

# *CHIARA LUBICH: A LIFE FOR UNITY*<sup>□</sup>

*By Amelia J. Uelmen*<sup>\*\*</sup>

## **Introduction**

This paper gives a brief sketch of the life of Chiara Lubich as an example of unlimited love for all humanity. Lubich is the founder of the international Focolare Movement which has now spread to over 180 countries. Rooted in the Roman Catholic Church, the Focolare Movement is known especially for its work in inter-religious dialogue, and more generally as an instrument to build unity between people of different cultures, races, and social backgrounds<sup>1</sup> (Focolare in Brief: Its Diffusion).

In exploring the topic of unlimited love, it seems particularly appropriate to reflect on how such love has actually been put into practice in someone's life. After tracing the patterns, one might be tempted to then move fairly quickly to a certain level of abstraction, to consider how this pattern might be, in a certain sense, "harnessed", and applied more broadly.<sup>2</sup>

As I attempted this sketch, something seemed to elude my efforts to "harness" Lubich's patterns of unlimited love. Her life itself seems to say that altruism is not so much about one's own individual heroic effort or creative initiative and planning. Hers is more a story of a radical openness and response to God's own initiative and plans. As Lubich herself reflected, "The pen

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<sup>□</sup> The title is borrowed from Zambonini (1992), the English translation of an Italian journalist's comprehensive interview with Chiara Lubich. In Italian, "ch" is pronounced like an English "k"; phonetically, the pronunciation of Lubich's name is "Kee-are-ah Loo-bick."

<sup>\*\*</sup> Director, Fordham University School of Law Institute on Religion, Law & Lawyer's Work; email: [aelmen@law.fordham.edu](mailto:aelmen@law.fordham.edu)

<sup>1</sup> For general information and a broad overview, the Focolare Movement's official international website is particularly helpful ([www.focolare.org](http://www.focolare.org)) [in Italian, "Movimento dei Focolari"]. Throughout the text, where the original references are in Italian, the translations are my own.

<sup>2</sup> For example, the program description of the Works of Love Conference poses the question: "How do our complex brains, unique imaginations, communicative abilities, reasoning powers, moral sense, and spiritual and religious promptings give rise to this remarkable yet not at all uncommon practice of unselfish love for our neighbors, or for those we do not even know? If we could answer this question and harness the extraordinary power of love, the world might well erupt into hope."

does not know what it will write, the artist's brush does not know what it will paint . . . when God takes someone in hand to bring a new work into being, that person does not know what she will achieve; she is simply an instrument"<sup>3</sup> (Pochet, 1985, p. 14).

### *Stars and Tears*

Chiara Lubich<sup>4</sup> was born in 1920 in Trent, northern Italy, the second of four children. Her childhood was simple – looking back, she reflects that both her parents had a strong impact. From her mother, a traditional devout Roman Catholic, she absorbed a deep religious sensitivity. She was particularly close to her father, a Socialist, whom she describes as “large of heart” and broad of mind (Zambonini, 1992, p. 31). As Fascism gained ground in the late 1920s, her father lost his job, and the family lived through years of extreme poverty. Chiara helped to support the family, working her way through school, and eventually she took a job as an elementary school teacher (Zambonini, 1992, pp. 36-38).

Because of its strategic location as a passage through the Dolomite mountains, Trent was heavily bombed during World War II. On May 13, 1944, from a wooded hillside where she had taken refuge with her family, Chiara watched as bombings ravaged her neighborhood and destroyed her family home. As she lay awake through the night, looking up into the darkness and watching the stars move across the sky, she had the sense that something new was coming to life in her city, and felt that she could not abandon the group of friends who were counting on her. Yet she struggled, knowing that her family would leave the next morning to look for safer shelter in the mountains (Zamboni, 2003, p. 10).

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<sup>3</sup> In his introduction to a comprehensive compendium of Lubich's principle texts, Monsignor Piero Coda, Professor of Systematic Theology at the Lateran University in Rome and a member of the Pontifical Academy of Theology, notes that the image of a paintbrush or a pen is common among the testimonies of mystics (Coda, 2001, p. 15).

