

(English translation)

Rome, 13 June 1998

## **Answers given to Muslim friends of the Focolare Movement**

**“Chiara, we would like to ask you, what has it been like establishing a relationship with the faithful of other religions?”**

I have always felt very comfortable! Because even if our religions are different we have much in common and this unites us. Our diversity attracts us to one another; it makes us curious about one another. Therefore, I am happy for two reasons: because I come to know new things and I enter into another's

culture; but also because I come to know brothers and sisters who are the same as me insofar as we believe in so many of the same things.

The most important thing we have in common is the Golden Rule: “Do not do to others what you would not have them do to you.” This saying is present in the sacred books of all of the most important religions. It is also in the gospel for Christians.

It means: treat your brothers and sisters well, hold them in high esteem, love them. Thus, when they discover this sentence in their scriptures and I discover it in mine, I love, they love, and in the end we love one another. This is the foundation on which we can begin to live universal brotherhood.

**“What do you feel when you meet a brother or sister of another religion?”**

I feel a great desire to relate with them as with members of the same family, to enter immediately into a fraternal relationship, to make unity.

**“When you first began the Focolare Movement it was formed solely by Roman Catholics. Can you tell me how you were able to open the minds of people of other races and religions and unite them among themselves, helping them understand love for others in such a simple way?”**

We began to love because the gospel told us to love. Love is the word that sums up the whole of the Christian religion. Loving: it is all there.

And since we are spread out all over the world, if one of us met a Buddhist, a Muslim or a Hindu, we loved him or her because we must love everyone. And so a contact was established simply by loving.

Then, as I said before, we discovered that there are truths in these religions - especially in the more important ones - that are the same as those that exist in our religion. Therefore, we helped them to discover in their scriptures precisely those truths that corresponded to the main points of our spirituality, because with the passage of time we understood that God had prepared this charism for many.

**“One would imagine that the process of making your ideal effective in practice has not been lacking in difficulties, as is usually the case with large undertakings at the service of humanity. Could you tell us, even briefly, of the difficulties you have faced?”**

They are the difficulties you too will face. The first is a difficulty within ourselves.

Perhaps there are times when we want to say: “That's enough, I'm tired of loving, I'll live my own life, I'll turn on the television, I'll watch it, I'll go and get a drink...” And this is what Saint Paul

calls the “old self.” In other words, it is that purely human behavior which is inclined toward self-centeredness

and toward our passions. Instead, when we love, when we live our Ideal, we have the “new self.”

But we need to train ourselves, to be athletes of the spirit. If we do so, little by little we are able to live as our “new selves” all day long. Of course, not perfectly because we are still sinners, but we will get there. Therefore, you will find the first obstacle within; it comes from our “old self.”

We, as a Movement, also found many difficulties from the outside. Since the Movement first began we loved one another completely and like the first Christians we put all that we had in common. As a result we were accused of being Communists. We knew that it was not true, and our bishops knew it as well, but the accusation remained.

Or, because we read the gospel with such fervor and we tried to put it into practice, others said: “They are Protestants.”

Therefore, people will accuse you too, and one day you will tell me about it. But what matters is that we keep on going.

**“I have seen that in the talks that you prepare for us you often cite the Qur’an and this has really touched me. What moved you to take our Holy Book and make a comparison with the gospel?”**

Since Islam is one of the major religions, I was convinced that the Qur’an contained profound truths similar to ours. Therefore, I began to look for those fundamental truths that God had underlined for us in the gospel, so that we might be able to live them together and therefore already in some way be united.

**“How can we as Muslims face suffering?”**

In order to explain this point well, I must say first that in the spiritual life it is very important always to live the present moment. We cannot live in the past because it is already gone; we must cast it into God’s mercy. We cannot live in the future, because it has not yet come. We must live in the present. The skill of the spiritual life tells us: live now, totally and fully in the here and now.

I know, for example, that for us, when someone is close to death, we advise him or her to live in the present, because it is the most reasonable thing to do.

Now, with this as a premise, I will tell you how to approach suffering.

Suffering is very, very precious. It is not something to be discarded. In this regard, the Qur’an made a great impression on me. There is a sentence in it that is almost identical to something that Jesus says: “Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit” (Jn 12:24). It is like saying that if we do not know how to accept suffering, learn to die to ourselves, we do not bear any fruit, we remain sterile all our lives. If instead we accept suffering and we die, we will bear much fruit.

If you were to ask me: “What is it that fuels the Movement?” I would have to respond: “It is suffering accepted.”

