love one another as He has loved us (cf. Jn 15:12).

This triggers a shared decision, sealed by a covenant of mutual love, consciously and solemnly renewed often and with trust, especially in the face of any shortcomings in charity.

**The other "cornerstone" is the discovery of Jesus forsaken.** Even before focusing on the passage in John 17, Chiara and her companions had "discovered" Jesus' cry of forsakenness on the cross. They understood it as the experience of his greatest pain: experiencing being forsaken, he who had said: "I and the Father are one" (Jn 10:29-30). It was a culmination of suffering in which the greatness of his love is revealed, bearing fruit in redemption by reuniting a torn and divided humanity to God. He is the key to unity with God, therefore, and the key to the unity of people amongst themselves.

In a very well-known text, Chiara affirms: I have only one Spouse on earth: Jesus Forsaken. I have no other God but him. In him there is the whole of paradise with the Trinity and the whole of the earth with Humanity. ... I will go through the world seeking him in every instant of my life." <sup>2</sup>

So it was for her and so it is for those who follow the path of Unity, which leads us, like the disciples of Emmaus, to walk with the Risen Lord.

"Jesus Forsaken" and "unity" are two sides of the same coin<sup>3</sup>, and those who want to live in unity and for unity "can only be sustained by leaning on a Suffering-Love as strong as that of Jesus Crucified and Forsaken<sup>4</sup>! By living in this way, we enter an Easter journey, from

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<sup>2</sup> C. Lubich, *Essential Writings*, New City Press, New York and New City, London, 2007 p. 95.

<sup>3</sup> Chiara wrote to a male religious in 1948: «The book of Light that the Lord is writing in my soul has two sides: one, a page shining with mysterious love: *Unity*. The other page, shining with mysterious pain: Jesus forsaken. They are two sides of the same coin. I show the page of Unity to everyone. For me and for those who are with me on the front lines of Unity: *Our only portion is Jesus forsaken*. We've chosen to climb the mountain toward extreme abandonment.» in C. Lubich, *Early Letters at the origins of a new spirituality*, edited by F. Gillet e G. D'Alessandro, New City Press, Hyde Park, New York, 2012 p. 93.

<sup>4</sup> Ibidem, *Early Letters*, cit. p. 99.

forsakenness to the light of unity, which is essential in any synodal journey.

## ***2. A paradigmatic experience of synodality***

A foundational experience of the Movement that we could define as paradigmatic of a synodal approach was the process of approval of the Movement by Church authorities. This process lasted a good 17 years if we consider the first statute approved by the diocesan authorities as the beginning and the full and final approval given by Pope Paul VI as the end. This was followed by another phase filled with blessings, which we cannot go into now.

In those 17 years, Chiara's faith in God's love and in the motherhood of the Church was unshakable and never wavered, not even when, in 1952, she was advised to resign from the leadership of the Movement, or when in the following years the possibility of its being dissolved (1960) was raised.

It was a school of humility. And Chiara was able to live this profound purification by keeping her eyes fixed on the One she had chosen, Jesus crucified and forsaken, with love for Him as her only support.

In this spirit, she put herself at the service of the Church, which, although suspicious of the Movement, asked for help with the apostolate in Italy and in the countries which, at that time, were behind the Iron Curtain.

In this way, the certainty matured that the Movement that was growing was not of human making but came from God, as the fruits confirmed. It was a certainty that there is a plan of God, that God wants unity, he wants that "all may be one". This is how it was until the full recognition of the presence of a charism.

Faith in God's love, in the motherhood of the Church, obedience, humility, service, thankfulness even when being purified: these are virtues not to be forgotten, as they are part of our DNA, and are necessary today too in every synodal process.

## ***3. The experience today in the heart of the Focolare Movement***

How is this process taking place in the Movement today? A compass is indicated to us in our Statutes, the premise of which states:

"Mutual and constant love, which makes unity possible and brings the presence of Jesus among all, is, for those who are part of the Work of Mary, the basis for their life under every aspect: it is the norm of norms, the premise to every other rule."

Mutual and continuous charity in order to reach consensus must therefore be the style of our synodality. Pope Francis urged us to do this when, welcoming the participants in the General Assembly of the Work of Mary at the Vatican on 6 February, among other things, he said:

"With regard to your effort within the Movement, I urge you increasingly to promote synodality, so that all members, as depositaries of the same charism, may be co-responsible for and participate in the life of the Work of Mary and its specific goals." This is what we are trying to do with particular attention right now in the period following the death of the founder.

A characteristic that is ingrained in the very nature of the "Movement", which is open to all, to men and women of all ages, is the man-woman relationship. The governance of the Movement at all levels, founded on the presence of Jesus in the midst, is entrusted to a man and a woman, as co-responsible persons. In the case of the President, who according to the Statutes will always be a woman, she is assisted in her responsibility as guarantor of the unity of the Movement by a co-president. This too is a permanent school of synodality that bears fruit.

I will now briefly describe the important reference points for implementing a synodal process, knowing full well that they remain a challenge, a "should-be" to aim for, and when they do not turn out well because we make mistakes, they lead us to sincerely apologise in order to start again.

**The pact of mutual love**, which is renewed and placed at the basis of every discernment process, involves a commitment to be ready to love one another as Jesus loved us. It opens us up to benevolence, to appreciating what is positive in the other, to a culture of trust and a family spirit.

