

The Society for Ecumenical Studies

The Focolare Movement And Ecumenism

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First of all, we would like to say how delighted we are to have the opportunity to be with you this evening. Paul McPartlan invited us to come and say something about the Focolare. Maybe some of you have heard of the Focolare Movement; others have never heard anything about it at all. It's an ecclesial movement, which has great relevance for ecumenism and we hope to explain a little about it now. I'll start by giving a general overview; Pat will then tell you of the origins and development of what has been described as a communitarian, ecumenical spirituality; then I'll say something more specifically about ecumenism, inter-religious dialogue and the overall effects of the Movement. We then hope you'll ask all the questions that may come to your mind as we're speaking!

Overview

The Focolare Movement began in Trent, northern Italy, during the Second World War. However, nobody ever set out to 'start a movement'. Its aim is to contribute towards the fulfilment of Jesus' prayer, "Father, may they all be one" (Jn. 17:11-21). It is first and foremost a spiritual movement, a charism of the Holy Spirit, and this - of course - has to have practical consequences. Thus, over its fifty-five years, the Focolare has given life to structures and actions, which are of value to the whole Church.

Literally, Focolare means "hearth", "fireside" - and it carries all the connotations of family, home, warmth, belonging... It's a nickname, which was given to the initial group in Trent and has 'stuck' ever since. Apparently at the beginning, the bishop of Trent, Carlo Ferrari, questioned the group of young girls about what they were doing. They told him that they simply wanted to live as Christians. He retorted 'I

can't write to the Pope and say that I've got Christians in my diocese! You must have a name - what do you call yourselves?' They replied that people referred to them collectively as the 'Focolare'. Bishop Ferrari decided that should be their name. But the official name of the Movement is *Opera di Maria*.

There are about 110,000 committed members and approximately 20 million who are in touch through the Movement's outreach. The Focolare is now present in over 190 countries of the world. Although it is most diffused within the Catholic Church, the Movement is made up of people from all the Christian denominations and from the major world religions, as well as many people of good will who have no specific religious belief.

Widespread use is made of modern means of communication. To give you two examples: last year in Rome the 12-16 year olds organised an international event, the "Supercongress". Through drama, personal experiences and songs, its aim was to show the revolution brought about by living the Beatitudes. There were 9,000 teenagers actually present. It was televised for 3 hours by 50 national TV networks and sent throughout the world by 32 satellites. The second example: every month 65 cities all over the world are linked up for a telephone conference call. Each time Chiara Lubich, the foundress of the Focolare, prepares a spiritual thought for everyone to put into practice and news is shared. The thought and the news are then circulated amongst everyone.

Chiara Lubich is officially the president of the Movement. She is now 78. In 1985 she asked Pope John Paul II whether the president should always be a woman. He answered, 'Yes'; and spoke of how he saw the Movement as ecumenical and as an indication of the Marian profile in the Church.

Pope John XXIII signed the first approval of the Movement's statutes in 1963. The latest was confirmed by a decree of the Pontifical Council of the Laity in 1990. The premise to the statutes is the commitment to mutual love, to strive to live in unity with the presence of Christ amongst us.

In the statutes it has been possible to have Catholic recognition of the vows of the non-Catholics who are committed within the Movement. (I myself am an Anglican). In Germany there is a Muslim boy who lives in one of the community houses, in Italy a Muslim girl feels called to give her life to God in the life of the Focolare and in Thailand there is a Buddhist boy who shares a house with Catholics, living the consecrated, celibate life. Those of other faiths participate in everything as far as their consciences suggest, being faithful to their own religion and working for unity within their own religious communities.

Over the last two years Chiara has been awarded five honorary degrees and doctorates from universities in different parts of the world - in theology, philosophy, communications, social sciences and arts. Later this year she is receiving one in psychology.

In 1996 she was awarded the UNESCO Peace Prize in Paris and, following on from that, in May last year she was invited to speak to an assembly of the United Nations in New York and to answer their questions on how to bring about unity in the world.

