

# The Focolare Movement experience of Interreligious Dialogue in Asia

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## 1. Introduction

Interreligious dialogue is one of the most debated subjects in the Christian world today, especially in the Catholic Church. Christianity is called to meet the challenge represented by a general situation, where the world has shrunk into a *global village* and migratory fluxes have redesigned the socio-geographical image of the planet. Once again, the great challenge today is the '*other*', the '*different*', a chapter, which, less than a century ago, as many times in the past, was considered to be closed.<sup>1</sup>

Nevertheless it is a challenge that had been lingering for so long over the Asian<sup>2</sup> continent where Christianity had remained, as it appears today, almost as an unwanted guest. *Ecclesia in Asia* clearly affirms it: "*it is truly a mystery why the Saviour of the world, born in Asia, has, so far, remained largely unknown to the peoples of Asia.*" (EA 2) In this present context '*dialogue*' has become a key-word, at times controversial, but it cannot be disregarded.

## 2. Dialogue in the Church: Magisterium, theological reflection and charisms

The Church grasped the happenings of the last half century ahead of time, before the landslide of events which led to the present situation. The Second Vatican Council played a prophetic role in opening wide the Catholic world towards other cultures and religions. *Nostra Aetate* is a clear evidence of this prophecy, but all other leading documents<sup>3</sup> confirmed the same line. Subsequent encyclicals or exhortation letters by the Popes<sup>4</sup> have further developed the idea of dialogue, trying to find the right balance between dialogue and evangelising mission. The subject provoked much discussion and complex discernment processes and it is far from being over.

What is striking is the fact that the Church's position, as far as *dialogue* goes, has matured along with two dimensions which cannot be downplayed: a theological reflection and a charismatic experience.<sup>5</sup>

It is well known that the first one started before the Council with theologians like De Lubac and Rahner, whose perspectives on ecclesiology and Christology led to a different approach to people of other faiths. It continued after the Council, creating a wide-spread and, at times, controversial debate. This called for necessary clarifications, but in the end it contributed to start a process of opening the horizons towards a more inclusive approach. The stressing is no longer on the impossibility of finding salvation outside the Church, but rather in proposing

with a '*respectful announcement*', as Paul VI and John Paul II often reminded, the way God announced in and through Christ to men of all races, cultures and religions.

Magisterium and theology have been progressively enriched and enhanced by what we can call the *charismatic dimension* of the Church<sup>6</sup>. In fact, several new charisms born in the last half a century, carry a strong capacity for an interreligious approach.<sup>7</sup> This study deals with the approach and the experience of dialogue the Focolare had in Asia in the last thirty years.

### **2.1 The Focolare Movement and dialogue with other religions**

When the Focolare was born, Chiara Lubich, its foundress, little knew that she would be called one day to meet faithful of other religions. She had only one great desire, which was twofold: to love God and to have Him loved by as many people as possible. In a nutshell, this simple dream encapsulated a different perspective of humanity, which she expressed effectively way back in the late '40's.

*"We must always fix our gaze on the one Father of many children. Then look at all persons as children of our one Father. With our thoughts and the affections of our heart we must always go beyond every limit imposed by a merely human life and tend constantly, and because of an acquired habit, to universal brotherhood in one Father: God."*

We need to draw our attention to three elements in this text: the same one Father for the whole of humanity, the fact that, as a consequence, we are all brothers and sisters and, finally, that we have to tend to universal brotherhood. Here is the summary of the dialogical approach of the charism of communion, as Chiara liked to call the spirituality of the Focolare. To confirm the strong mutual reference between the magisterial voice and the charismatic dimension of the Church on this point, it may be significant to underline that these three elements are key points of *Nostra Aetate*.

*"One is the community of all peoples, one their origin, for God made the whole human race to live over the face of the earth.(1) One also is their final goal, God. His providence, His manifestations of goodness, His saving design extend to all men,(2) until that time when the elect will be united in the Holy City, (...)" (NA 1)*

It may be striking to note that Chiara, a young unknown school teacher, wrote these few lines in 1947, while *NA* was written by the Council fathers in 1964. In both, alike, we can see the powerful hand of the same Spirit at work. The approach of the Focolare to interreligious dialogue since the beginning has been an experiential one, but it did not remain restricted to the so-called dialogue of life. It went on to deal with collaboration with other religions at the social level, common

commitment to peace building and includes the effort to extend dialogue to the intellectual and theological sphere.

## **2.2 Historical unfolding.**

In examining how interreligious dialogue originated in the experience of the Focolare Movement,<sup>8</sup> two events emerge as instrumental to initiate the process.

### **2.2.1 A prophetic intuition**

In 1966, Chiara was in Cameroun, where since a couple of years a few doctors of the Movement had started working<sup>9</sup>. While paying a visit to them, she was warmly welcomed by the Bangwa tribe who organised a full reception in an open space in the forest not far from the local king's (Fon) palace<sup>10</sup>. Later she related.

