

Transcription  
(For simultaneous translation)

Lublin (Poland), June 19, 1996

**Chiara is conferred with the *honoris causa* degree in social sciences**

(The Magnifico Rector, Wielgus, invites Chiara to give her speech.)

Your Eminencies, Your Excellencies, Magnifico Rector, eminent members of the Senate, distinguished Professors, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I would like to begin by expressing my sincere gratitude to the Magnifico Rector of this University, to the academic Senate and to the Faculty of Social Sciences, who were instrumental in awarding me this doctorate.

I never imagined that I would one day find myself here for a ceremony of this kind, in such a noble and prestigious environment, made famous by the fact that Karol Wojtyla, our Holy Father, was once a professor here.

In fact, I ceased to devote myself to studies more than fifty years ago, literally putting my cherished books away in the attic. I did this not only because of a lack of time (the Focolare Movement was coming to life), but above all because, thirsty for truth, for absolute truth, I had understood that, while this could be glimpsed, for example, through philosophy, to which I had diligently devoted myself, never could I discover it more clearly and more completely than in Him who said of Himself: "I am the Truth" (Jn14:6).

It was for this reason that I decided, through a special call of God, to follow Jesus along the way that He would indicate to me.

Now, with surprise, I can affirm, only for the glory of God, that after years and years of this demanding and splendid discipleship, the Lord, in His goodness, has wished to make known to me and to those who follow the Focolare Movement, something of His infinite wisdom, not only in matters concerning the study of God, theology, but also in other ambits of knowledge. He has revealed lines of thought capable of vivifying - so as to make them authentically true and acceptable to Him - the various human sciences, including the social sciences.

Now let us pass on to the present doctorate award.

The motivations given for this doctorate - as I have understood - are very flattering. Certainly not because they refer to me or to us, who are always useless and unfaithful servants, but because they refer to on-going achievements in a Work of God: the Focolare Movement; its writings; the ecumenism it lives; its social aspect, or more precisely, the economy of communion.

The Focolare Movement.

It is not easy to describe it in a few minutes. However, we can clearly see the purpose for which we believe God brought it about.

It appeared in the Church during the forties, at a time when an ideology was spreading in the world - and you can understand this better than others - an ideology that disregarded God, indeed, that wanted to banish Him from society.

Hatred had assumed an important role in building a society which wanted to appear as advanced.

Unity, the unity of nations without God, constituted the utopia people wanted to believe in and for which it was worthwhile spending their best energies.

This is the context that saw the birth of the Focolare Movement, whose objectives and aims are the exact opposite: God, who is chosen even as the Ideal of one's life; love, as a style of life; unity, as the practice which links each person to God and people with one another.

How can we describe the Focolare Movement today?

It is both a religious and civil reality which counts more than four million people: two million are closely linked to the Movement and its structures, while the other two million live its spirit. There are people of every race, language, nation and religion, scattered throughout the world in almost two hundred nations.

Its members are linked to one another as brothers and sisters by the charity that Jesus brought on earth, or simply by the loving kindness that all religions propose. This love is accepted also by people who are indifferent to religion as the only means necessary for building universal brotherhood.

The Focolare Movement - in the eyes of John Paul II - is a small "people," expression of the larger people of God. It is marching towards the goal of a more united world as it works to build a civilization of love.

It has its own specific, communitarian spirituality, and its own precise culture.

Most of the people who adhere to the Focolare Movement are Catholics of all ages and vocations, but there are also Christians of other Churches and members of other religions.

Nor can we forget the non-believers, if they are men and women of good will.

It is a Work of God and therefore, very rich in aspects and expressions. It can be seen from various viewpoints: spiritual, apostolic, pastoral, charitable, associative, prophetic, social....

Today, at least in this first part, we would like to consider it especially from the social angle.

The Focolare Movement is fifty-three years old: it was born in 1943.

How can we describe its first stirrings? What was “the first inspiring spark,” as John Paul II called it?

It was simple, as all the things of God.

During the terror of the war, it was a re-revelation of who God truly is: Love.

He loved us immensely. He loved everybody.

This was the re-discovery that made us feel that God was close to us, present in all circumstances of life.

This was the first announcement we made to all those we met: God is here, He loves you, He counts even the hairs of your head; He died for you.

