

(English translation)

Rocca di Papa, 18 April 2002

Face to face – Chiara Lubich and Sandra Hoggett
(Part 1)

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4) **Sandra:** Can you tell me when you first felt this immense love for God?

Chiara: In a sense, I have always had a strong faith. I was born into it and I grew up with God's love. But like for so many people, God was somewhere out there, beyond the stars, faraway. The real thunderbolt came when I was 23 years old and the charism began to stir within me. I was teaching in a small orphanage. A visiting priest had perhaps seen me praying in church. Anyway he called me out of the class and he said: "Could you give an hour of your time to help me in ministry?" It was a priest and I had such faith in God and in the Church that I said: "You can have the whole day, not just an hour". He was surprised by this. He told me to kneel down and he blessed me saying: "God loves you immensely". And I believed it. It was as if God was speaking to me through him.

I had known God's presence before present in the tabernacle but somehow also distant. Now He seemed very close to me and I understood how everything is guided by Him. The whole of history and also the history of each one of us. I understood that He is Love and that His Love is in everything. Even though at times what happens might appear negative, God allows a greater good to come out of it all. But of course you have to believe in His Love in order to see this.

I was so deeply impressed with the thought of God loving me immensely that I told everyone. I told my friends, my mother, I wrote it in letters to my brother and sisters. And that's how my first companions joined me. I'd say to them: "Do you know that God loves you, God loves us, He loves us immensely". And we believed in this love. The war was going on and we knew we could die at any moment and so we said: "If we die, we want to be buried all together in the same grave and our epitaph should read: 'And we have believed in Love'."

We were like children who were orphans suddenly finding out they had a father. We discovered God the Father. That's what launched our Christian revolution.

But it is true that the *Kerigma*, the message of our Church, of our faith is in fact this: "God loves you, God loves Man". You have been created out of love, He sent His Son to die for you out of love He has prepared an eternity of happiness for you out of love, all out of love". It's the Holy Spirit who announces and He announced this extremely well to us!

5) **Sandra:** You made a very unusual vow which is normally only made by nuns. You actually made a marriage vow with God...

Chiara: That was also because of the circumstances. God speaks to us through events, people we meet and so on. I was studying at home. Mum was keen for me to study and not to waste time doing other things. My two younger sisters did lots of other things.

We were quite poor. At one time we had been fairly well off but then things had changed. One bitterly cold day, my mother asked the girls to go and fetch some milk. You had to take a bottle and walk for about one and a half kilometres. One sister said: It's too cold. I'm not going. The other said: Well I'm not going either.

I had already understood that I had to love even before our Ideal took off so I thought: Well, I'll make an act of love and go. So I said: Mum, "I'm going" and I set off with the bottle. I was about halfway there when all of a sudden, it was just an impression I had, as if the sky opened up and I seemed to hear these words in my heart: "Give yourself to me, give yourself completely to me." I knew that God was calling me.

I carried on to get the milk and went back home. I was very quiet. I wrote a note about it to my priest and then I went to see him. He played what they used to call "the devil's advocate" which was to try to put you off. He said: "If you consecrate yourself to God, you'll end up all alone. Your brother and sisters will all get married and have children and you'll have no-one." I replied: "As long as there is a tabernacle on earth, I will never be alone". He consulted another very old and very wise priest and I was given permission right away to consecrate myself to God forever.

The day came and I was to go to the church to hear mass first. There was a little kneeler arranged for me. I had a lovely little missal and I remember that before I said the words: "I am Yours forever", I suddenly realized what I was doing. It was as if a bridge I'd crossed was collapsing behind me. I could never go back. Tears fell on to that missal. But I made my vow, you could call it a vow I suppose but for me it was a marriage with God. Then I went home. What I felt inside was this: You've married God. You can expect anything to happen to you now.

I expected something great to happen but I would never have imagined a Movement like this which cannot be explained in human terms.

I remember I'd been told to stay awake and pray the night before. It wasn't the sort of thing I'd do but I managed it for a couple of hours. I had a little crucifix. The next day on my way back after the vow, I bought three red carnations to put beside it. Mum had asked: Where are you going? To a function, I said. I didn't want to say. The gospel says that not everyone understands. Only those who are called understand.

I used to give after school lessons to some young friends. What's happened to you, they asked. I was so happy. So I told them. "We want to do it too" they said. And that's how the Movement began.

My vow was the laying of the first stone, firmly and forever.

6) **Sandra:** You talk about this marriage...it's a two way process. How do you and God communicate with each other? What do you have to offer each other?

Chiara: When I understood that God is Love, that He loves me and is there in everything that happens to us, that nothing is by chance, that we are and should be only love for one another, it was then that I knew I had to respond by loving Him in return. As a Christian I knew from scripture that Jesus said: "The one who loves me will keep my commandments".

So I thought, that's what He wants. But it was wartime. We were always running to the shelters as often as 11 times a day. So we took the gospels with us. They would teach us how to love God. We read them and we understood that even one sentence was enough to change our lives. "Love your neighbour", it says. "Who's our neighbour", we asked. The woman over there with five little children. Let's give her a hand and each of us carried a child. And what about that disabled man who can't get to the shelter. Let's visit him. And there's someone who has no food and so on.

Our way of living changed. We thought of the others and we were very happy because loving brings happiness. And people said: "What have you got to be happy about with the war, the bombing, the wounded, with all these orphaned children?" We said how we had discovered the gospels and many joined us. In two months there were 500 of us on this evangelical adventure.

- 7) **Sandra:** I want to pursue a little more your relationship with God. Is it the same as the relationship between any married couple...in that you support one another, at times you have differences of opinion. Couples sometimes have rows. Can you explain a little more, I would like to understand the relationship you feel.

Chiara: At first you have a relationship through the normal prayers that you've learnt. Then it becomes more spontaneous. Our Ideal in our Movement is that the more you love your neighbour, the more you find union with God within you.

The experience we all had even the children, is that if we try to love our neighbour all day one by one, in the evening when we pray we find that God is there waiting within us and we can speak with Him. You find this union with God. It's a mystical experience which comes from having practised loving all the time by making yourself one, by helping and so on.

And then the more you love God, the more you spend time with Him, speaking with Him, praying, the more you are able to love your neighbour.

Take the example of a small plant. The deeper the roots, the taller the shoot. The more the shoot is exposed to the air, the more oxygen it absorbs and the more the roots grow. It's the same with God and our neighbour. It's a relationship of love, a love you can feel. Everyone can experience this union with God. It is something great and beautiful. Compared with this, everything else is ordinary.