

(English translation)

Rocca di Papa, 12 February 1985

The Focolare Movement and the Word

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Each spirituality in the Church is simply a way of living Christianity, although viewing it from a particular angle, and the same applies to our spirituality. However, Christianity is immeasurably rich in treasures and the Scriptures are a part of this wealth. Therefore, we would like to look at the way the Holy Spirit, who inspired this Movement and enriched the Church with a new spirituality, presented the Word of God to us. Recalling the way he made us penetrate the Gospel and deepened our understanding of it, we would like to consider the way our Movement envisions and lives the Gospel, and the relationship that exists between the Gospel and the Focolare Movement.

To develop this topic adequately and precisely... we cannot overlook the early days (now more than forty years ago) when, as John Paul II described it, the first "inspiring spark" was enkindled.¹ The Church encourages us to return to the beginning and we realize how opportune and useful this is.

Against the background of World War II and the realization that all things pass (in fact everything was being annihilated), the first focolarine felt the call from on High to make a fundamental choice, namely, to place God as the Ideal of their lives. We chose God who manifested himself to us as Love (*1 John 4:16*) in the midst of the horrors of the war and the raging hatred among people and nations. We have made this choice and desiring to be consistent with this Ideal, we firmly resolved to respond to love with our love by carrying out his will. Particularly, we put into practice the commandment which was so closed to Jesus' heart, that of mutual love, which he had called "new" and "his" and which generates unity.

Jesus Forsaken (because we had followed Jesus Forsaken two months after the Movement began) Jesus Forsaken had already manifested himself to us as the key to the perfect accomplishment of this commandment (it's the supreme cry of Jesus, the apex of his suffering) and we had begun to incarnate this mystery in our lives as the way to maintain the unity Jesus desired....

For this reason, we can assume that, although unbeknown to us, Jesus was spiritually present in the midst of us who were united in his name in the first focolare.

It was precisely at this point, if we remember correctly, that we began to read the Gospel everyday.

What effect did it have on us?

Before describing the impact that the Gospel had on that small group of girls, I would like to say something about our lives as Christians up until that point and the lives of the Christians we knew.

Good, practicing Christians went to Church and attended Mass, some even went to daily Mass. They read religious books and were generous in almsgiving. They participated in processions and novenas and attended the month of May ceremonies for Our Lady.

Unquestionably, we all made the effort to observe the ten commandments of God and the precepts of the Church.

In short, we can say that we met all the requirements for calling ourselves practicing Christians. And yet we were not.

A Christian's life was characterized more by "not doing" than by "doing": by not committing sin.

In this perspective we can say that ours was a negative Christianity, so to speak, lacking in attractiveness and incisiveness. Moreover, it was almost exclusively expressed in liturgical ceremonies.

¹ John Paul II, Talk to the Mariapolis Centre of Rocca di Papa translated from the Italian text in *L'Osservatore Romano* of August 20-21, 1984.

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As far as the Gospel was concerned, it wasn't the custom to encourage the faithful to read it. (This was true for our part of the world. I don't know about others.) Perhaps the Reformation had left its mark. People followed the advice of confessors or spiritual directors more than the Gospel. Of course, it wasn't forbidden to read the Gospel, but we could say that our mentality was to consider it as a book like all the others. There was no real difference between the words of the Gospel and words found in other books. Seen in this light, we can say that Christianity appeared static, heavy, and traditional, even though we cannot deny the dynamic initiatives undertaken by several Catholic associations.

It was in this context that the first focolarine encountered the Gospel.

The raging war forced us to seek refuge in the air-raid shelters several times a day. We couldn't take anything with us. We were content with having saved our lives. The only thing that wasn't too much trouble to bring with us was the small book of the Gospel.

In the shelter, we would open the Gospel and read the words we had heard so often in the past. Yet in those moments they appeared remarkably new! A very new light illuminated those words. They were so masterfully clear-cut and divine – they seemed to be unique. We discovered them to be eternal words, relevant for all times and also for our world today. They were universal words which everyone could live.

“Love your neighbor as yourself” (*Mt 22:39*). Who could not live this? (Everyone has a neighbor.) It was meant for whites and for blacks, for those who are consecrated and those who are married, for women and for men, for prisoners, farmers, mothers, statesmen, for people of all vocations and ages -for children and adults.

“Love your neighbor as yourself.” Yes, everyone could live these words, but who lived like this at that time? Who loved his neighbor as himself? “Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you” (*Lk 6:27*).

Who did it? The most we did was to put up with one another. But to respond, we used to say to take revenge by loving. Well, we couldn't find Christians who had the attitude of doing good to those who harmed them.

Christians, we called ourselves Christians, but our great or small enemies remained so for all our lives. In our families, an uncle who was our father's enemy didn't receive a single glance from us... yet we were Christians, we received Holy Communion, etc.

The words of the Gospel were words of life which could immediately be put into practice.

We tried to live them to the letter, and a revolution was born: the revolution of the Gospel.

Our relationships changed with God and with our brothers and sisters. With the Word of God and because of it, a Christian community began. It was the new-born Focolare Movement which surged forth like a spring of water from the Gospel, as someone authoritatively stated.²

People who were strangers became brothers and sisters to the point of living a material and spiritual communion of goods with one another.

We understood that the Gospel offered a different kind of Christianity, dynamic and positive; that it forcefully projected us towards our brothers and sisters, towards every human being the world over.

Yes, of course, the Gospel also told us to pray, indeed, to pray always, to nourish ourselves with the Eucharist, to fulfill our duties as Christians, but everything was to be based on brotherly love.