*"There was a great red sun which broke through the clouds at sunset. It was illuminating everybody in a marvellous unity. (...) the sun of the ideal of unity embraced the whole tribe. It came to my mind that God brought us to life so that we could care for those the Church cannot reach out to."*

### **2.2.2 London 1977: the Templeton Award, a founding event**

A second event, which represented the foundation of the interreligious dialogue in the Focolare, took place some ten years later. The occasion was the *Templeton Award*, which was bestowed on Chiara in 1977, at the time when she was not yet a world figure<sup>11</sup>.

In the Guildhall in London she found herself in front of an audience which was amazingly varied as far as races, religions and cultures were concerned. After completing her acceptance speech, she had the profound impression that all differences disappeared and had the feeling that Jesus' dream - *"That all may be one"* - was a reality. Probably - this was the answer she found - all those who were present, though followers of different religions, had faith in Him and, as a consequence, His presence enveloped everyone.<sup>12</sup> On the way out of the hall the first ones who came forward to greet her were Sikhs, Buddhists, Hindus and Muslims. It was clear that the Focolare had to open up to followers of all faiths.

### **2.2.3 The first contacts with Mahayana Buddhism**

The London event represented a turning point for the whole movement and its members, wherever they were in the world, started meeting with faithful of different religious traditions. The youth of the *Rissho Kosei-kai*, a lay Buddhist organisation from Japan, came in contact with the youth of the Focolare. The echo of their meeting reached the founder Nikkyo Niwano<sup>13</sup>. Between Niwano and Lubich a great mutual understanding flourished. He invited her to Tokyo to address thousand of Buddhists in the large Sacred Hall of the *Rissho Kosei-kai*. It was 28th December 1981. On that occasion she noted down in her diary:

*"I never spoke in that way. It was as if God were present. The audience was a well prepared ground and the seed went deep down. I announced Jesus and the Holy Trinity! Everything was welcomed as if those people were just waiting to hear all those things. It was a unique experience to repeat to those people Jesus' words, which they never heard before: "All your hair are counted"<sup>14</sup>, "Give and you will receive"<sup>15</sup>, "Ask and you will get back in return"<sup>16</sup>!"<sup>17</sup>.*

Relationship with the Buddhists of *Rissho Kosei-kai* grew in Japan, where members of the two Movements started meeting regularly, and in other parts of the world, whenever they met for conferences and peace building initiatives. Thanks to this, a fruitful collaboration started also with the *World Conference for Religions and Peace*<sup>18</sup> (WCRP). Through this cooperation, as years went by, many other rapports with *Mahayana* Buddhists were built.

Sharing common ethical and religious principles, lived with commitment and coherence, led teenagers from several religions and different parts of the world to start working together, thanks to the initiative of the *Myochikai*, another Buddhist organisation committed to youth formation to peace. A significant rapport was also established with *Tendai Shu*, the most ancient Japanese Buddhist tradition, with the blessing and the encouragement of his leader, the Ven. Etai Yamada.<sup>19</sup>

#### **2.2.4 Developments with Therawada Buddhism**

Relationship with Buddhism could not be limited to *Mahayana* tradition, it had to also involve the *Therawada* stream present in South-East Asia. In Thailand several monks came in contact with the Focolare Movement during the 80's and 90's. A decisive role was the one played by Phra Thonrattana Thavorn, a Thai monk.<sup>20</sup> After a short visit to Rome where he could meet Chiara and have an audience with Pope John Paul II, the Thai monk returned to Italy the following year to spend some months in the small town of Loppiano<sup>21</sup>. He was deeply impressed by communion and harmony among the inhabitants of the small town and, once he returned to Thailand, he became the mouthpiece of the Focolare among monks and Buddhist students. He finally worked to have Chiara Lubich invited to his country by the Great Master, Ajan Thong.

In January 1997, Chiara travelled to Thailand where she spoke to 800 students of the *Buddhist Mahajularacha University* and to 100 monks e 70 nuns of the *Wat Rampoeng Temple*, a famous centre for *Vipassana* meditation. In the course of the last ten years the relationship with *Therawada* Buddhist monks developed and deepened and several social and welfare projects have been undertaken in Thailand as a collaboration between Christians and Buddhists.

#### **2.2.5 Meeting the Hindus: a dialogue of hearts**

In India, after several years of very fruitful dialogue at the personal level, Chiara Lubich's visit in January 2001 proved a turning point. *Sarvodaya Movement* for

Tamil Nadu, *Shanti Ashram* and *Bharatya Vidhya Bhavan* decided to honour her with the *Defender of Peace 2000 Award*. On that occasion she addressed 700 people (mainly Hindus) in Coimbatore. While delivering the thanksgiving address, Dr. Markandan, former Vice-Chancellor of *Gandhigram Rural University*, publicly asked the Movement to initiate a dialogue between Hindus and Catholics in India. His invitation was powerfully backed by Mr. Krishnaraj Vanavarayar, Chairman of the local centre of *Bharatya Vidhya Bhavan*, by Dr. Minoti Aram and Dr. Vinu Aram of the Shanti Ashram.