<sup>4</sup> From this point forward in the text, I will refer to Lubich with the familiar “Chiara,” as millions know her today.

Then, she recounts, “almost as if someone suggested it to me . . . I remembered a phrase in Latin, *Omnia vincit amor*, love conquers all.” About four in the morning she dried her tears. She remembers, “From the moment I said that ‘yes’ I sensed a new strength” (Zamboni, 2003, p. 11).

Early the next morning, in what she describes as the most painful moment, she placed her heavy backpack on her mother’s curved shoulders. Her family made their way towards the mountains, and she turned toward the city. Many years later, the scene is still vivid: “the destruction was total: trees had been uprooted, houses were in ruins, roads were covered with debris. Tears came to my eyes . . . and I let them flow.” Then, suddenly a woman appeared at the corner of a street. She grabbed hold of her, screaming, “Four of mine have died, do you understand?” Chiara remembers, “As I consoled her I understood that I had to forget about my own grief in order to take on that of the others” (Zamboni, 2003, pp. 10-12; Gallagher, 1997, pp. 35-39; Pochet, 1985, pp. 24-28; Zambonini, 1992, pp. 43-47).<sup>5</sup>

She searched among the ruins for her friends, and was relieved to find they were all alive. As the homes of several 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 (Gallagher, 1997, p. 35-36).

Little did Chiara know at the time that the disastrous ruins of war-torn Trent would serve as the backdrop for the initial growth and development of a movement which would involve more than four and a half million people of different races, cultures, social backgrounds and

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<sup>5</sup> Lubich 2001a includes a version in the original Italian of Lubich’s own account of these initial developments (pp. 43-52).

religious traditions. They are committed to being seeds of social and spiritual renewal, to building a more united world (Focolare in Brief).

For each person who has been touched in some way by the Focolare spirituality and lifestyle, the initial step is similar to Chiara's – as a response to the discovery of God's love, to move beyond comfortable or familiar horizons, in order to turn with love to neighbors in need. They often face what war-torn Trent continues to represent, all over the world – not only war and violence, but also poverty, injustice, and discord of every kind, in families, and between people of different religions and cultures. They work to bring love, to build unity.

What is the source of this unselfish love? How did it emerge and develop?

### **Springs of Living Water**

Former Archdeacon of Canterbury Bernard Pawley once described the Focolare as having “burst forth in the church like a fountain of living water from the Gospel” (Lubich, 2002b).

Such is evident from Chiara's description of the Movement's beginnings. In those initial months, as the air raid sirens called them to the shelters sometimes several times a day, almost by chance they brought with them a small copy of the Gospel – unusual for Roman Catholics at the time. As they read the scriptures together, the words seemed to light up. As Chiara vividly described in an interview with Piero Damosso: “It was as if we had never read, ‘Love your neighbor as yourself’ – and all of a sudden we understood, ah, it's that old lady who can't run to the shelter; it's the mother struggling with her five crying children – let's help them!”<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Following numerous ecclesiastical approvals, Chiara would explain this light as a particular gift and action of the Holy Spirit. As she described in an interview with Piero Damosso, “A charism is a light which helps you to understand things in a new way, and a strength which pushes you to live it immediately” (2001). Similarly, Fr. Jesus Castellano, a Discalced Carmelite from Spain and consultant to the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, reflecting on Chiara's intuitions on applications of life of the Trinity, explained the novelty of the gift: “There is no doubt that a supernatural wisdom, a charism of the Holy Spirit lay at the basis at the basis of such a new

A “divine adventure,” as Chiara would describe it, opened before them. The words of Jesus, “Whatever you do to the least, you do to me” (Mt 25:40) brought them to share the material goods they could collect with the many who lacked basic necessities due to the war. “Ask and you shall receive” (Lk 11:9) – food, clothing, and medicine filled the halls of their small apartment. “Give and it shall be given” (Lk 6:38) – what was shared with trusting faith in God’s continual intervention, often multiplied before the day’s end. With wonder, they experienced the life of the Gospel put into practice as the solution to every personal and social problem<sup>7</sup> (Chiara Lubich: A Biographical Sketch; Lubich, 2000b).

