

Ecumenical Northern European
Priests Meeting within the
Focolare Movement - 20-23
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THE HISTORY OF THE MOVEMENT AND THE PRIESTS

1. The beginning of the movement of the focolare.

A little word to Chiara Lubich, born in 1920 in Trento, North Italy. She lived around a little community of Capuchin Fathers and was introduced by them in the Franciscan spirituality.

Therefore she has changed her baptism name SILVIA into CHIARA recording saint Clara of Assisi.

With young girls in the parish of the Capuchins and as teacher in the primary school with her class - she made several experiences with the gospel. In the terrific situations in the end of second world war and especially under the bombardments of her town Trento she has found a deep hope in the lecture of the gospel. In the bunker she has read with the girls the gospel (a little book of the 4 evangelists) day by day and sentence by sentence. They understood that it is **possible to do** what has been written in the gospel. And they made a special experience: when you love the poor mother with her children running in the bunker – they felt a special joy, an unforgettable hope, a spiritual force, like a light. And in telling each another what they felt, this experience became stronger. Chiara understood: When I live the gospel concretely in the actual situation, I can feel the presence of Jesus. The insight in the gospel comes from living the gospel. And when You tell this experience to others and these others are really open to my experience, the word of God brings to us the presence of Jesus.

2. Chiara and the priests.

In the fifties and sixties there have been several catholic priests of Italy, Austria, Switzerland, France and Germany who learnt the radical biblical spirituality of Chiara. They saw in living directly and every day one word of gospel a very helpful instrument to bring God to the modern people.

I name only some priests: Don Silvano Cola, Don Pepe, Don Raggio, Don Gió, Don Annibale, Anton Weber/Switzerland, in Germany Hans Heilkenbrinker, Klaus Hemmerle (later on Bishop of Aachen), Josef Gleich, Matthäus Appesbacher in Austria, Don Eraldo of Stockholm and many others of Italy, Germany, France, Austria, Nederland's.

The central word what these priests have heard was "experience with the word of God.". These priests have been touched by the meetings with the focolare, especially by the simplicity of so many experiences with the word of God which has been met in concrete life and was able to make a big change in the persons... They made the experience that their faith in God, their confidence in the Holy Ghost was really increasing when they lived in the experience of the focolare and when they changed their experiences with others, priests or laypeople. By living the word of God – verse by verse, sentence by sentence – they entered in a new flow of life, of Christian life. Around them were born little communities.

Chiara learnt these priests. These priests discovered in Chiara a living instrument of the Holy Ghost and Chiara saw that these priests wanted to enter in the form of life of the focolare. They really wanted to increase more and more in the young spirituality of unity.

When I encountered, two years after my ordination and still studying in Rome, the movement in January 1965 I was so astonished to see these priests formed by Chiara.

I couldn't hesitate to join them.

3. Chiara and the formation of the priests

Chiara, in contact with Don Silvano and Don Foresi, felt a big responsibility for the priests. She saw the difficulties of many priests, because isolated. And she saw in Don Silvano a person like an instrument of God to form with her spirituality the priests from today. Don Silvano started guided by Chiara the first priest focolar: priests living together with other priests the gospel of Jesus, beginning a way of life open to the values of the gospel: to love God, to accept, to forgive, to be open for everybody.

Chiara spoke to us of a priesthood which has certain aspects in common with Mary. Mary did not speak, but she gave with her life the life to Jesus. Chiara said to us that we should first live the gospel, then preach it. It is necessary that Jesus is amidst the priests, then they can preach him. The presence of Jesus between

us gives force and clearness to every service of a priest: preaching, formation of young people or formation of the parents in the preparation for the sacraments as baptism, holy communion, confirmation.

The novelty lay in the fact that it was necessary to put before every work or intellectual activity the norm of the norms that is the basis of the spirituality of communion: "As I have loved you, so you also must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (Jn 13:34-35).

One can understand the importance of this educational orientation if one thinks of the eminently individualistic formation that was received, and therefore, for example, of the difficulty that priests in ministry had in living together in the same presbyterate.

