

THE FOCOLARE MOVEMENT Origins, Spirituality and Impact in Asia

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The Focolare Movement has its origins in Trent, Italy. It began in 1943 amidst the background of the World War II. The lesson that God was giving Chiara Lubich, the founder, then 23 years old and her youth companions through the circumstance of the war was: "Everything is vanity of vanities: everything passes away." It seemed that God raised a question in their hearts: "Is there an ideal that no bomb can destroy, for which we can give all of ourselves? And they understood: "Yes, God." And so they decided to make God the reason for their living.

"Family fireside" is the English translation of the Italian word *focolare*. The people who frequented the small house in Trent where Lubich and her early companions lived soon after the war, coined that term. They referred to the warmth of reciprocal love that they felt each time they went there. What exactly had they experienced? Lubich would say that by living the words "Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there in their midst," (Mt 18:20) Jesus is present and all the effects of this presence is felt: joy, peace, and the atmosphere of being like a family where there is warmth of relationship and love. And what did Jesus do, when he was spiritually present among them? He enabled them to achieve unity and to experience it: "I pray that they may all be one. Father! May they be in us, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they be one, so that the world will believe that you sent me" (Jn 17:21).

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What has become of Focolare Movement now? It has become a vast ecclesial movement with about a thousand Focolare houses and centers around the globe with at least eight million members and adherents of all cultures and religions: Catholics, Lutherans, Anglicans, Reformed Church, Orthodox, different Christian denominations, Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, and people of good will. This Movement has twenty eight branches, includes at its core the consecrated members living a community life with evangelical vows and radically committed to the life of unity; families, youth, professionals from diverse fields; religious of various congregations, etc. Within the Focolare Movement are mass movements like "New Humanity Movement," "Parish Movement," "Diocesan Movement," "Youth for a United World Movement," "Young Ones For Unity" and still other mass movements such as a movement that brings together politicians from diverse political parties to work together for the society called Movement for Unity in Politics.¹ The Movement is involved in works for ecumenical and interreligious dialogue as the Church does in Europe, in Asia and in all the continents. It has thirty five "towns of witness" in all the continents, like that of Loppiano in Incisa Val D'Arno, Italy, an ecumenical town in Ottmaring, Germany, and the little town in Tagaytay, Philippines, called Mariapolis Peace, a place of encounter among people of different religions in Asia.

Opera di Maria (Work of Mary) is the official name of the Focolare Movement. The Catholic Church approved it on March 23, 1962 and it is one among many ecclesial movements under the Pontifical Council for the Laity. Every branch of the movement and the mass movements within it are distinct and are united to the whole *Opera di Maria*. It is organized and structured so as to safeguard the unity among them. As a predominantly lay movement, its people are not separate from the socio-cultural, eco-political and religious life in every country where it has emerged and is continually growing.

What exactly is the spirituality or the vision and charism of Chiara Lubich? When this question is posed her answer is usually UNITY. Unity is more than a concept. No static definition is sufficient to describe it. Unity is neither a *virtue* nor *charity*. Unity is dynamic. It is the reciprocal love among individuals rooted in Jesus' command: "And now, I give you a new commandment: love one another. As I have loved you, so, you must love one another" (Jn 13:34). And to love one another means to seek the ultimate good. It is acquired in a fuller way, for the two remain distinct and yet are united. When will

¹Visit www.mppu.org

two persons be one? When they are *living*, meaning when they are *cut* from what is merely human, and through living and incarnating love, they become one where God can be in their midst. Who can live this reality of God's presence in the midst of persons? The possibility to live this is open to everyone. In Mt 18:20, it does not specify anyone in particular, "Where two or three..." the two or three are anonymous. It could be two or three repentant sinners, two persons, one an adult, the other a child; two or three Christians of different denominations; two or three of different faith Traditions as long as they live to love, they will experience Unity.

But what about its tangible manifestation?

Lubich delineated seven aspects of human and divine life which when lived individually and collectively shows Unity.

1. Communion of spiritual and material goods: This is the practice of sharing our material possessions and spiritual experiences with one another. People of different faith Traditions share their material and spiritual good with one another as gifts and build unity.

2. Witness and diffusion: Concrete expressions of reciprocal love among people of diverse faith Traditions is a great witness of a possibility for universal brotherhood.

3. Union with God and prayer life: True unity could be achieved if we are in relationship with the Creator through prayer in all its variety of expressions.