As the war continued to rage, conscious that any moment could be their last, they asked, what might be the words especially dear to Jesus. They discovered, “I give you a new commandment: love one another as I have loved you” (Jn 15:12-13), and they understood the measure of his love, he gave his life. Chiara remembers how they gathered in a circle and made a pact: “I am ready to give my life for you; I for you; each one for the other.” The effort to keep the flame of mutual love alive among them became their lifestyle (Lubich, 2001a, p. 27; Lubich, 2000b).

In another moment, taking refuge from the bombings in a dark cellar, they opened the Gospel to the solemn page of Jesus’ prayer before dying: “Father, may they all be one” (Jn 17:11). As they read by candlelight the difficult and profound passage, Chiara remembers, “We had the impression that we had been born for those words, for unity, for contributing toward building it in the world. The new commandment, which we made the effort to keep alive among us always, achieved precisely that, unity.” And, they discovered, with unity comes “an

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and lofty discovery, which, I might say, was practically unknown, unheard of up to that point” (Castellano, 1985, p. 11).

<sup>7</sup> Zamboni (2002) includes a collection of both the initial stories of God’s intervention as well as more recent examples from all over the globe.

extraordinary, exceptional and divine reality: Jesus Himself.” They remembered his promise, “Where two or three are gathered in my name (that is, in His love), there am I in the midst of them” (Mt. 18:20) (Focolare in Brief: Its Origins).

When the war ended, people of the community traveled to other cities for work or study, and carried with them their newly discovered lifestyle. Focolare houses were opened first in other cities in Italy, then throughout Europe, and starting in the late 1950s and into the 1960s, in North and South America, Asia and Africa (Focolare in Brief: Its Diffusion).

**Practical Suggestions for Living Love for All Humanity**

Wherever it has spread throughout the globe, love for all humanity has remained the core of the Focolare spirituality and lifestyle. As John Paul II put it during a 1984 visit to the Focolare headquarters in Rome, love is the “inspiring spark” of everything that is done under the name Focolare.<sup>8</sup> What is remarkable about Chiara is not only her consistency as a living example of evangelical love, but also her capacity to communicate to people of all ages and cultures the practical “how to.”

To give just one example of the range and reach: for the children four to eight years old, Chiara has synthesized the principles of universal love into six key points which cover the sides of a cube – for example, love everyone, including our enemies; be the first to love; love concretely, by sharing the other’s joy or pain. Each morning the kids roll the cube, and then try to live according to what comes out on top. In the evening, they share their efforts with their friends and family. Six-year-old Michael from the Czech Republic recounts: “We were running to a neighbor’s barn to see the baby deer; then Andrew fell and hurt himself. I didn’t want to stop because I was in a hurry to see the deer, but then I remembered when I rolled the cube it

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<sup>8</sup> Lubich 2001b includes her own reflections on John Paul II’s discourse (p. 119). Lubich 2002a includes discussion of how the “inspiring spark” of love also grounds the theology emerging from the spirituality (p. 23).

said, “love everyone.” So I let my other friends go ahead, and helped Andrew get up and clean his scraped knee. He stopped crying and we went to see the deer together.” There are thousands of these examples, from kids all over the world (Vanderbroek & Camozzi, 2001, pp. 6-7).

**Path-breaking Developments in Inter-Religious Dialogue**

What often emerges is the spirituality’s simplicity and its accessibility to people of all ages and social backgrounds – so it is possible to miss its extraordinary depth and power. But universal love for all humanity has propelled the people of the movement to build unity in the most delicate and challenging contexts. For example, Chiara’s work in inter-faith dialogue has been acclaimed as path breaking within the Roman Catholic Church and beyond.<sup>9</sup>

What are her suggestions for engaging in fruitful dialogue? Love leads to a complete “emptying” of oneself in order to “become one” with others, to deeply understand the meaning they give to their religious experience. Chiara explains: “When we make ourselves one with the others, they can open up, reveal themselves to us, express and explain themselves, and share something of their being Jewish or Muslim or Buddhist or Christian. Some of their immense, even unexpected richness will shine in us too” (Lubich, 1996, pp. 10-11).