The origins and development of a communitarian, ecumenical spirituality

The growth of the Focolare Movement is out of proportion to any one person or people who might have been instruments. It's a work of God. Its secret lies in a gift from the Holy Spirit, in a collective, Gospel-based spirituality, which has come to be referred to as the *spirituality of unity*, one which generates a new style of life.

Because of this style of life, men and women of almost every nationality, wherever they may be, are slowly but surely trying to be seeds of a new people, of a more united world, a world at peace, one committed especially to those who are the weakest, the poorest.

Because of this spirituality, we feel the obligation to offer our contribution everywhere throughout the world, so as to give a spiritual boost to the efforts being made in this direction.

It has a distinct community dimension; it is not something to be lived alone, but with others, together. Although it is inspired by Christian principles, it also emphasises parallel values in other faiths and cultures.

In order to describe the Movement, it helps to say something about its history. As we said before, there was never any plan to start anything; the plan was in heaven. It was like this at the beginning and it has always been like this throughout the fifty-five years of the Movement's life.

It was 1943. The war was raging. Trent was immersed in ruins, rubble and death. Chiara Lubich and a few of her friends were in their late teens, early twenties. They describe how one day, when they were sheltering from the bombing in a dark cellar, they started reading a copy of the New Testament which they had with them. By candlelight they read the prayer of Jesus before his death: "Father, may they all be one" (Jn 17:11-21). Although it was not an easy text to understand, they say that those words seemed to light up one by one and put into their hearts the conviction that they were born for that page of the Gospel.

On the feast of Christ the King they gathered around an altar and prayed to Jesus, "You know how to bring about unity. Here we are. If you want to, use us." The liturgy of the day, with the words from the second psalm, impressed them: "Ask of me, and I shall give you the nations as your inheritance, the ends of the earth as your dominion" (Ps.2: 8). So they asked, knowing that God is all-powerful.

The bombing continued and destroyed the people or things that had been the goals, the ideals of the young girls' hearts. One dreamed of having a beautiful home; her house was reduced to rubble. Another was waiting to get married; her fiancé never returned from the front. Chiara's aim had been to study; the war meant she couldn't go to university.

Obviously, all this affected them very deeply. They felt that the lesson God was offering them through these circumstances was clear: everything is "vanity of vanities" (Eccl. 1:2). Everything passes away. At the same time, God put a

question in their hearts and, with it, the answer. Is there an ideal that will not die, that no bomb can destroy, to which we can give the whole of ourselves? Yes, was the answer, there is. It is God.

They decided to make God the ideal of their lives. God who, in the midst of war, the fruit of hatred, revealed himself for what he is: Love.

The people of Trent were being evacuated to the valleys. The girls all stayed in Trent. Some stayed because of their work. Chiara stayed above all to look after the Movement that was coming to life. They lived together in a small flat.

Having now found the ideal to live for: God, who is love, they then wondered how they should live for such an ideal. Turning to the Gospels they found the answer: "Not everyone who says to me 'Lord, Lord' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my father in heaven" (Mt. 7: 21). So it was not a matter of feelings or trying to be pious. To do God's will: that was what mattered. The next question, then, was, "What is the will of God?" Throughout all this, they were having to run to the air raid shelters maybe eleven times a day: each time they took a small copy of the Gospels with them; and again it was there they found the answer to their question.

They talk of how the meaning of those words, which they'd heard so many times before, suddenly became very clear, as if illuminated from within. They understood them and felt compelled to put them into practice.

Reading "You shall love your neighbour as yourself" (Mt. 19:19), they asked, "Who is our neighbour? Where is our neighbour?" It was logical: their neighbour was right there beside them. Their neighbour was that old lady who could barely drag herself to the air raid shelter when the alarm sounded. She had to be loved. Therefore, they had to help her by holding her up and taking her to the shelter each time. Their neighbours were also those five children who were terrified, huddled around their mother; they needed to be carried home. "Their neighbour was the sick man confined to his home, who couldn't get to the air raid shelters

and who needed medical treatment. To love him they had to go to his house, get the medicine he needed and take care of him.