4. Natural world and physical life: The world we live in is created by God. As creatures we take the responsibility together towards the natural world and physical life to safeguard the harmony of God's creation.

5. Harmony in relationships: The characteristic of this expression of love is harmonious relationships, which is an effect and a reflection of the life of Unity.

6. Wisdom and study: This refers to all that is done to grow intellectually and in wisdom. Intellectual life is the expression and effect of love for God and neighbor and assures our solid foundation in Unity.

7. Communication and oneness: This refers to the human family, and when looking at heavenly things, finds its model in the Most Holy Trinity where each of the persons exists for the other.

The Impact of the Focolare Movement in Asia

The seed of the spirituality of unity was planted in Asia in 1966 and like any ecclesial movement, it is growing underneath a multi-cultural and multi-faith Asian society. There are 66 focolare houses in twelve countries: the Philippines, Korea, Japan, Hongkong, Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand, Vietnam, India, Pakistan, and Taiwan.

What about the thrust as indicated by the Federation of Asian Bishops Conferences (FABC) as dialogue with the poor? In some countries in Asia like the Philippines, social action projects like the *Bukas Palad Social Centers*, the *Pagasa Social Center*, and *Sulyap Housing Projects* were set up in some parts of the country to help poor communities. Many of the poor who were helped are now involved in volunteer works for the other poor, with an interactive concept of reciprocity.

In most countries in Asia where the movement has developed, the Economy of Communion (EOC)² project has involved entrepreneurs, workers, managers, consumers, and financial operators with the aim of increasing the relationship of reciprocity with the individuals and collectivity they serve. The concept was for enterprises to adapt a new way of promoting a “culture of giving,” as opposed to a “culture of having” which most economic models are based on. Some enterprises in Asia have freely committed themselves to put their profits in common, dividing them into three parts: a third for the poor, a third is re-invested within the company itself, and a third for the formation of the people in this “culture of giving” mainly in the Focolare Movement’s little town.

Aside from the initiatives of the Focolare Movement in Asia on dealing with the alleviation of poverty through the EOC mentioned above, there are also initiatives in bridging politicians of different parties to work for the common good in the specific society they are in, called “Movement for Unity in Politics” (MUP).³ The MUP members consist of politicians elected at various institutional levels, active members of various political parties, public officers, youth interested in major world issues in politics and in the day to day life of their own city, politicians and researchers in Political Science. With universal fraternity as its fundamental principle, the MUP in Korea aims at increasing democratic participation, reviewing various issues that society is faced with from its perspective, that is, departing from

²Visit www.edc-online.org

³Visit www.mppu.org

shared universal values, in order to arrive at more enlightened political action. In Korea, the Movement for Unity in Politics is affirming itself with the adhesion of a group of parliamentary leaders – Catholics, Protestants, Buddhists – coming from different political parties.

Preoccupied of bringing a true evangelical novelty, in the beginning the Focolare Movement did not think particularly of inculturation, even if the members had the fundamental attitude of “making ourselves one” with each neighbor and environment. The knowledge on the local culture grew through the sharing of experiences among the people of living out the spirituality of unity. The people realized afterwards that the local culture has its riches and needs too, thus, it can share and also receive from other cultures. On the other hand, every religion can still grow and develop in its own unique expression through “giving and receiving” from others, meaning, in reciprocal love. Over the years diverse bilateral dialogues through the “dialogue of life” has taken place. The dialogues are with Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, Taoists, Animists, etc. The dialogue is simple and dynamic and highlights one’s being gifts to one another, and in being co-partners in building universal brotherhood in segments.

The goal of Unity pushed the Focolare Movement to diverse dialogues as instruments that contribute to the ecumenical dialogue particularly in Korea, Hong Kong, Philippines and the inter-religious dialogue mostly in Japan, Korea, Taiwan, Thailand, India, Pakistan, and Singapore, as well as dialogue with people of goodwill and of traditional religions and people of goodwill in all Asian countries.

As a conclusion, from the *Lubichian* perspective, Unity may be witnessed in Asia not only in the spiritual sense but in the relationships of people that is observable through their reciprocal love. It will be very concrete in socio-economic, political, and cultural life expressions and in the diversity and communion among Asians of various faith Traditions. Chiara Lubich has always believed that in every human person is the imprint of the Creator whose *Being* is Love and such imprint when lit up and nurtured through the spirituality, charism and vision of Unity, it will bring humanity to being *One Family* in its deepest sense.