A few days later Chiara Lubich was invited to address a similar crowd at the *Somaiya College* in Mumbai. Here she came into close contact with Dr. Kala Acharya and Dr. K.A. Somaiya, respectively the head and the sponsor of the *Somaya Sanskriti Peetam*, an Institute which fosters dialogue between Hindus and Christians. As immediate results, fruitful cooperation started both with Gandhian organisations in the south and the academic world in Mumbai.

Dialogue between the Focolare Movement and Gandhians took off on exploring respective spiritual foundations, in order to then launch together joint actions and projects. More than ten Round Tables were organized by Focolare and Sarvodaya. They offered the opportunity of going right to the roots of the spiritualities lived by Christians and Gandhian Hindus. Starting from God as our Father and passing through the commandment of love, unity, the mystery of suffering, and the commitment in doing God's will, there was a great effort in going to one's respective roots at the spiritual level. Common riches were discovered with a sense of gratitude to God for such gifts to mankind.

Other aspects progressively came to the fore.

Joint actions and projects were launched: a *Balashanti*<sup>22</sup> for village children, an initiative for village sanitation, but also *Hiroshima Day* for peace awareness among the youth, a week for *Artists in Unity* and we cannot forget the youth exchange programme which is contributing in a small but significant way to peace building and national integration between youth of different backgrounds (Christian and Hindu, urban and rural, rich and poor, English and Tamil speaking).

Soon this experience of dialogue and harmony building extended to other Gandhian organisations. What came into evidence, among the Hindu Gandhians, has been the common commitment to peace building and conflict resolutions at different levels, the constant effort in applying Gandhi's idea to every day life and the desire to make it relevant to younger generation. At the same time, the Gandhian spirit has been powerfully inspirational for the Catholic partners in dialogue and both sides gained tremendously from these past ten years of mutual collaboration.

On the other hand, the contacts with Hindu scholars took a more intellectual dimension, but the experience of theological and academic encounters was rooted into a deep spiritual experience, as Prof. Kala Acharya confirmed:

*"We didn't aim at having an academic exercise. It was all together a spiritual experience. (...) For any other seminar, people will speak about the topic, they discuss and debate. We together underwent a common experience."*

In this spirit several symposia and conferences were held in India and in Rome with the participation of scholars from *Bharatya Vidhya Bhavan*, *Somaiya Sanskriti Peetham*, *Mumbai University*, *Goa University*, *Delhi University* and *Jawaharlal Nehru University* (JNU) and from the *Focolare Abba School*<sup>23</sup>. Different were the topics which led to a mutual acquaintance.<sup>24</sup>

### **2.3 A methodology of dialogue**

As mentioned earlier, the experience of dialogue in the perspective of the spirituality of communion has a strong, though not exclusive, experiential basis. The members of the Movement are committed, with all human limitations and failures, to live the Gospel in the daily life with a special attention to the commandment of love. We can pinpoint these two as basic elements of the methodology of dialogue: the life of scripture and the commitment to love.

#### **2.3.1 Living the Scriptures**

Every month members of the Focolare select a sentence<sup>25</sup> from one of the Sundays liturgy and try to put it into practice during the whole month. Meetings of the different groups, then, revolve around sharing the attempts, with successes and failures, in the venture of living the scripture. This effort had a two-fold consequence: a re-evangelizing effect at the personal level, as far as Christian life is concerned, and attracts the attention of other people, especially faithful of other religions (whenever lived in countries where Christians are a minority).

At times they showed interest in trying to do the same, taking inspiration from their respective Holy Books. This was the way members of the Movement came in contact with Muslims in Algeria and in the Maghreb region<sup>26</sup>. But also in Asia the same experience carries a significant value.

A Hindu homeopathic doctor from Mumbai relates her own experience of dialogue with Christians, based on the effort of living the respective Holy texts.

*"This experience has helped me to become a better Hindu and to discover my own religion. In the Gita it is written that we have to do our duties "without expecting anything in return", it teaches "selfless love". Nobody thinks that we have to put into practice these beautiful words. The Focolare underlines the necessity of not only reading the Scripture but put it into practice."*

### 2.3.2 The commandment of love and the *Golden Rule*

Moreover, what came progressively into evidence is the great relevance of the element of 'love' for all religious traditions. It may be called differently<sup>27</sup>, but the fact remains that it represents the real '*golden rule*', which all faiths recognize at least as a universal ethical principle. Though every religion has its own formulation, it can be universally recognized in the following words: "*Do to the others what you would like them do unto you*".<sup>28,28</sup>

In the effort to live the dimension of love, a way of living emerged, which can be very well called a *methodology for dialogue*. It is a sort of an art, an *art of loving*. It consists of some points, which are strongly scripture based, not only in the Christian Bible but also in the sacred texts of other faiths<sup>29</sup>.

