In Gratitude for the Life and Legacy of Chiara Lubich (1920-2008)

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Described by the New York Times as “one of the most influential women in the Roman Catholic Church,” Chiara Lubich was a path-breaker in every sense of the word.

Born in 1920 in a working-class family in Trent, Italy, she was teaching elementary school and studying philosophy when the bombings of World War II ravaged her city. As the air-raid sirens howled, she and a group of friends would rush to the shelters. “Is there an ideal that does not die, that no bomb can destroy, to which we can devote our lives?” they asked themselves. “Yes, there is,” they felt from within. “That ideal is God. We decided to make God the ideal of our lives. In the midst of war, the fruit of hate, God was manifesting himself to us as love.”

Almost by chance they brought to the shelter a small book of the gospels. In the flickering darkness the words seemed to light up, with profound answers to their questions about how to live even those tragic moments as a response to God’s love.

“Love your neighbor as yourself” (Mt. 19:19). They found “neighbors” to love all around: the old lady unable to make it to safety, the five children shaking with fear, the homebound invalid who needed medicine, the hungry, the thirsty, the injured. “Give and it will be given to you” (Lk. 6:38): “If we had only one egg in the house for all of us we offered it to the poor. And what do you know, in the morning a bag of eggs arrived!”

Since several of their homes had been destroyed, they gathered in a small apartment that came to be known as the “Focolare” (which in Italian means “hearth”) because of the warm atmosphere of family and love that continues to be characteristic of these communities. In the constant effort to renew relationships of mutual love, they experienced the presence of the risen Lord in their midst: “Where two or three are gathered in my name...” (Mt. 18:23).

In another moment, as they were taking refuge in a dark cellar, they read the prayer of Jesus to the Father, “May they all be one” (John 17:21). They intuited that their emerging lifestyle would contribute to building unity in the world. In stark contrast to the fear and violence of the war, their initiative created a joyful community which attracted hundreds of people.

The ecclesial movement that emerged from these initial experiences now embraces people of every age, nationality, social background, and walk of life. Through their efforts to live the spirituality of unity in their everyday lives, Focolare people hope to be catalysts for building the civilization of love. Comparing Chiara’s witness to that of Francis of Assisi and of Ignatius of Loyola, John Paul II identified love as the movement’s “inspiring spark,” and its primary aim as making love “victorious in every circumstance.”

By the 1950s, the Focolare Movement had spread throughout Italy, and by the 1960s had fanned across Europe, penetrated beyond the Iron Curtain, and reached every continent. Approved by John XXIII in 1962 as “Work of Mary,” today it is present in 182 countries with more than 140,000 core members and over 2 million affiliates.

Over the years, Chiara’s personal letters, informal conversations, conference call messages, books, magazine articles, and public talks have helped thousands of people to discover how their personal search for union with God is intimately linked with building relationships of love with their neighbors. “This is the great attraction of modern times”—she wrote—“to pen-
etrate to the highest contemplation while mingling with everyone, one person alongside others." We can find God, she encouraged, not in avoiding others, but recognizing the presence of God in every person, "recollecting" them into the "heaven" within us; and by recollecting ourselves "in the heaven of the other."

During her long and extraordinarily fruitful life, she shared with many the "heaven" within her, from the profound discovery of God's love amid the ordinary circumstances of daily life to the joyful experience of "partnership" with God in doing his will; from deep gratitude for his gifts of the Eucharist and the life of the church to the striking insights that emerge from genuine love for Jesus, who on the cross cried out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Mt. 27:46). She wrote: "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 earth with humanity."

In a writing from 1949, Chiara drew out the connections between the spiritual life and the transformation of culture. "The point is that we need to bring God back to life in us, then keep him alive, and therefore overflow him onto others like bursts of life that revive the dead. And we need to keep him alive among us by loving one another . . . Then everything changes, politics and art, education and religion, private life and recreation. Everything."

**Unity and Current Challenges**

In the light of this love, Chiara was also able to penetrate deeply the complexities of the most varied ecclesial and social realities and to explain how the spirituality of unity sheds much light on their current challenges. With a profound "passion for the church," Chiara encouraged Focolare people throughout the world to sustain local parish and diocesan structures with the gift of unity. Recognizing the gifts that other movements and associations offer to the life of the church, she worked to foster a profound sharing of "spiritual goods" among all. Her insights have helped countless families to "revitalize the love that is inherent in every family with that love which is a pure gift from God." Chiara's own vitality helped to attract thousands of youth of all ages to respond to God's "active and dynamic" invitation to move beyond their limited horizons in order to become "everyday heroes who, day after day, are at the service of their neighbors."

Over time, what emerged in the movement were several kinds of vehicles for communal reflection on what it might mean to live the spirituality of unity in one's daily life. Where two or more people committed to living the Focolare spirituality are in the same workplace, they create a "living action cell," where they continually renew their commitment to live mutual love and strive to let Christ's living presence among them illuminate their
work and all of their relationships, which in turn helps them to see how to build unity in that particular environment.

Chiara’s creative vision has also given rise to “Economy of Communion” businesses, which share profits and generate jobs for the relief of poverty and in order to foster a “culture of giving” where material goods are placed at the service of building relationships of communion and love. Thousands of people have found a path to holiness, she described, “not in spite of politics [and] economics, but precisely in the life of politics [and] economics.”

No one has been left out of the “360 degree” dialogue which embraces all people. As Chiara described: “When we are open to one another in a dialogue of human kindness, of mutual esteem, or respect, or mercy, we are also opening ourselves to God and, in the words of John Paul II, ‘we let God be present in our midst.’ ...What greater help can there be for those who want to be instruments of fraternity and peace?”