This is the way we believed in love.

But we had to respond to this love. How? With our love, which is certainly not an empty sentimentality; rather, we had to place ourselves and live in accordance with His will: “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...” (Mt 7:21).

And His will - we understood - is that we love.

The Spirit (which I would like to call the charism of unity), which began to enlighten us, thus urged us to love.

But we could honestly love only by keeping and practicing the Words of God.

It was not possible to take anything with us during the many escapes to the air-raid shelters during the day and during the night seeking to protect ourselves from the bombs. All we could bring with us was a Gospel, a small Gospel, yes.

And there, as we waited for hours, we read. They were unique, universal words, addressed to everyone.

We understood at once that if they were translated into life, they would give rise to a revolution.

We read them and we lived them. And the world within us and around us changed.

Although we were fascinated by the whole Gospel, we were especially struck by certain words of Jesus and by realities that underlined love: love for God, love for neighbor, love for one another, welcoming the spiritual presence of Christ among us, as He had promised wherever two or more are united in His name (cf. Mt 18:20), and that is, in His love; following the greatest expression of Love: Jesus crucified; achieving unity, the effect of mutual love lived out not only with those who represented the Church, but with everybody (“May they all be one” [Jn 17:21]): that unity which, as Christians, we are called to live following the model of the Holy Trinity.

We understood the Eucharist as the generator and bond of unity; Mary as the Mother of beautiful Love and unity; we deepened our understanding of the Church as communion in love; the Holy Spirit as Love made a Person.

Afterwards, these words and realities of the Gospel which had particularly captivated us, began to take shape as the main lines of a spirituality completely centered on love and unity: the spirituality of unity.

Decades later, we are discovering it as a genuine spirituality of the Church, alongside the more individually-centered spiritualities that have adorned the Bride of Christ down through the centuries. This spirituality of unity has a characteristic all its own: the most radical, most intense life of communion.

Thus, one lives - in wonder and amazement - the daily fulfillment of the evangelical promises: "Gifts will be given to you" (Lk 6:38) for having given; "all these things will be given you besides" (Mt 6:33), which punctually arrived for having sought His kingdom; the "hundredfold", which regularly followed whoever among us had left everything for God.

But there is an episode from those days, one of the thousand anecdotes that studded our life, which confirms this specific communitarian vocation.

Gathered one day in a cellar in order to shelter ourselves from the dangers of the war, we opened the Gospel at random and found ourselves before Jesus' solemn prayer to the Father, on His way to the Mount of Olives, over the torrent Kidron.

"Holy Father"... we began to read, and although unprepared, we had the impression that we had penetrated the meaning of that difficult passage. Above all, we felt certain that we had been born for that page of the Gospel; for us, it was like the "magna charta" of the new Movement.

This communitarian spirituality led us to put in common - in different ways - with the many people who were now following us, the few material goods we had, the spiritual goods and also the needs.

Such an evangelical achievement did not leave others indifferent (actually, we wanted to imitate, in some way, the first Christians, among whom no one was in need because of the communion of goods they lived).

In fact, one day some Communists came to our first focolare asking to know the secret behind what was taking place around us. They told us that they wanted to accomplish all over the world what they had seen accomplished in the city of Trent.

In answer to their question, we pointed to the Crucifix on the wall: had it not been for Him that we loved one another to the point of sharing everything?

But that secret wasn't for them; they lowered their heads and went away.

The Movement then began its rapid expansion, first in Italy, then throughout Europe, also in Eastern Europe, and later on all over the world.

All because of that "secret" which we had indicated to our Communist brothers. In fact, on one occasion - foreseen, we think, by God - we had come to know that Jesus had suffered the most when on the cross He experienced the abandonment of the Father: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Mt 27:46).

We were touched by this fact. And our youth, enthusiasm, and especially the grace of God, urged us, first focolarine, to choose Jesus in His abandonment as the ideal of our life.

Ever since then we have discovered His face everywhere: in our own sufferings, which we loved with all our might because they were an expression of Him, and in our neighbors, especially if they were suffering.

He had felt that the Father was far from Him; He had experienced within Himself the separation of human beings from God and from one another. We recognized Jesus forsaken also in all the divisions of the world, big or small: divisions in the family, between generations, between rich and poor; divisions at the heart of the Church Herself between the various works; between different Churches; also between religions; and even between those who believe and those who do not believe....