We have to start from the preliminary consideration, which we have seen in one of Chiara's early writings as well in *Nostra Aetate*: *we all have only one Father*. The commandment of love that we find in all Holy Texts is strongly rooted in a basic truth: God is the Father of us all, irrespective of sex, religion, social statues, age, etc. In the Judaic and Christian tradition it is expressed in the famous sentence: "*God makes the rain fall on the bad and on the good alike*".<sup>30 31</sup>

From this consideration of the fatherhood of God follows, as a consequence, the fact that we are all brothers and sisters and therefore we have to treat each other accordingly. That is why the *command of love is directed towards everyone*. Every brother or sister we meet is a child of God and therefore a potential candidate for our love. People cannot be discriminated against on any ground: social, political, physical and religious. All religious Holy Scriptures help us to go beyond discriminations. Jesus said: "*Each time you did these things to the least of my brothers, you did it to me*".<sup>32 33</sup>

This kind of love has a requirement: *it takes the initiative*.

Love, in fact, is ready to make the first move without waiting to be loved in return, as God does with us. He did not wait for us to love him. Rather, he showed us always and in a thousand ways that he loves us first, regardless of our response. This is what all the great founders of religions teach us with their lives. Jesus exemplified this. It was he who said: "*No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends*".<sup>34 35</sup> And he indeed gave his life.

Moreover this *love wants us to love the other person as we love ourselves*.

It is not easy to see the other as another self and to do for the other what we would do for ourselves. But this is what emerges clearly from Jesus' preaching "*Love your neighbour as yourself*".<sup>36</sup> From this principle flows a norm which, if applied, could by itself provide the greatest impetus towards bringing harmony among individuals and groups, within families as well as states and religions.

What the world would be like if not only individuals, but also peoples, ethnic groups, and states were to practice the Golden Rule! For example, "*Love the other's country as your own.*" "*Love the other religion as you love your own*"!

In practice, *love knows how to make itself one with the person loved*. This means to suffer with whoever is suffering, to rejoice with whoever is rejoicing, to carry the burdens of the others. Therefore, it is a love which is not only words, but concrete facts. The great Christian Apostle, Paul, wrote: "*For the weak I made myself weak. I made myself all things to all in order to save some at any cost*"<sup>37, 38</sup>

Finally, *true love is directed not only to friends, but also to enemies*.<sup>39</sup>

As we can see, Scriptures and the Golden Rule are powerful tools for dialogue as all religions offer powerful inspiration in this regard. The experience of Chiara Lubich and of her followers helped to bring to light many points which can be defined, without any confusion or syncretism, source of common inspiration for a commitment to dialogue and harmony. As a confirmation we can quote an Iranian dentist, mother of a family, who affirms:

*"I often ask myself how I can live a spirit based on the Christian faith if I am a Muslim. The answer is evident. It was proposed to us as a simple, concrete way of loving, which can be lived by any human being, no matter what their religion is, whether they are believers or not. (...) The fact that my family has remained together is thanks to this movement that urges us to forgive always, to love always, to be the first to love without expecting anything in return."*

Finally, there is another aspect of Christian spirituality which has been a strong element of dialogue, especially with Buddhism.

### **2.3.3 Jesus Crucified and Abandoned: key to dialogue**

The deepest motivation of dialogue finds its roots in the *kenotic* dimension of Christ, which represents a key point in the spirituality of communion and it is referred to as the *mystery of Jesus Forsaken and Abandoned*<sup>40</sup>, the annihilation of Jesus on the cross to reconcile man to God. Chiara never felt restrained from sharing this aspect of her faith and her experience with faithful of other religions. Much to her surprise they showed a special interest and understanding of it.

She herself comments:

*«That typical suffering of Christ which led Him to total annihilation seems to be particularly fascinating for the faithful of oriental religions. They know how to distinguish that light and that peace which stems from someone who dies to him/herself in order to be one with them. In doing so, he or she allows Christ to be alive in him or in her. The same happens when followers of other religious traditions come into contact with the Risen Christ present in the midst of Christians who are united in His name. Also this is a fruit of loving the cross. They know how to distinguish that light and that peace,*



*effects of the spirit, which irradiate from their faces. They feel attracted and ask for explanations.»<sup>41</sup>.*

This experience seems to suggest that Jesus on the cross mysteriously draws to Himself all men and women of all religions and cultures. This confirms the theological approach of Waldenfels, who affirms that *"Today all religions find themselves, each with its own history, in front of Christ's cross."*<sup>42</sup>