Chiara was awarded the Templeton Prize for Progress in Religion (1977), the UNESCO Prize for Peace Education (1996), and the Council of Europe’s Human Rights Prize (1998), honorary citizenshipships in Rome and numerous other cities, as well as sixteen honorary doctoral degrees in a wide variety of disciplines. On more than one occasion she was also nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize.

Her extensive travels brought her into contact with people from a variety of religious traditions in Japan, Thailand, India, Argentina, the United States, and elsewhere. Each of these communities could witness to the continual flowering of the seeds of mutual love planted on those occasions. As she shared with a large gathering of Muslims and Christians: “We can already appreciate that what is taking place among us...is not a mere dialogue of words. What we are experiencing is communion in God.”

The spirit of her 1997 visit to the historic Malcolm Shabazz Mosque in Harlem, New York, where she addressed 3,000 followers of Imam Warith Deen Mohammed, continues in the ongoing collaboration for “Encounters in the Spirit of Universal Brotherhood,” held regularly in many cities throughout the United States.

After an intense period of activity and travel, Chiara’s health became frail in the autumn of 2004. During that time, she managed to update the General Statutes of the Focolare Movement, initially approved in 1990 by the Pontifical Council for the Laity, so as to reflect the movement’s latest developments. Just a few months before her death, she joyfully received the approval by the Pontifical Congregation for Catholic Education for the movement’s new Sophia University Institute, which now offers interdisciplinary master’s and doctoral degrees in “Foundations and Perspective in a Culture of Unity.”

Chiara’s death was serene, occurring on March 14, 2008, at her home in Rocca di Papa, outside Rome. Her funeral and the inter-religious tribute that preceded it were transmitted via satellite and Internet from the Roman Basilica of St. Paul Outside the Walls and acknowledged the global impact of her life and her spirituality.

As Vatican Secretary of State Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone summarized during the funeral homily: “She formed individuals who lived the charisma of unity and communion with God and neighbor; people who spread love-unity by making themselves, their homes and their work a ‘focolare.’ This is a mission that is possible for everyone because the Gospel is within everyone’s reach: bishops and priests, children, young people and adults, consecrated and lay people, married couples, families and communities—all are called to live the ideal of unity: ‘that all may be one!’ ...It is up to us, and especially her spiritual children, to continue the mission she began.”

Often the death of a founder marks a particularly difficult time of crisis and testing for a religious community. How has the Focolare Movement experienced the transition?

In July 2008, close to 500 representatives from the communities where the movement is present throughout the world gathered for a General Assembly that was
tasked with electing the new leadership. Each arrived with the desire to be faithful to the
charism of unity and to live it in the decision-making process as well.

The initial vote, however, revealed a split right down the middle: on one side, the desire to maintain in the leadership as much continuity as possible, so as to not risk any transformation in what Chiara herself had built; and on the other, the recognition that the new era which was opening might require a more significant change in the leadership. The split continued for the following three votes. Time to start negotiating a compromise? They felt this path would fall short of their call to unity. They decided, instead, to suspend the vote and take a break.

What then unfolded was a moment of profound communion that revealed an even deeper capacity to listen to each other and to understand the varying perspectives on the movement’s future direction. Focolare co-founder Father Pasquale Fori shared his impression that the time had come for the first generation to pass on the working responsibility for the movement, while these elders would still remain as guardians who assure their continuing help and support. Each felt within that this was the path suggested by the Holy Spirit. The following vote for the new president, Maria Voce, the 72-year old lawyer and long-time collaborator who had helped Chiara in drafting the statutes, was nearly unanimous.

In this delicate moment of transition, the experience of the Assembly remains a luminous example and point of reference. As the foreword to the General Statutes reads, “Mutual and constant love, which makes unity possible and brings the presence of Jesus among all” is the “norm of norms, the premise to every other rule.” In Focolare communities throughout the world, the dynamic of listening, loving, and being ready to let go, so as to discover together how to remain faithful to the spiritual patrimony that Chiara left, leaves open the constant novelty that she herself welcomed in the efforts to apply its principles in the most varied cultural and social contexts.

When Focolare communities throughout the world gathered last March to mark the first anniversary of Chiara’s passage to eternal life, the predominant note was a joyful serenity, grounded in an experience of her presence in a bond that links heaven and earth in an almost tangible way.

Certainty that her mission will continue is also buoyed by the fact that she leaves a vast spiritual and cultural “inheritance,” embodied not only in the statutes and in

an extensive multi-media archive, but also in the living witness and example of her first collaborators. And for the thousands of people who have been touched by the charism of unity, the “inheritance” also includes resources for the daily transformation of their personal lives and relationships, and for the renewal of all aspects of the ecclesial and social contexts where they live and work.

“There are many reasons for thanking the Lord for the gift given to the Church of this woman of intrepid faith, humble messenger of hope and peace, founder of a vast spiritual family that embraces many fields of evangelization,” Pope Benedict XVI wrote in the message read at her funeral.

Chiara herself would also let gratitude to God have the last word. Here is how she described her hoped-for encounter with the Lord: “When I arrive to your door and you ask me my name, I will not say my name, I will say my name is ‘thank you,’ for everything and forever.”

Of all of Chiara’s “spiritual children,” perhaps those in elementary school best capture both the gratitude for her life and the certainty that her legacy of love will live on. Julie from Korea summed it up well: “Dear Chiara, thanks to you I learned how to love. Now my dad who was always serious is getting better and I don’t fight any more with my little sister. Thanks to you our house is like heaven. It would be beautiful to bring this to the whole world to fill it with love and faith. Chiara, give me your courage to bring love and peace to everyone.”