Another verse which made a great impact was, "Whatever you did to one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did it to me" (Mt. 25:40). Because of the terrible circumstances of the war, there were countless people who were wounded, in need of clothes and shelter and who were hungry and thirsty. The girls started to make enormous quantities of soup to take to them. Sometimes people would knock at the door of the little flat to ask for food They would be invited in to share what the girls were eating.

When they read "Ask and it will be given to you" (Mt. 7:7; Lk. 11: 19), they began asking on behalf of the poor, and each time they received: bread, powdered milk, jam, firewood, clothes. There is one story which is typical of the 'divine adventure' they were living: One day a man who had no shoes asked one of the girls to find him a pair - size 12. She went into a church and prayed: "Give me a pair of shoes, size 12, for you in that poor man." As she came out of the church, a woman handed her a parcel. She opened it, and there was a pair of shoes, size 12! They read, "Give and gifts will be given to you" (Lk. 6:38) - and so they started giving. Once they gave away the only egg they had and only a couple of hours later were given a dozen.

So they saw that the promises that Jesus had made came true. Therefore, the Gospel was credible, real. This experience made them all the more eager to continue with this new life they had started living. They would tell others about what was happening to them day by day and many were intrigued by these facts, wanting to live the same experience and to follow Jesus. It was as if the words of the apostles - "Christ is risen" - were being echoed in a small way in the streets of Trent; people were saying "Christ is alive!"

The air raid shelters offered little protection: death could have come at any moment. So another pressing question arose: "Was there something God especially wanted them to do, something particularly close to his heart?" If they were going to die, they wanted to be able to put that very thing into practice, at least in their last moments.

They found the answer in Jesus' "new" commandment. "This is my commandment: love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, than to lay down one's life for one's friends" (Jn. 15:12-13). They looked at one another and declared: "I am ready to give my life for you." "And I for you." "And I for you." Every one of them for each of the others.

This solemn promise helped them to do willingly the thousand and one little things that love demands of us every day. Because it was not that they were usually asked to die for one another. But in the meantime they could share everything: worries, joys, sufferings, their few belongings, their spiritual riches.

They noticed that the quality of their lives changed significantly. Someone, very quietly, had come among them: the invisible Brother, who gives confidence, a joy never known before, a new peace, a new fullness of life, and a new way of understanding things - totally unlike any other. It was Jesus, whose words had been fulfilled among them: "For where two or three are gathered together in my name [in my love] there am I in the midst of them" (Mt. 18:20).

He had said, "May they be one in us so that the world may believe" (Jn. 17:21). If there is Christ, in the unity of brothers and sisters, the world around us believes. And this is what happened in Trent. Many people radically changed their way of life; others found the strength to respond to God's call or to be faithful to their decision to live for him.

In just a few months, about five hundred people of all ages and social backgrounds had decided to share this "ideal" of God alone. They put everything they had into common, looking to the first Christian communities as their example. They discovered the words of the Gospel as unique, fascinating, clear-cut, and capable of being translated into life. By living them, everything changed: their relationship with God, with their neighbours, with their enemies.

The Gospel put all values into their proper perspective and enabled people to put aside everything, even father or mother, brother or sisters, even their own jobs, in order to put God first in their lives. But the Gospel also promised the hundredfold in

this life and eternal life as well. It was a Gospel message unlike anything they had ever known before. It was not a matter of pious attitudes, or belief by force of habit, or a religion where God was up in the clouds somewhere, inaccessible. They realised that that's not the religion Jesus was talking about. For the little they gave to God, he showered them with gifts. Each one responded to God individually and then found themselves surrounded by a hundred mothers, a hundred fathers, a hundred brothers and sisters, and all kinds of material things to be able to give to those who have nothing. They saw that there is no human situation to which there is not an explicit or implicit answer in Scripture. The growing number of people caught up in this new life immersed themselves in Scripture, finding nourishment and a way of continuous re-evangelisation.