Jesus' *kenosis*, as presented in Lubich's understanding, struck several Buddhist philosophers of the *Kyoto Zen School*. Significant exchange meetings have taken place between Donald W. Mitchell and Keiji Nishitani<sup>43</sup>. Nishitani draws a stimulating parallel between Christian concept of *kenosis* and the concept of *sunnyata*, of the Mahayana Buddhism. He finds in the description of *Fil. 2, 6-8* almost the personification of *sunnyata*, which means not only annihilation of attachments, but also liberation and redemption. Moreover, the Japanese scholar underlines that in order to find unity and harmony among men is necessary *«to pass through a self-emptying process, from an ego-centered to a 'other-centered life'.*<sup>44</sup>

#### **2.4 Formation to dialogue**

For centuries and, at times, for millennia, people had fought with each other on religious ground, communication among different religious group was poor and everyone lived closed up in his or her own religious circle, as a strong element of identity. It is necessary, therefore, to engage in forming people to a new mentality which may help to shift from rejection and hate to appreciation and love, from ignorance to mutual acquaintance, from biased or stereo-typed idea of the *other* to what he or she really is and thinks of himself or herself.

As the experience of dialogue progressively developed, the need was felt for an appropriate formation of Christians to this dimension. John Paul II used to refer to the Focolare members as *apostles of dialogue*<sup>45</sup>, but the commitment to open up to other faiths calls, first of all, for a better understanding and a deeper knowledge of the Catholic tradition and of the Magisterium of the Church on this specific topic. This has been in line with the recommendation of several magisterial documents. *Ecclesia in Asia* effectively affirms:

*"Only those with a mature and convinced Christian faith are qualified to engage in genuine interreligious dialogue. (...) It is therefore important for the Church in Asia to provide suitable models of interreligious dialogue (...) and suitable training for those involved."* (EA 32)

Formation has, then, to be completed with necessary elements of other traditions, which have to be known in order to establish right relations with their followers.

In order to answer these challenges, especially in Asia, where Christians remain a tiny minority and at times are dangerously closed in a sort of a ghetto mentality or tempted by dangerous short-cuts landing into a syncretistic approach, a *School for Oriental Religions* (SOR) was established in the Philippines. Chiara herself conceived and proposed it during her first visit to Asia in 1981.<sup>46</sup>

### **2.5 Fruits of this experience of dialogue.**

Attempting an evaluation of these 30 years of experience in dialogue with faithful of other religions it is not easy, but we can try, at least, to sum up some of the fruits.

The first impression is *a growing conviction that universal brotherhood is not only a dream but can be a reality*. It has been experienced notwithstanding differences. Feeling fraternity, as a consequence, has pulled down barriers giving a strong feeling of integration at different levels: religious, social and geographical.

Secondly, *mutual openness and trust* have arisen, becoming an attitude in life. The starting point is sharing problems, personal experiences, family difficulties and later, but progressively, opening up on bigger and larger issues, involving communities, religious leaders, stereo-type understanding of the other faith and its followers. This has led to trust the other person along with his or her faith and tradition. Prof. Ananathan Rambachan, at the end of a conference, a few years ago stated:

*"My experiences of dialogue with Christian friends have enabled me to see how such encounters, when sought with humility and openness, can be spiritually enriching.*

*My own life as a Hindu has been greatly influenced by the gifts that I continue to receive from Christian friends.."*

A third effect has been the *falling of all possible misconceptions*. Moments of dialogue and sharing have enhanced the possibility of understanding certain behaviours, ideas, traditions and ways of worshipping from the other's view-point and not from the biased or stereo-typed idea which commonly circulate in society.

All this does not mean to ignore or to deny differences. On the contrary, it led to their *appreciation*. It soon came to evidence that dialogue, if based on life experience and on respect and trust of the other, should not lead to confusion of beliefs and dangerous attempts of finding common basis for all religions. Differences among religions emerged, progressively and steadily. Still, thanks to trust and openness, which have been built up, far from being an obstacle they were, rather, a way to be enriched by the other and carried along with their discovery an invitation to respect his or her faith and tradition for what it is.

Respecting differences and avoiding dangerous confusion towards a pseudo-universal religion, offered the chance to deepen one's own beliefs and tradition in order to share it in ways which can be understood by others. This exercise represented a blessing in disguise as everyone had to go back to his or her own roots. The result has been a *confirmation of one's own faith and tradition*.

Dialogue did not stop at the spiritual or intellectual level. It had given life to a true *partnership in action*. Years of mutual friendship and growing brotherhood paved the way to co-operation at social level, as Pope John Paul II envisaged.

*"Dialogue which proceeds from the "internal drive of charity" is a powerful means of collaboration between people in eradicating evil from human life and from the life of the community, in establishing right order in human society and thus contributing to the common good of all men in every walk of life."*<sup>47</sup>

But probably the most important and significant point has been, for us Christians, the one of experiencing the possibility of *harmonizing evangelization with dialogue* and, more specifically, an *evangelization which is Christ-centered*. Often Christians have been asked to speak of their own experience. Those were unique occasions to share openly about the Gospel, the life of the Church and the person of Jesus Christ. These presentations are followed by the one of brothers or sisters of other religions and enriched by a long series of questions. This offers an further opportunity of speaking even more in depth about Christianity, in general, and Christ, in particular.

