

(English translation)

Assisi, 26 October 2000

Affinity between the Franciscan and the Focolare Spiritualities

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Urs von Balthasar says that when the Holy Spirit sends one of his charisms, a little window is opened for the first time in heaven, through which it is possible to know truths which, although contained in the patrimony of the Church, appear to be new¹.

Through the charism of unity, that little window revealed to us, for as much as it is possible for us human beings to understand, many of these mysteries which are like the two sides of the same medal: Jesus forsaken and unity.

I believe that the little window of St. Francis was unity and poverty. ...

But generally speaking, charisms – as I said before – have something in common with one another. I feel that this is the case of our charism and that of St. Francis. I am not sufficiently prepared for this analysis. Nonetheless, I can attempt to point out some similarities, also in view of the information that was kindly given to me.

Everyone knows, for example, that – just as the first point of our spirituality demands – the heart of St. Francis was all inflamed with a very ardent love towards God, to the extent that we can consider it to be the great ideal of his life. Do not the words "My God, my God," his nocturnal prayer, which others translate as "My God and my all," reveal that the Lord was at the centre of his heart and at the apex of his thoughts?

Furthermore, interesting and new for me was the emphasis on unity, our characteristic charism, which appears in an official document of Pope Innocent IV. Consenting to the requests of Claire, abbess of St. Damian in Assisi, and her sisters, he permanently confirmed for all of them and for those who would follow them "the form of life and the way of holy unity and most high poverty".

St. Claire herself affirmed that the "poor sisters" gathered together in order to live in "holy unity." "May we always be eager to conserve the unity of mutual charity, which is the bond of perfection." It is a form of life which in essence reproduces the rule and life of the Friar Minors as well as that of the Franciscan Third Order. Unity, therefore, would seem to be in the first place also in the Franciscan spirituality, while the highest poverty, which is usually thought of in the world as the ideal *par excellence*, the sole ideal of St. Francis, would seem to come afterwards. It would seem to come afterwards according to these definitions, and as a means to unity.

With regard to the new commandment of Jesus, also Francis wanted his brothers to love one another. He affirmed: "May they always love one another as I have loved them and do love them." In reference to the community of St. Claire it was written: "There reigns among them, above all else, the virtue of a constant, mutual charity."

As I said before, we strive towards universal brotherhood to the point of achieving the dream of a united world. But didn't St. Francis strive for this as well – as they said here – embracing all people along with the cosmos with the sun, the moon, and the stars?

I read that John Paul II recently spoke of the priority and centrality that St. Francis gave to a brotherhood based on the Gospel². Likewise, Cardinal Etchegaray, in his homily during the Jubilee Mass

¹ Cf J.CORDES in *30 Giorni*, March 1986, p. 56.

² Cf GIOVANNI PAOLO II to the participants of the General Chapter of the Franciscan Order of the Capuchin Friar Minors, in "L'Osservatore Romano", 8 July 2000, p. 9.

of the Franciscan family, said, among other things, that a life truly based on brotherhood was the wild dream, the daring project, the obstinate plan of Francis and his first companions³.

With regard to the Word of God, which we constantly put into practice, is it not common knowledge that St. Francis not only meditated on the word, but that he "lived" it *sine glossa* [without comment]?

The idea of having "nothing of one's own" - which for Francis meant total exterior and interior expropriation, and for St. Claire that abnegation mentioned in the bull of canonization – this idea finds a perfect and insuperable model in Jesus crucified who was totally annulled physically and spiritually in the abandonment.

And we cannot help but notice the likeness between the experience of the friars with the young Jesus in their midst, narrated in the *Little Flowers*, and what we try to live every day in our focolares and in the whole Movement.

In addition: the name Claire, St. Claire calls to mind *claritas*, a term which is close to our heart, intent as we are in "clarifying" human realities, that is, in bringing the light of the supernatural into the most varied environments on earth: in politics, in art, in economy, in science, in education...

These are only a few ideas, but we hope significant ones. Who knows what you would have to say! You Franciscans!

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³ Cf CARD. R.ETCHEGARAY, homily on occasion of the Jubilee of the Franciscan Family, in "L'Osservatore Romano", 12 April 2000, p. 8.