How many people - even now for your meeting - offer up their sufferings, hardships, even their death? Every day I receive news: “Chiara, today this woman left for heaven, and she offered everything for the Movement and for this moment.” “This man discovered that he had a tumor, he accepted it and offered everything for this moment.” And this is because we know that suffering is something extremely precious.

Well then, the Qur'an also speaks of a grain of wheat thrown to the ground. Therefore, it also recognizes, although in a slightly different way, how precious suffering is. It says that certain people who appear to be made nothing by suffering, then instead are resurrected with a thousand lives. It is the same thing, the same idea. Thus, suffering is extremely precious. It is a constitutive element of the spiritual life.

So, what do we do when suffering comes?

I repeat, we must live the present moment. And so when suffering comes our way, we go deep within our hearts as we do when we pray. We know that God is everywhere; therefore he is also in the depths of our hearts. And so we say to God: "OK, I accept this suffering and I offer it to you, for you." And then, in the following moment we must continue to do God's will, which, for example, might be to come here and listen or to go and do some shopping, to read, to study.... We must do this will of God immediately. I assure you, it has been our experience for several decades now that many sufferings, in particular

spiritual ones, fade away, vanish, we no longer feel them. Try it! It is a challenge, but it is true.

**"Having come to know the Movement and its members, I have noticed that you and other members do not marry. Since marriage is very important for us, could you explain this choice of yours? Would it not be better to marry in order to pass on this beauty that I have noticed, especially in these people, to their own children?"**

I would preface my response by saying that also in the Church, among Christians, marriage is considered to be a wonderful state of life. And not only from a human point of view but from a supernatural point of view as well. Marriage is even sealed by a sacrament, which for us means that it is something truly from God. Having said this, in the Christian world, especially in the Catholic Church, there are people who, instead, follow God in virginity. Some of us present here today are among those who follow God in this way.

Why have we made this choice? Because God called us; but also because we saw that Jesus was a virgin, Mary was a virgin, even though a mother. And also some of the apostles, like Saint Paul, never married. What is more, we also find that due to virginity we can approach many more people. In fact, Jesus encourages virginity and he speaks very highly of it because he sees it as a possibility to dedicate all of one's time for God's work, to spread the kingdom of God. And this is precisely what happens.

Of course, if we live our virginity well we also become mothers and fathers, spiritually speaking, and we have many children.

Do you know that people all over the world call me "mother"? Just the other day I heard that there is a Buddhist monk who goes around saying: "I am a Buddhist, a Buddhist monk, but I am the son of a Christian mother." He says this to everyone.

Thus, with regard to motherhood, we are not lacking anything. Another kind of maternity takes its place, a spiritual maternity.

**"Discovering the Focolare Movement has filled me with joy and has opened my eyes, showing me how to be Muslim. What would you advise me to do in order to give this treasure to other Muslims so that they can understand it as I have?"**

This is the way: you must go and love. If you find someone who is suffering, try to help him or her. Love is never made up only of words: "I love you, I love you." Love is always made up of concrete acts. It means giving the hungry something to eat, helping those who suffer.... The Qur'an says it too (cf. 2, 177 and 76, 8).

At first we must love without speaking. Beware of speaking, because people will immediately point you out and they will judge you. You have to love for a long time without speaking, until one of these people whom you have loved asks you: “Why are you different? You are not like everyone else, you understand people. Why is that?” Then you can speak up and say: “Well, I live my life differently; I’ve changed.” Tell them that little that you think they can understand. And usually you will win them over to your cause.

In this regard, I heard that two Buddhist nuns, to whom I had spoken while I was in Thailand, participated in one of the meetings of our Movement, a Mariapolis, and that they learned there how to love without speaking. When they went back to their convent they began to love. The others, noticing that they were acting differently, asked them what had caused this change. Now they have begun to speak and little by little other nuns have begun to love.

**“How do you manage to love us Muslims so much as to make us feel this unity so strongly?”**

It comes spontaneously to me. It is not that I have to think about it. It comes spontaneously, there’s no effort involved – on the contrary, it’s a great joy for me to come here.

But it is not just something human. I think it comes from the fact that there is God in this.

**“Chiara, what impression did your experience with your Muslim brothers and sisters make on you?”**

It is as if I had known them all my life. When I am with them I feel as if I am among brothers and sisters. I attribute this to our common faith in God.

**“How do you foresee the fulfillment of unity among Christians and Muslims in the future?”**

Only God knows that. I could not even begin to imagine. God knows. It will be something very beautiful, but only God knows.

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