The Christological dimension that Hindus and Buddhists seem to be sensitive to is not so much the historical or theological ones. Rather, they seem to be open to the presence of Christ in a community of brothers and sisters who try to live the commandment of love among them on the model of the early Christian communities. The challenge of dialogue and the possibility of harmonizing it with announcing Christ, is therefore rooted in the commitment to live as a united community which may bear witness to the promise of Christ: *"Where two or more are united in my name I am present in their midst"*.

### (Endnotes)

1 It happened within the Roman Empire, which had already become Christian, at the time of the invasion of peoples which led to its collapsing. Evangelizing those populations was the answer.

The appearance of Islam in the second half of the first millennium marked another phase of the *encounter* with the 'other'. It developed into a millennium long history made up of clashes, crusades, wars, conquests, with some signs of hope for a peaceful meeting among religions. St. Francis meeting the Great Sultan remains the most shining example that dialogue is possible.

The third, and more controversial phase, came with the great discoveries of the 15th and 16th century. It was widely thought at that time that Christianity had already been announced

to the whole world. To discover people in America and in Asia who did not know Christ, was a shocking experience for the whole western world, identified with Christendom. The consequences of the meeting with the traditional religions of the Americas and the millennia old religions of Asia were a twofold one.

- 2 The situation is totally different in Central and South America, where the indigenous religions were erased by the wave of evangelisation. In Asia, oriental traditions were almost untouched by Christianity which apparently did not appeal to them. Above all, they were not ready to follow a new religion, which appeared exclusivistic and asked for renouncing one's culture and tradition.
- 3 I refer to *Gaudium et Spes, Lumen Gentium, Ad Gentes*
- 4 The reference is above all to *Ecclesiam Suam*, which represents the foundation of the dialogical approach of the Church, and, later, *Evangelii Nuntiandi, Redemptoris Missio, Ecclesia in Asia*
- 5 The converging of these three dimensions of the Church (magisterial, theological and charismatic) has been particularly relevant in other key moments along the centuries, especially on issues which marked an epoch with consequences into following centuries.
- 6 Von Balthasar used to define *Magisterium* and the *charisms* in the Church, respectively, as the *petrine* and *marian* profiles. Pope John Paul II had defined these two aspects as co-essential to the very nature of the Church. *"The institutional and charismatic aspects are co-essential as it were to the Church's constitution. They contribute, although differently, to the life, renewal and sanctification of God's People. It is from this providential rediscovery of the Church's charismatic dimension that, before and after the Council, a remarkable pattern of growth has been established for ecclesial movements and new communities."* (Speech of Pope John Paul II – Meeting with Ecclesial Movements and New Communities, St. Peter's Square – 30th May 1998)
- 7 Cfr. DE FIORES, *La nuova spiritualità*,  
The *Focolare Movement* and *S. Egidio Community* had been particularly effective in this context.
- 8 In this article special attention will be given to the Asian religious traditions, especially Buddhism and Hinduism. The Focolare has a positive experience of dialogue with Judaism and Islam too. Keeping into account the type of volume this paper is meant for, it is felt that it is advisable to deepen only the relationship with the first two religions.
- 9 The local tribe that had asked for help, was severely threatened by the sleeping sickness to the point of risking extinction. Those doctors, without much speaking, had started working hard to eradicate malaria and other sicknesses. Today the small village where they started working is a township with a College, a hospital, a power station, a parish church and a thousand people have decided to follow the way of Christ.
- 10 It may be worth noticing that we were still in the mid-sixties and tribals were referred to as *"pagans"* This terminology is used by Lubich herself, but does not prevent her from having a different approach which is a clear sign of a new perspective in dealing with people of other religious faiths.
- 11 The award came as a surprise for her and for the Movement. Chiara could not reconcile with the idea of receiving a prize for living the Gospel. She had thought that *'eternal life'* would have been the reward. Still she accepted it.
- 12 Quoted in E.M.FONDIE M.ZANZUCCHI, *Un popolo nato dal Vangelo*, 382-383
- 13 Niwano was invited to the mass for the opening session of the Second Vatican Council and was received in a special audience by the Pope. It was from Paul VI that he had gained the

conviction of the necessity of working for harmony among religions. In 1970, Niwano, along with other world religions leaders, established the World Conference for Religions and Peace (WCRP), which held her first World Assembly in Kyoto. Today the organisation is known as *Religions for Peace*, and it is still a very active promoter of harmony and peace among different religious communities. Niwano, himself a recipient of the *Templeton Prize* in 1979, died in... . His son, Nichiko Niwano, took over as the President of his Movement.