The war ended. People of the Movement were able to travel to other parts of Italy to study, work, and to take this life to others. In fact, the 'focolarini' as they were called, were invited to many cities and towns to talk about what they had witnessed. Throughout Italy, in a quiet way. Focolare communities grew up along the lines of the first one in Trent.

They experienced joy, discoveries, graces and conquests. And these certainly are *one* aspect of Gospel life. But right from the start, they also understood that everything had *another* side to it, that the tree has its roots: the Gospel embraces you with love, but it also demands everything of you. "Unless the grain of wheat falls to the earth and dies," Jesus says, "it remains only a single grain; but if it dies, it yields a rich harvest" (Mt. 12:24). This meant dying to themselves. "Every branch that bears fruit, the Father prunes to make it bear even more" (Jn. 15:2). Pruning: more suffering. The Focolare Movement has experienced all kinds of difficulties, but with the grace of God, since the beginning suffering has been seen as the chance to make our own the words of St Paul: "I know only Christ and him crucified" (cf. 1 Cor. 2:2). Loving Christ crucified is another cornerstone of this spirituality.

Over the years the Movement has developed according to a precise plan of God, unknown to us but revealed little by little. Various vocations have emerged within the Movement - for adults, young people, lay people and priests, each totally

committed in its own way. These people are the backbone of the Focolare Movement. Around them, broader movements have developed especially for families, for youth, for those involved in the various fields of human endeavour and in the life of the Church.

After fifteen years the Focolare was present all over Europe. From 1958 onwards it spread to the other continents. The spread of the Movement can be put down to two factors: the unity amongst those trying to live with the presence of Jesus in their midst and the desire to always be in the fullest unity with the Church hierarchy.

1960 marked a significant milestone for the Movement. Its spirit began to penetrate the lives of non-Catholic Christians. Chiara Lubich was invited to Germany to speak to a group of Lutheran sisters, the Darmstadt sisters. The reaction of some Lutheran ministers present was one of surprise: "Catholics living the Gospel!" "They were impressed not only because the Movement spoke of the Gospel, but also because it wanted to *live* the Gospel. They were keen for the Focolare experience to be shared within the Lutheran world. Groups of Lutherans started to come to Focolare meetings in Rome almost every year. A warm, open relationship developed because it was based on love and on always being straightforward and truthful. Centuries of prejudices started to crumble.

At the inauguration of the Focolare ecumenical centre near Augsburg in 1968, where Catholics and Lutherans live and pray together, Cardinal Bea spoke of how the more Christians of every denomination live the Gospel in a deep way, the closer we will come to one another because we will become more like Christ.

Then, also in the early sixties, three Anglican clergy found themselves by chance at a Focolare meeting of Catholics and Lutherans. The warm atmosphere in which these Christians, long separated from one another, recognised one another as brothers and sisters through baptism touched them. They started encouraging Anglicans to meet the Focolare. (In 1963 the first Focolare house had been opened in Liverpool with the blessing of the then Archbishop Heenan.)

It was through Canon Bernard Pawley, who was an Anglican observer at Vatican II, that Chiara was invited to Lambeth Palace in 1966 to meet Dr Ramsey. He said that he could see "the hand of God" in the Movement. His successors, Archbishops Coggan, Runcie, and now George Carey, have all become friends of the Focolare.

The Movement then started to have contacts within the Presbyterian and Baptist Churches and the Reformed Churches of Switzerland and Holland. In Australia, and North and South America this life is present in many Christian denominations.

In June 1967, the Ecumenical Patriarch Athenagoras I, who wanted to know about the Movement in depth, invited Chiara to Istanbul. He said he wanted to be "a simple focolarino". He asked to have a Focolare house in Istanbul. Through him the Movement was introduced to, and has developed among, the Orthodox in the East. Contacts have continued with his successors, Demetrios I and now with His Holiness Bartholomew I.