But - and this is important - all these divisions did not frighten us; on the contrary, out of love for Him forsaken, they attracted us. We understood that our place was there, precisely where there was the trauma, the crack.

This love for Jesus forsaken was fruitful in every field.

Today, the Movement and the variety of people who are part of it form only one reality. Although everyone is united by only one Center and closely linked to one another, it is made up of sixteen branches which include young people (boys and girls and very little children), adults, married people and consecrated people, priests, men and women religious, and also a noteworthy number of bishops who are friends of the Movement.

These various branches are actively involved in the complex world of the family and in the different ambits of social action.

And there are immensely positive effects.

First of all, conversions, conversions, conversions.

Boys and girls. They are no longer "incomplete" or "immature" as one usually thinks of adolescents. They become "protagonists".

Young people set into motion micro-achievements, like collecting funds to meet the needs created by natural disasters, projects for peace, moments of prayer. Their large-scale events attract the interest of the media. The most recent GenFest in Rome, attended by 15,000 young people, was transmitted on 324 national and local television programs, reaching an audience of 200 million people.

In the family, love is revitalized. The gap between generations is transformed into a positive exchange of gifts.

In a society which appears to be losing the Christian values of a sanctified sexuality and of life, the witness of families rooted in God becomes a catalyst towards religious and civil commitment.

Couples on the brink of separation or divorce regain strength for a new dialogue. There are thousands of adoptions at a distance of children in developing countries.

In the social world, because the collective spirituality contains the "code" for transforming the social reality, it invests all realities, from the world of economy and work to that of politics, justice, health, education, and social communications.

In the ecclesial world.

By living in unity with one another and with the bishop, priests experience the reality of a supernatural family, wherein the beauty of celibacy is resplendent with special light.

This new lifestyle generates vocations; also seminaries become centers of diffusion.

The pastoral service of priests gives rise to living communities in which the Church-communion shines forth.

Men religious better understand their founders; they re-discover their Rules. A profound unity is born with their superiors, and the community is renewed.

In addition, a profound communion is achieved among different Institutes, with the diocesan clergy and with lay Christians.

There are several hundred focolares of men, of women and of diocesan priests in the world, homes for members of all the Work of Mary, Mariapolis Centers for meetings, and about twenty little towns, like that which we hope will soon develop here in Poland, whose inhabitants would like to show to those who visit them what the world would be like if everyone lived the Gospel.

The extensive development of the Movement is to be attributed to the perfect unity always maintained with whoever represents the Church, and to unity among the members which is always re-established. And we know what we can expect from unity: "May they be one," said Jesus, "so that the world may believe" (cf. Jn 17:21).

A second motivation for this *honoris causa* doctorate is the literature which I have supposedly produced.

To tell the truth, I have never really sat down to write a book, even though more than thirty works bear my name. But these books are, for the most part, a collection, compiled by others, of my thoughts, meditations, talks, and pages from my diary, which I have simply jotted down throughout the years in order to serve the Movement.

They are also theological reflections on the various points of the spirituality considered in relation to the Scriptures, the Fathers of the Church, the Magisterium, the Councils, and the texts of saints.

These books contain the spiritual lines that were gradually taking shape, and the trials and joys involved in this spirituality.

And now we come to the ecumenical aspect of the Movement.

We didn't know anything about ecumenism at the beginning of the Movement, and for a number of years we believed that this charism was solely for our Church and the Catholic world, so as to revive civil and religious communities with the spirit of unity.

In 1950, a Jesuit who wanted to know more about the Movement asked me: "Of course, you are involved in ecumenism?" "No," I replied.

The fact is that the project for this Movement does not come from any human mind, but it comes from Above. Generally, the circumstances manifest what God wants. We try to follow His will day after day.

And so it was in January, 1961 - before the Council - when, invited to Germany, we happened to meet some Evangelical pastors who were surprised to learn that we gave special importance to the Word of God. This convinced them to join us.

That marked the beginning of an authentic dialogue in charity.

Cardinal Bea, Pope John XXIII, and the successive Pontiffs always followed with interest and encouraged this dialogue.