Chiara’s approach to dialogue has received an extraordinary welcome – many religious leaders have invited her to share her explicitly Christian experience with their communities. Introducing her as the first Christian woman and lay person invited to recount her spiritual experience to more than 800 Buddhist monks and nuns in Thailand, the Great Teacher Ajahn Thong, explained, “The wise person is neither man nor woman. When someone lights a light in

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<sup>9</sup> For example, John Paul II’s 2002 Letter to Lubich expresses appreciation for the Focolare’s “promotion of communion through the quest and practice of dialogue.” Similarly, upon awarding Lubich the 1996 UNESCO Prize for Peace Education, President of the International Jury Paul Smoker noted: “In an age where ethnic and religious differences too often lead to violent conflict, the spread of the Focolari [sic] Movement has also contributed to a constructive dialogue and creative interchange between peoples of different cultural backgrounds and religious faiths, a dialogue very much in harmony with the mission of UNESCO” (Smoker, 1996, p. 7).

the darkness, one does not ask if the one who lit it was a man or a woman. Chiara is here to give us the light she has experienced” (Coda, 1997a, p. 57).

The citation for the 2001 Defender of Peace Prize presented by two prestigious Hindu-Gandhian institutions in India, warmly acknowledged how her use of “the most powerful human force of love and a strong faith in the unity of all humankind as espoused in the teachings of Jesus Christ” has enabled her “to play a tireless role in sowing the seeds of peace and love among all peoples.”

For Chiara, inter-religious dialogue is much more than learning how to be kind, tolerant, and appreciative of religious difference. At a November 2000 gathering of 5,000 Christians and Muslims in Washington DC, as she highlighted the parallel teachings on love in the Qur’an and the Gospels, she encouraged the participants, “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.” At the same gathering, the leader of the American Society of Muslims, Imam Warith Dean Mohammed responded to Chiara’s address, giving an inkling of the depths of this communion: “I read in the Bible when Jesus Christ, peace be upon him, invited his followers to wash each other’s feet, and I think that’s just what we are doing. We are washing each other’s feet”<sup>10</sup> (A Spirituality of Unity, 2000, 2001).

Perhaps one of the most extraordinary aspects of Chiara’s life is her capacity to inspire grassroots commitment to continued development of the dialogue. These gatherings are not one time events, but part of an ongoing relationship. Christians continue to gather with Hindus, Buddhists, Muslims and Jews, to deepen reciprocal understanding and respect. In the awareness of being part of one human family, they strengthen their common commitment to work together

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<sup>10</sup> Coda 1997b recounts the initial 1997 encounter between Chiara Lubich and W. D. Mohammed in the Masjid Malcom Shabbazz Mosque, Harlem, New York (pp. 13-23).



for a world of peace and unity.<sup>11</sup> For example, throughout the United States, periodic “Encounters in the Spirit of Universal Brotherhood” continue the dialogue between the people of the American Society of Muslims and those of the Focolare communities in many different cities<sup>12</sup> (Silvi, 2001, p. 10).

**The “Abba School”: From Practice to Theory**

After close to 60 years of living the spirituality, the Focolare’s interdisciplinary study center, the “Abba School” draws from Chiara’s writings a “theory” with vast implications not only for theology and philosophy, but for all the social sciences, and for every discipline.

Theologian Jesus Castellano, president of the Carmelite University in Rome and a member of the Abba School, has described the move from practice to theory. He wrote: “The experience of such a life that impels us to live for one another, ‘making ourselves one’ with our neighbor, raises our life to a continual and wonderful supernatural level, to a height where love is the supreme law, and the primary and indispensable condition of all other actions. By living in God, by living God’s own life, we discover how God sees and wants things to be” (Castellano, 1985, p. 11).