Certainly, Jesus wanted us to partake in the liturgy, but “If you are bringing your offering to the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your offering there before the altar, go and be reconciled with your brother first...” (*Mt 5:23-24*).

² Canon Bernard Pawley, Anglican.

The Gospel, which we had taken with us by chance and because we couldn't take anything else, had become for us the book.

Before long in almost all the shelters of the surrounding hills in the city of Trent, you could find people with the Gospel in their hands.

It was read and every passage appeared new.

How watered-down other books appeared to be in comparison with the Gospel, even the excellent spiritual books we had read and meditated! How many pages we had to read, at times, in order to find one idea we could put into practice! How the theories of philosophers seemed to dissolve into thin air, theories which previously had had a certain fascination for us students!

Why did these words seem to be so new to us? Who made us understand them in this way? Surely, this was an effect of the charism which gave origin to the Movement in its entirety, but also to one of its particular expressions.

We had begun to live, as I mentioned earlier, with the presence of Jesus among us. In all likelihood, as with the disciples in Emmaus, he did not disdain to be the Teacher among us, who enlightened us, making us understand his own words.

We know that the Word of God must fall into good soil. What better soil could there be than that in which He is present among his own because of unity?³

Jesus was in our midst with his Spirit and he taught us how to understand his words. It was a kind of exegesis given to us, not by a theology teacher but by Jesus himself, because as Anselm, doctor of the Church, says: "It is one thing to be fluent in speech and even eloquent; it is another thing to enter the veins and the marrow of heavenly words and to contemplate with pure heart the heavenly mysteries. No human teaching, no worldly learning will achieve this. It can be given only by the purity of one's mind and the teaching of the Holy Spirit."⁴

Which words did the Holy Spirit point out to us first?

The words which spoke of love. John Paul II, in his visit to this Center, said that "the central point "the specific charism", the "characteristic" of our Movement is love."⁵

As I said before, the Lord had given us an intuition about the value of love at the dawning of our new way of life, when he prepared us for reading the Gospel.

He had already given us this insight, and now in reading the Gospel, he was giving the greatest importance to the words which spoke explicitly of love and he strongly urged us to live them.

They were: "Love your neighbor as yourself." "Love your enemies..." "Always treat others as you would like them to treat you"(Mt 7:12). And then, "I was hungry and you gave me food... I was thirsty... In so far as you did this to one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did it to me"(Mt 25:35).

In short, we could say of ourselves what was said of the early Christians: Charity (love for God and neighbor) was the first thing that a member of the community learned to live. For this reason John could say, "My dear people, this is not a new commandment that I am writing to tell you, but an old commandment that you were given from the beginning" (1 John 2:7).

The Spirit of Jesus had a definite reason for stressing these words of evangelical love. He focused our attention there because it was by putting this love into practice that we could better understand all the other words. God manifests himself to those who love him (Cf. John 14:21). It was principally with love that we could reinforce and guarantee his presence among us. In this way, we could move quickly along the pathway of unity (to bring unity to the world).

³ Cf. Luke 24:13-32.

⁴ St. Anselm, *Tractatus Asceticus*, c.5; PL158:1033C.

⁵ John Paul II, *Ibid.*

Each one of these words I just mentioned and all the others we took from the Gospel and tried to translate into life, pertaining to a variety of subjects, ... appeared to us as rich and unfathomable resources.

We believed that the rule of what was coming to life was simply the Gospel. It was logical then for us to eliminate all other books and to keep only the Gospel.

A writing from those days affirms, "We have no other book except the Gospel; we have no other science, no other art. There is Life! Whoever finds it, does not die."⁶

I've been reading the stories of some of the focolarine and focolarini who were with us during this period, in which they recount their meeting with the Movement. I noticed how they were struck, as by lightning, overwhelmed and caught up into this life, not by the spirituality (which didn't exist yet) but by one of Jesus' words which they had seen us living.

Living the Word was our way of loving. "If anyone loves me he will keep my words" (*John* 14:23), Jesus had said.

We read in another writing from those days: "Try to live it, and you will find all of perfection and, just as every morning you are content with that Sacred Host you receive, without desiring some other one, in the same way, be satisfied with this Word. You will find in it, as Saint Francis did, 'the hidden manna of a thousand fragrances!'"

The writing continues: "In this way and only in this way: in doing the truth, we love! Otherwise, love is empty sentimentalism."⁷

While the whole Gospel had a particular fascination for us, with the passing of time, a few words became like signposts along our way. They became the main points of that new spirituality which was rising from the Gospel.

These main points were: "That all may be one" (*John* 17:21), which did not accept barriers of race, nationality or culture. On the contrary, they opened wide our hearts to universal brotherhood.

"Where two or three are united in my name, I am there in their midst." This sealed our unity and became the norm of all norms in the Movement's life. It is the rule of all rules. It comes before all the other rules. If Jesus is not in our midst, the rules are of no value for us.

"Whoever hears you, hears me," (*Lk* 10:16) prompted us to entrust ourselves with filial and total confidence, to the Church's maternity.

And then, the cry of Jesus, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (*Mt* 27:46) in which he revealed himself (immediately afterwards and then more and more) as the key to unity to everything.

These were a few of the words which gave origin to a collective, communitarian spirituality in the Church, meeting the needs of our times.

This was the face-to-face encounter between the new Movement and the Gospel.

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⁶ Chiara Lubich, letter from 1948.

⁷ Chiara Lubich, *Ibid.*