- 14 *Mt* 10, 30
- 15 *Lc* 6, 38
- 16 *Cf. Mt* 7, 7
- 17 Chiara Lubich, *Incontri con l'Oriente*, *op. cit.*, p. 69
- 18 *World Conference for Religions and Peace* has changed its name into *Religions for Peace*
- 19 ***Etai Yamada was a world figure, acknowledged for his moral and religious stature. He met the Focolare on the occasion of the Assisi Prayer Meeting, called by Pope John Paul II, in 1986. A year later, Etai Yamada himself organised a similar event at Mount Hiei, close to Kyoto. He wanted a large group of teenagers to be present. They were the bearers of a message addressed to the United Nations and signed by thousand of people asking world leaders for a greater commitment to peace.***
- 20 He was invited to represent his tradition on the occasion of the *X World Youth Day*, held in 1995 in Manila. On that occasion he met Focolare members, while visiting the small town of Tagaytai, and expressed the desire to have an encounter with Chiara Lubich whom he saw in a photograph.
- 21 Loppiano, a few miles a way from Florence, is the first model town of the Focolare Movement. It was started in 1964 and today has around thousand inhabitants from many different countries in the world. They are members of the Focolare – families, priests, youth, nuns, consecrated members of the Movement – who spend some time for formation or permanently living in Loppiano. They are all committed to live the spirituality of communion to offer a model of convivence according to the Gospel law.
- 22 The name means literally children (*bala*) of peace (*shanti*) and gives the meaning to the educational experience which wants to be imparted to the village children who attend the pre-elementary courses in the 12 centres.
- 23 The *Abba School* is an original interdisciplinary experience lived by a group of scholars of different specializations (from theology to medicine, from philosophy to mathematics, from sociology to art, from psychology to economics) who worked in close connection with Chiara Lubich to explore the contribution the spirituality of communion can give to their respective disciplines.
- 24 The title of the conferences held so far had been: "*Bhakti – the way of love, Union with God and Universal Brotherhood in Hinduism and Christianity*", "*Streams of Spirituality in Christianity and Hinduism*", "*Society and Spirituality, a communitarian perspective*", "*God, man and nature in the Hindu and Christian perspective*".
- 25 This practice, which has been typical of the Movement since the beginning, is called *Word of Life*. The sentence had been commented in a simple and profound way by Chiara herself and sent across the five continents to be translated and lived in the different contexts.
- 26 The first place that the dialogue with Muslims developed was in Algeria where Focolare centers opened since 1966. Since 1985 an annual meeting of five days, called the "*Mariapolis*", was organized. It is meant especially for Muslims. Of the 120/150 participants, there are

only about 15 Christians, most of whom are the Focolare members living there. All others are Muslims who try to live the words of the Koran to build harmony and peace.

- 27 For instance, '*compassion*' by the Buddhists
- 28 Judaism says: "*Do to no one what you yourself dislike*" (Tobit 4:15), In Hinduism the Mahabharata says: "*This is the summary of all duties: do not do to others what would hurt you*" Mahabharata 5: 1517. Gandhi, whom we can surely consider a prophet who helped millions of people rediscover the universal values of their religions, underlines the concept of Mahabharata by saying: "*You and I are but one thing. I cannot harm you without hurting myself.*" Lord Buddha invited his followers with these words: "*Do not hurt the others with what has hurt you*". The Koran specifies to the faithful of Islam: "*None among you is a believer till when he desires for his brother what he wishes for himself*" (Hadit 13, Al Bukhari).

Also religions with a smaller number of followers, but with an ancient or a very recent traditions, have a clear reference to the Golden Rule. In Sikhism, for instance, it is expressed with the following thought: "*Judge the others the way you judge yourself and you will be their partners in heaven*". "*Ascetism does not lie in ascetic robes; nor in the walking staff, nor in the ashes, (...) in the earring, the shaven head, or in the blowing of a conch (...) in mere words. He an ascetic is who treats everyone alike*".

In Zoroastrianism we find something very close to all this: "*He is good who, among human beings, does not do to others whatever is not good for him self*".

Jainism, the religion of *ahimsa*, can not renounce to love and compassion, and therefore states: "*In happiness and in suffering, in joy and in sorrow, we should look at every creature the way we look at ourselves. Therefore we should avoid inflicting to others what offence we feel unbearable for ourselves.*"

The Confucian tradition handed over the same value by saying: "Is there an idea which should be put into practice all life long? Certainly this is the one: 'Do not do to the others what you would not like the others do onto you'.