Since the 1960s, fifty-five international ecumenical meetings have taken place in Rome. Ecumenical schools are held in different parts of the world, to study the different Churches in order to be able to understand one another better.

For the last twenty-one years, meetings have been held for Catholic bishops who are interested in the Focolare spirituality. At some of these meetings there have been a hundred participants. In 1995 they had a Papal audience in which the Pope spoke to them about episcopal collegiality and of their calling to an ecclesiology of communion.

Since 1982 there have also been meetings for leaders of different Churches. Last November there were thirty bishops and Church leaders present at this meeting, representing the Orthodox, Syro-Orthodox, Anglican, Lutheran, Catholic and Disciples of Christ Churches. They too had a Papal audience in the Vatican. During the same meeting, Cardinal Cassidy (President of the Pontifical Council for Christian Unity) spent some time with them. They spoke to him of what the

Movement brings about in their different Churches and of how it helps Christian unity.

Specific ecumenical episodes in the United Kingdom

The key points of the Focolare life, which are so vital for ecumenism are:

1. An emphasis upon mutual love: the need for Christianity to be invaded by a torrent of love;
2. The presence of Jesus in our midst, through whom we enter into the One Church, and who lessens the pain of waiting for the day when we will all share together in his presence in the Eucharist;
3. An awareness that our divisions are a reflection of *the* division, *the* separation that Jesus experienced in his abandonment, and that it will be through our love for him in and through the difficulties that the ecumenical journey will go ahead.

So I'd like to mention three specifically 'ecumenical' episodes for those of us in England.

The first is to do with the ordination of women. For Anglicans within the Movement, the decision of the Church of England to ordain women presented a chance to live this ideal of unity as never before. Some were delighted, others were horrified. Forty of us met to affirm our unity, despite our differences of opinion. Together we wrote a letter to Dr Carey and the bishops who were meeting in Manchester, assuring them of our commitment to keep the vision of mutual love alive at the heart of our Church. We heard from one of the bishops present that our letter was read out to them all, significant for the fact that it came from people of both persuasions.

The second particular event occurred at our week long, holiday-style retreat last year. It's known as a 'Mariapolis' ('City of Mary' - because it seeks to generate the presence of Jesus through mutual love, in order to be able to give him to the

world, as Mary did.) Always, during our gatherings, Catholics and Anglicans separate for the Eucharist every day. Last year, the large number of people present from the Free Churches felt the time had come for them to have their own service. At one point during our Eucharist, I was aware of the singing and prayers of the other two groups. There were three different acts of worship going on in the same building at the same time and this seemed very symbolic; we were united in God but expressing our love for him in different ways.

Last June, Chiara was one of the speakers at the Second Ecumenical Assembly held in Graz. The idea that she launched there first came to her when she was in London in November 1996. This is the third episode. Here, she met with two thousand of us from all over the United Kingdom and Ireland to answer our questions on the Christian life. At the end she said that looking at all of us there together was to see one people united in Christ. Yes, we were Anglicans, Catholics, Orthodox, United Reformed, Baptists and Methodists, but our unity in Christ was stronger than anything that could divide us. Chiara said that she'd understood something new; she'd seen the need for a fourth dialogue within ecumenism. She then spoke about the dialogue of charity, the dialogue of prayer and the theological dialogue. All of these are essential but, she said, there is also a need for the dialogue of *life*, the dialogue of the *people*. She proposed that we should live this dialogue - without denying the others - growing as a 'people', the people of Christ, living in such a way that one day the theological barriers will have to fall. This we felt was our missionary mandate! That occasion in London, which directly related to us in the United Kingdom and Ireland, has had repercussions for the Movement everywhere.

Inter-religious dialogue and the effects of the Movement

As was said at the beginning, the Movement's outreach has meant that there are many contacts with people of other world religions. (In fact, in 1994 Chiara was nominated as honorary president of the World Conference on Religions and Peace.)