Later on, our contacts with the Evangelicals matured to such an extent that we decided to build a little town near Augsburg (in Germany), in which Catholics and Lutheran Evangelicals would live together in order to be a witness of mutual love among Christians.

Instead, in 1965, in one of our meetings in Rome between Catholics and Evangelicals, three Anglican priests were deeply touched by the atmosphere of unity among all. For this reason, they wished to know and to make known the spirit that generated such a reality.

Later on, one hundred Anglicans came to our ecumenical meeting in Rome. Because of the very beautiful communion among us, they wanted us to go to England. In the following years, I myself had intense relationships with the last three Primates of England, with the Archbishops Michael Ramsey, Donald Coggan and Robert Runcie. They encouraged us to bring this spirit into their country where the Movement subsequently developed.

I also have an appointment with the present Primate, George Carey.

In 1967, the ecumenical Patriarch, Athenagoras I, heard about the Movement and sent for me. I went to Istanbul eight times. A profound relationship was born: I found him to be an extraordinary person, a true charismatic. That was the beginning of the Movement among the Orthodox.

In the years that followed, the successors of Athenagoras I, Dimitrios I and Bartholomew I, continued along the same lines.

Also members of the Reformed Church in Switzerland and in Holland wished to know more about the Movement.

Likewise, members of the Ancient Churches of the East.

Now the Christians of other Churches, with whom we are in contact, number approximately 50,000 from 300 Churches.

And what are the results of these contacts?

Centuries-old prejudices have crumbled. Through this spirituality, their personal and community lives have been renewed. The same vocations that emerged in the Catholic Church have emerged in these other Churches: focolarini, volunteers, young people, etc. A process of renewal has begun in their Churches.

But the Movement's ecumenism does not stop here. It also embraces dialogue with members of other religions: with Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, Shintoists, Taoists, Sikhs, Zoroastrians, Jainists, faithful of the traditional religions....

This dialogue has a specific technique, "making ourselves one", which is not only an attitude of kindness, openness, esteem and respect. It is a practice which demands emptying ourselves completely in order to identify with others so as to understand them.

It has been written: "To know the religion of the other person implies living in the skin of the other person, seeing the world as the other sees it, penetrating the meaning that the other finds in being Hindu, Muslim, Jew, Buddhist." <sup>1</sup>

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1 F. Whaling, *Christian Theology and World religions: A Global Approach*, London, 1986, pp. 130-131.

Towards this goal, our spirituality offers us a privileged instrument: love for Jesus crucified and forsaken who annihilated himself for us. He is the true key of our dialogue with other religions, whose strength and fascination lie precisely in total self-denial, in annulling oneself.

And the results?

I will mention two worlds: Buddhism and Islam.

Our first contacts were with the Buddhist world.

I was invited to go to Japan by the President and Founder of a large Buddhist lay Movement, the Rissho Kosei-kai, which has six million adherents. He wanted me to tell my Christian spiritual experience to 12,000 members of the association in their large temple in Tokyo.

That event, fifteen years ago, was followed by numerous contacts and collaboration in various parts of the world. We can certainly affirm that in these Buddhist brothers and sisters there has been a convergence, a growing interest and a great openness towards the Gospel values brought by the Movement.

In our turn, we discovered the values that they bring.

But the most surprising meetings with Buddhism began to take place about two years ago with eminent representatives of Thai monasticism: the Great Teacher, Ajahn Tong, and the monk, Thongrattana, who have thousands of disciples in their own country and in others. Through them, a wide avenue has been opened to the heart of Theravada Buddhism.

Their extended stay in our international little town of Loppiano put them in vital contact with an experience of the Gospel lived. They no longer felt the obstacles that usually impede a true dialogue between Buddhists and Christians.

One of them, the younger of the two, shared with me his personal discoveries, his spiritual journey. He understood that "Christianity is the religion of love" and that "the death of Jesus on the cross is a very precious teaching."

This discovery contradicts the Buddhist tradition which has always viewed the symbol of the cross as being cruel and foreign to its own culture.

The monk, Thongrattana, said that he no longer feels "foolish" because he has understood. He and his Teacher have now returned to Thailand where they are witnessing to the mutual love they found among Christians. They take every opportunity to tell thousands of faithful and hundreds of monks about what they experienced in their encounter with Christianity, with the Holy Father, and with the Focolare Movement.