- 29 Relevant quotations from some of the Holy Books will be mentioned in the endnotes.
- 30 Gospel, Mt. 5:45
- 31 It is striking to note that Guru Nanak reechoed it, when coming back, after being taken to the presence of God, he announced: "*There is no Hindu, no Muslim.*"
- 32 Gospel Mt 25:40
- 33 The Prophet stated: "*Such is God's promise to His servants who believe and do good works. Say: 'For this I demand of you no recompense. I ask you only to love your kindred'*" (Qur'an 42:23. Translated by Bausani). The first meaning of the term "kindred" (*qurba*) indicates a relative, a member of the tribe, but it can acquire a broader meaning: "Love for the tribe can be extended to love for all humanity, because all human beings are brothers and sisters as descendents of Adam. ABDULLAH YUSUF ALI, *The meaning of the Holy Qur'an*, Amana Publications, Beltsville, Maryland, 1989, p.1253, note 4560. Moreover, a Muslim maxim affirms: "*God forgives a hundred times, but he reserves his greatest mercy for those whose piety has spared the smallest of his creatures.*" (cfr. G. M. GUZZETTI, *Islam in preghiera*, Rome, 1991, p. 136) Outside the monotheistic religions, we find a wonderful example in Buddha, who said to his first disciples: "*Oh Monks, you should work for the wellbeing of many, for the happiness of many, moved by compassion for the world, for the wellbeing of men and women.*" Mahagga, 19.
- 34 Jn 15:13

- 35 But we can not forget other beautiful examples. Buddha, for instance, has been described by the one who, "*not only taught non-violence and peace. He stood on the battlefield and personally intervened to prevent war between peoples and religions.*" W. RAHULA, *The Teaching of Lord Buddha*, Rome, 1996, p. 102). Also the Qur'an says: "*Let them pardon and forgive. Do you not wish God to forgive you? God is forgiving and merciful.*" (Qur'an 24:22Ibid, p.254)
- 36 Islam suggests: "*God helps a man in the measure that he helps his neighbor.*" (W. MUHS, *Parole del cuore*, Milan 1996, p. 82). Also Gandhi affirmed: "*You and I are one and the same thing. I cannot hurt you without harming myself.*" (W. MUHS, *Parole del cuore*, Milan 1996, p. 82)
- 37 1 Cor. 9:22
- 38 But also in the Qur'an we read a similar idea: "*The righteous man is he who, out of love for God, gives away his wealth - not words, not empty chatter - gives away his wealth to kinsfolk, to orphans, to the helpless, to the traveller in need, and to beggars, and for the redemption of captives.* (Qur'an S.2 A.177).
- 39 The Koran very beautifully expresses this invitation: "*Good and evil deeds are not alike. Requite evil with good, and he who is your enemy will become your dearest friend.*" (Ibid, p.354). A very beautiful image is used in the Hindu tradition for describing love for enemies: "*While the axe chops the sandalwood, it in turn offers its virtue by scenting the axe with its fragrance.*" (*Ramacaritamansa, Uttara-kanda*, 36,4.) In Christianity, we should not forget it, apart from the invitation to love our enemies we also have the challenge of "*offering the other cheek to the one striking us on the right one.*" Mt. 5.39
- 40 For an exhaustive presentation of the mystery of Jesus Abandoned and Forsaken in the experience of Chiara Lubich and in the spirituality of the Focolare Movement see CHIARA LUBICH, *Unity and Jesus Forsaken*, New City Press, New York, 1985 and CHIARA LUBICH, *The Cry*, New City Press, New York, 2001
- 41 CHIARA LUBICH, *L'unità e Gesù Abbandonato*, op. cit., pp. 117-118
- 42 H. WALDENFELS, *Der Gekreuzigte und die Weltreligionen*, trad. In italiano, *Gesù Crocifisso e le grandi religioni*, Napoli 1987, p. 60. The present text has been translated into English by the author of the present article.
- 43 Both scholars are closely connected with the spirituality of the Focolare Movement. Donald W. Mitchell is an American scholar of Buddhism of international standard. He teaches *Asian and Comparative Philosophy*, apart from being Director of the *Program of Religious Studies* at the Purdue University, USA. Keiji Nishitani (1900 - 1990) was a Japanese philosopher, probably the most representative of the *Kyoto School*.
- 44 DONALD W. MITCHELL, *La mia esperienza di dialogo*. Paper presented at the School for Interreligious Dialogue, Castelgandolfo, 12-13 May 1987
- 45 In the Focolare Movement there are several types of dialogue: within the Catholic Church with different charisms, within the Christian world among different Churches (the Movement is in touch with members of around 300 churches or ecclesial communities, with the larger portion of humanity which includes agnostics and atheists. The Statutes of the Focolare, approved by the Church in 1990 refer to this last form of dialogue as '*Dialogue with contemporary culture.*'
- 46 In the last 25 years SOR held courses on all main Asian traditions and, later, started a fresh series of presentations of the Church teaching and latest documents from *Nostra Aetate* to *Dominus Jesus*. Classes are held in Tagaytay, Philippines, for a limited number of people (max. 250) and repeated with due and necessary adaptation at the local level in several Asian countries. Most of the lessons are delivered by experts and especially by bishops who know the spirituality of communion. This allows an enriching mutual support from the spirituality of the Focolare and the tradition of the catholic Church.