To give just one example, the center has been studying the implications of Chiara’s description of the Trinity as a model for human relationships. She writes, “The life we must try

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<sup>11</sup> News of Focolare community gatherings is reported in the 35 editions of the Focolare Movement magazine, published in 20 different languages. The North American version, Living City ([www.livingcitymagazine.com](http://www.livingcitymagazine.com)) covers both local and international developments. The Italian version, Città Nuova ([www.cittanuova.it](http://www.cittanuova.it)), also covers both local and international inter-religious dialogue events. For a sampling, of recent events, Silvi 1998a, Zanzucchi 1999 and Pozzi 2003 summarize progress in Muslim-Christian dialogue; Poirier 1998 and Zanzucchi, 2000a describe local meetings between Jews and Christians; Zanzucchi, 2000b, gives a collage of recent progress in inter-religious dialogue (p. 30-31); Ciardi, 2002, describes progress in dialogue with Buddhists in Thailand (p. 36-39). In the United States, the Focolare’s Center for Education in Dialogue coordinates many of the local events. Silvi 1998b, Ferrazzi 2000 and Ferrazzi 2003 describe the history of the Center’s foundation and recent events.

<sup>12</sup> For additional discussion and analysis, Borelli also describes the positive relationship between the American Muslim Society and the Focolare Movement, and the ongoing dialogue in the United States.

to imitate is the life of the Holy Trinity, by loving each other, with the grace of God, in the way the persons of the Holy Trinity love one another”<sup>13</sup> (Povilus, 1992, pp. 65-66).

What are the implications? In contrast to theories that see what is not the self as a limit or a threat to affirming one’s integrity, Chiara defines human fulfillment in the light of the life of the Trinity, where the essence of love is to be a total gift of self. As theologian David Schindler summarized: “[for Chiara] the fullness of each person in the Trinity coincides with the “self-emptying” entailed in being *wholly for the other*” (Schindler, 2002, p. 8).

Chiara herself describes, “There are three Persons in the most holy Trinity, and yet they are One because Love *is not* and *is* at the same time. In the relationship of the three divine Persons, each one, being Love, *is* completely by *not being*, each one mutually indwelling in an eternal self-giving” (Lubich, 2002a, p. 34).

Where does she look for the model of a life of Trinitarian love? Jesus, on the cross, annulled, reduced to nothing, who cries out, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me” (Mt 27:46) – and who then re-abandons himself to the Father, “Into your hands I commend my spirit” (Lk 23:46). As Chiara explains, Jesus Forsaken shows us “that I am myself not when I close myself off from the other, but when I give myself, when out of love I am lost in the other” (Lubich, 2002a, p. 33).

From the initial work of the Abba School, one intuits the enormous implications for every discipline of just this one idea for every discipline. It would be enough to consider the current paralysis in many of the reigning legal and economic theories where “freedom” is defined as affirmation of the autonomous self; and where we throw up our hands in front of the knot of

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<sup>13</sup> As Coda 2002 notes, until recently Catholic theology on the Trinity has emphasized its pattern found in the individual soul rather than in inter-personal relationships (pp. 219-248). Caso (2003) discusses Thomas Aquinas’s description of the “eternal law” as the law of the life of God’s own being, but notes that it does not explicate its Trinitarian character (pp. 69-82).

incommensurable values. What would happen if the definition of freedom were to be re-cast within the context of the human fulfillment that emerges from living in Trinitarian relationships of reciprocal gift? Everything changes.

**Conclusion**

Considering all that has developed over the years, in a sense, Chiara is not surprised. She notes, with simplicity: “the plans for a work of God are in heaven, like a musical score, which is then played on earth” (Lubich 2000a). Her experience of unlimited love has been not so much to “harness” it, but to leave room for that love to “harness” her – and then, taken into the very life of God, to witness how that it can transform not only her own interior life, but every relationship – and with this, the promise of transforming the entire social fabric.

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