To give you two recent examples of our involvement with other religions:

First, In January 1997 Chiara went to Thailand. Some Buddhist monks had invited her to Chang Mai, in the northern part of the country, to speak in a Buddhist university to students and lecturers and, in a temple to Buddhist monks, nuns and lay people. This was something quite unusual, even more so when you realise that she'd been asked to speak about her spiritual experience, the Buddhist monks being fully aware that Chiara was a Christian.

This had come about because a Buddhist teacher and one of his disciples had met members of the Movement in Asia. They then wanted to visit one of the Movement's little towns, called Loppiano, which is near Florence. Here, as in the other 'little towns' of the Movement, the inhabitants aim to live in a way which shows how society could be if everyone lived the law of the New Commandment. Loppiano attracts thousands of visitors every year. The two monks subsequently went to Italy and spent some time in Loppiano.

They were deeply moved by the love and the unity they found there. One of them spoke of his surprise when he found that someone had cleaned his muddy shoes and ironed his robe; and of the fact that because he was used to a hot climate the heating was turned up and lots of blankets were provided. He asked those he was staying with why they did all these things. "Because you are our neighbour to be loved", was the answer. He found it overwhelming. He spoke of the things he'd understood about Christianity. The two monks were so keen to share this experience with their fellow Buddhists that they invited Chiara to Thailand, precisely to speak about love and unity (the characteristics of Christianity). The visit to Thailand opened the way for a mutually enriching, profound dialogue, which is continuing.

The second example. Having met our movement, the founder of a large Muslim movement of two million Afro-Americans, Imam W.D. Mohammed, successor of Malcolm X, asked Chiara to speak to three thousand of his adherents. So, last May she went to a mosque in Harlem, New York and shared her experience of unity. The Muslims were enchanted by 'the art of loving', a strategy which she proposed for Christians and Muslims alike, and now the members of the Muslim movement want to work with the Focolare towards building a new, more united

world. This rapidly growing unity between black and white, Muslim and Christian, is beginning to make quite an impact in the United States.

Very many people of no religious affiliation at all are also involved in the Focolare. These people share the values that the Movement stands for - solidarity, peace, unity, human rights, freedom, life - and want to work together to promote these values. So, they work alongside everyone else in our social projects, in particular for one known as "the economy of communion". This is a venture which sets up businesses in which the profits are divided into three: a third goes back into the business; a third goes to the poor; and a third goes towards building up structures for forming 'new' people, with the 'new', Christian mentality. There are now several hundred of these businesses.

What effects does the Movement have?

The fruits are immense. First of all, and it's always been like this, radical changes of life take place. To express it in religious terms, there are countless conversions to God, or at least towards good. As a result, it helps to form members of society who are conscious of their duties and responsibilities. Starting with the youngest, teenagers show a great maturity. They become leaders in religious and social actions; they know how to face suffering; they are happy to be 'different' because they know that although they are in the world, they are not of the world; they are not overwhelmed by the negative influences that the world offers.

The Movement's young people aim high; they prepare themselves seriously for their future and commit themselves to the Church and society.

Working for the earthly city and building it, the members of the Movement feel that they are co-creators with God.

Families, which have been broken by separation and divorce, are reunited. Many adopt children.

Every aspect of society is embraced by this collective spirituality, from the world of economy and work, to that of politics and ethics, health, education, art, and so on.

In the ecclesiastical world, vocations are increasing. Groups of priests and the seminaries living in this way provide centres that witness to the Gospel, thus making an enormous contribution to building up the heavenly city, as co-redeemers with Christ.

The men and women religious involved in the Movement become more truly brothers and sisters and see the renewal of their communities; they rediscover their founders and their rules; they emphasise unity with their superiors; new vocations are born.

To conclude: that which the Focolare Movement feels called to firstly live and then offer is a Christian lifestyle that unites. Thank you for your unity this evening!