There is another world which, at first sight, might appear to be more difficult, that of relations with Islam. And yet, here too, there have been comforting experiences.

For twenty-five years, we have been living an intense exchange of spiritual experiences, in lengthy meetings during which we live together and dialogue.

Such meetings have carried out (and this applies to contacts with other religions as well) the model of dialogue proposed by the Synod of Bishops in 1985, a dialogue which, as it states, "tends to bring the human person to open up and communicate his inner sentiments to the one with whom he is speaking," in the sense that "God can use the dialogue (...) as a pathway for communicating the fullness of grace."



One surprising consequence of the Movement's interreligious dialogue is that a number of young men and women, including married people, of other religions, wish to become involved in the Movement by collaborating towards its aims and by living, as far as this is possible for them, its spirituality.

Thus a branch was born of "collaborators" who belong to various religions, and they are officially recognized as such in the statutes of our Movement.

A certain tension between proclamation and dialogue has sometimes been pointed out in interreligious dialogue, a sort of contrast that would make the two terms incompatible, reducing the mission of the Church to one or to the other.

From my own personal experience and from that of the Movement, I am convinced that the proclamation of the Gospel, necessary for every Christian ("Woe to me if I do not preach the Gospel" [cf. 1 Cor 9:16]), is inseparably made up of two moments: witness and evangelization. Listening to our Christian message becomes open and fruitful if it is preceded by the witness, also through an authentic dialogue, of a personal and collective life imbued with evangelical values.

One final motivation for this *honoris causa* doctorate is the realization within the heart of the Movement of what has been called the economy of communion, in freedom, of course.

As I said before, we always sought to find a solution to the emerging economic problems of our Movement, and we tried to do this through the communion of goods. But a few years ago, precisely because of the growth of the Movement, I realized that what we were doing was not enough. This took place during a trip I had taken to Brazil in 1991.

I had visited that country a number of times in the past and I had noticed the enormous contrasts afflicting it: development and underdevelopment, waste and need, abundance and misery.

The Movement, present there since 1958, has spread widely, attracting people of all social categories. There too all kinds of social projects developed.

In the beginning of the sixties, our little town of Araceli developed and has now become a reference point for all our activities in Brazil.

It was in this little town that the idea of the economy of communion matured. It seemed to me that God was calling our Movement in Brazil - approximately 200,000 people - to bring about a wider communion of goods, one that would involve the whole Movement.

Although I am not at all acquainted with economic problems, I thought that what we needed there was to begin businesses, enterprises. Their management had to be entrusted to persons who were capable and competent, able to make them operate effectively and profitably. These profits - and this is what is new - had to be put in common.

For what purpose? That of the first Christian community: to help those who are in need, to support them until they are able to find a job. Then, of course, also to enlarge and boost the businesses. And, finally, in order to develop structures of formation for "new men and women," animated by Christian love, "new men and women" without which it is not possible to build a new society.

The idea was received with enthusiasm not only in Brazil, but in Europe and other parts of the world.

Many businesses were born, and others were "transformed" in line with the rules of the economy of communion.

But this calls for an economic activity which - although taking place within the current economic system in force - opposes the mainstream criteria of economic thought today. In other words, we are going against the current, avoiding action that is contrary to evangelical love, promoting attitudes inspired by our spirituality which is based on mutual love and unity.

This project, which might seem to be a utopia, has already yielded satisfactory results. In November, 1995, the businesses that adhere to the economy of communion were 544: 182 in the Americas (144 in Latin America), 22 in Asia, a few in Africa and in Australia, and 333 in Europe.

Your Eminencies, Your Excellencies, Magnifico Rector, eminent Senate, distinguished Professors, Ladies and Gentlemen, from what I have said, I hope to have shown that there is a vast new Work in the Church, brought about by the One who triumphs with His strength precisely where there is weakness. "My power," said Jesus to St. Paul, "is made perfect in weakness" (2 Cor 12:9).

It must be concluded, therefore, that the honor which this doctorate expresses is not to be attributed to me, nor to us of the Focolare Movement, but to the One who, being One and Triune at the same time, is the root and model of every form of lay and religious society, and the first source of inspiration for every authentic social science. (Applause)