In October 24 in 1966 Chiara made a big step in her work for the priests. She has found a real School to form priests by priests to learn this marian profile living together for several months in an own house. For her it was necessary and important that these priests learn to be in a community formed by the rules of the gospel: to love God, to accept the other, to forgive each another, to be open the heart for everybody.

Chiara developed the Marian quality that a priest should attain, inaugurating a school of community spirituality, precisely for priests, on October 24, 1966:

*"If our priests know how to postpone everything, even the priesthood, to ensure the presence of Jesus among them, living the Kingdom of God like children, it will be inevitable that Jesus will bring out a new pastoral care, new **seminaries** (...). And if there is unity also with the lay part of the Movement, it will give rise to what I have called a "city-church", or "society-church" which will show the world what it would be like if it were all clarified by Jesus, by his Gospel (...). We are laying here the first stone of a reality that blossoms after the Council, but which has its roots before the Council, because it has them in God who raised up this Movement."*

Therefore it is important to note how Chiara, with her charism, saw and spoke of the priesthood:

"Today the times demand authenticity more than ever: simple men ordained priests are no longer enough: we need priests-Christ, priest-victims for humanity. Authentic Christs, ready to die for all".

"The Marian priest is that priest who puts God first. He is not unaware that he was chosen, chosen, for something truly extraordinary, because Jesus said: "as the Father sent me, so I send you". He is aware that he has extraordinary gifts, charisms, but they are always part of God's gifts, they are not God (...). In reality, all Christians, priests or laity or bishops, must choose God and everything else must be put later, as a gift from God. (...Therefore the Marian priest is a simple one, who has God as his Ideal. Then he, instead of being a blacksmith, who is a worker, becomes a priest, aware that the Lord has elected him for something truly exceptional. We must not underestimate this aspect; but it is something to be moved for God. God first".

"The novelty that the Work of Mary brings is precisely the preponderant emphasis that priests must be Jesus abandoned alive. (...).

Priests who lose everything with love, even certain labels they may have, or certain attitudes, because it is not necessary to have any attitude other than that of Jesus on the cross, who died for his brothers and sisters. Here is the priest: he is Jesus abandoned alive. Then he also acts as a minister of God, and has the extraordinary grace, which cannot be measured, so great is it, of representing Christ himself (...). But we emphasize the victim aspect".

"What is the relationship between our spirituality and Mary? It is to be another Mary for the world, bringing God. But is there a particular way in which we, children of Mary, can bring Jesus? This is something that makes you go crazy with joy: Mary physically brought the baby Jesus, and gave birth to him; we can generate the mystical Jesus in our midst ("Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am in the midst of them") by being Mary".

Today we have a priestschool in Loppiano/Florence, in Tagaytay/Philippines, near to Sao Paulo/Brasil, in Nairobi/Kenia.

There took part sometimes also married priests of the Lutheran or united-orthodox churches. In Germany we have women pastor who is part the normal women-focolare.

4. Perdere tutto - lose everything

On January 31, 1969, Chiara answered some **QUESTIONS FROM THE FOCOLARE PRIESTS** after they had heard the tape recording of her lecture of December 24. On this occasion, she explains

***Lose everything, everything, everything
like Mary under the cross
and fully live the will of God in the actual moment,
so that Jesus may be in us, the way, the truth and the life."***

It is a matter of forming priests who can discern and understand what corresponds to the will of God and what does not, and who orient their actions accordingly. It can be an expression of God's will to let go of something or to give up or not to strive for. It's like a distacco, a certain form of freeing yourself from things. I am thinking, for example, of a certain detachment from money, a certain detachment from wanting to own a house ... etc. etc. etc.

Losing everything also means detachment from everything, including spiritual activities, if they do not correspond to the will of God. For example: Someone has decided to take time for a deep meditation in peace and quiet. He feels an extraordinary unity with God. He really wants to do a good meditation. And there, of all things, a poor soul knocks on the front door, to whom he should definitely open. It is necessary to lose meditation, to detach oneself from the deep experience of God, to detach oneself from the deeply experienced unity with God. It is important to get involved with the person at the door. After all, it is Jesus who meets in this person. This is what I mean by LOSING.

***Lose everything, everything, everything
like Mary under the cross
and fully live the will of God in the moment,
so that Jesus may be in us, the way, the truth and the life."***