Mutual and continuous charity requires that we learn the gospel Art of loving: to listen, "*setting out to learn*", because we truly can learn, as Chiara said, if we believe that the other has been created as a gift for me, as I am for him or her.

**Love everyone. Be the first to love. Love as oneself.**

**To make ourselves one with the other person**, which, referring to St Paul (cf. 1 Cor 9:22) is an attitude filled with meaning and practicality because it implies making room for the other, understanding his or her point of view and cultural reality. This creates a closeness in relationships that enables community discernment.

**To speak with respect, but also with sincerity and clarity.** Everything can be shared with *parrhesia*, [frankness] putting oneself before God and keeping alive the reality of the new commandment.

#### **4. Two examples**

I would like to share two experiences as examples. The first is that of the "**Holy Journey**".

The fact of being called to "journey together" was made clear to us by Chiara when, in 1980, she involved the young people and then the whole Movement in reinvigorating the choice of God and undertaking the "Holy Journey" (cf. Ps 84:6). It was a call to holiness lived for each other. This gave rise to an incredible spiritual journey, of young and old, with a commitment to live one's life out of love, which Chiara herself nurtured by accompanying us on a monthly basis. This gave rise to the famous telephone calls - which predate today's zooms - which connected our people around the world, in which shared experiences and joint resolutions led to meaningful experiences and guided the "Holy Journey" of many to the end of life.

This "walking together" (= synod), aiming towards fraternity and "That they may all be one", which brought the presence of Jesus, as promised to those gathered "in His name" (Mt 18:20). Jesus who becomes a traveller in our midst<sup>5</sup>.

#### **The 2021 General Assembly**

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<sup>5</sup> Cf. AA. VV., *Il Patto del '49 nell'esperienza di Chiara Lubich. Percorsi interdisciplinari*, [The Pact of '49 in the experience of Chiara Lubich. Interdisciplinary pathways] Città Nuova, Roma 2012, pp. 23-25, 45. Cf. *L'unità. Uno sguardo dal Paradiso '49*, [Unity: a viewpoint from Paradise '49] a cura di S. Tobler e J. Povilus, Città Nuova, Roma 2021.

Another strong experience of synodality that I can testify to is what happened at the last **General Assembly 2021**. The Assembly was prepared for more than a year with a local consultation involving young people and adults from the five continents, not only members, but also adherents, including people from various Churches and religious traditions, who expressed themselves both individually and more often as a community. The work started on the basis of the culture of trust - which had been implemented so much in the previous six years.

And this broad sharing produced a great wealth of reflections and proposals, until they were gathered into the vision and guidelines that then matured in the discussion and were summarised in the final document.

Thinking back to this period, I feel that the grace of the *sensus fidei* of the people was at work, the grace of the Assembly as it is considered in our Statutes as the supreme organ of governance. All this, of course, based on the pact of mutual love and being open to continuous conversion.

The condition for success was tenacity in not giving up in our listening to one another with love until we experienced the fruit, the inspiration on which we could come together with joy, as a sign of the presence of the Risen Lord.

I now see that this process is continuing in the light of the words of the Pope and the final document of the Assembly, and the search for ways of applying them is bearing fruit in the different geographical areas, listening to the cry of suffering humanity and fostering a strong family spirit.

### **A family spirit**

The core of our spirituality can be expressed as follows: to offer the world a model of life in the style of a family, that is, of brothers and sisters on a universal level. To ensure that this family spirit is lived in the Centres, in the little towns and everywhere!

Particularly close to my heart is to have an experience of "**synodality**" in the **governance of the Movement**, which means doing everything in a spirit of listening and to bring back into interpersonal

relationships to that brotherly and sisterly love, truth, and charity, which illuminates the place that is due to each person, which is the central place.

As a General Council, for example, we have just had the wonderful experience of hearing from those responsible for territories throughout the world. They are the ones who have their "hands in the dough", who know the potential, the needs, and the cultural and anthropological characteristics of our communities. Listening to them, all the zeal and creativity of "Chiara's people" emerged, who want to remedy the different forms of disunity and heal the wounds of humanity around them. Perhaps it is not even necessary for the International Centre to always give directives or guide the path of the Movement. The important thing is that the Centre always guarantees the unity of the entire Movement and that it can bring to light what the Holy Spirit gradually indicates to us for everyone.

### **Conclusion**

These words of Chiara from Christmas 1973 resound insistently in our hearts, as an enlightening stimulus:

"Were I to leave this earth today and were you to ask me for a final word about what our Ideal is, I would have to say, certain that it would be understood in its deepest sense: "Be a family.." ...

Never place any kind of activity, whether spiritual or apostolic, before the spirit of being a family with the brothers or sisters with whom you are living.

Wherever you go out to bring Christ's ideal, to spread this immense family of the Work of Mary, you will do no better than to try to create, with discretion and prudence, but with solid conviction, the spirit of a family. It is a humble spirit; it wishes the best for everyone; it is not proud... to sum up, it is true, total charity.

So were I to leave this world today, in fact, I would let Jesus in me repeat to you: "Love one another ... so that all may be one."<sup>6</sup>

We hope that being so powerfully helped by Pope Francis, by living our own charism intensely and by learning from each other here, we too

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<sup>6</sup> Essential Writings cit. p. 48.

can say as the Apostles did, "For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us...". (cf. Acts 15:28).