

(English translation)

Rome, Basilica of Santa Maria in Trastevere,  
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### Story of the Focolare Movement

Chiara with the St. Egidio Community

Andrea Riccardi: I'm very happy to be here this evening in Santa Maria in Trastevere, which is the church where we meet for the big and beautiful celebrations of the community. I am very happy that this time we are here for Chiara Lubich's visit, something we've been looking forward to for a long time, even though in a certain sense, it's also a surprise visit because we learned about it only two days ago. And so we are very happy that Chiara is here in our midst this evening and that she can speak with us.

What is it that I personally admire in Chiara? Chiara is a lay woman, a Christian, who has re-discovered the Gospel along with her companions, both men and women. And from the perspective of history, her story is a story of the love of God, a story that prepared Vatican II, that prepared human, Christian energies for Vatican II. We can say then that Chiara's Christian experience is an experience to which the Church of our times, of our century owes much.

I welcome her with great affection on behalf of all of you and I thank her for all that she will say to us. Thank you. (Applause)

Chiara: Dearest Ladies and Gentlemen, (unfortunately, I don't know all of you), brothers, sisters and friends, ...

I'll tell you something about the Focolare Movement.

More than twenty years ago, Paul VI had already said that because this Movement is a Work of God, it is something great, and therefore, out of proportion with the instruments God used... which might be us; he compared the Movement to a tree which has become big and strong.

Now, many years later, we have another Pope, and we can say that this tree has spread out its branches over all the world, to the very ends of the earth, and that this Movement is followed by millions of people.

However, like all the things of God, this Movement was born from a tiny seed. So this evening you will listen to many little episodes, many little stories which we could say form the foundation of the Movement's birth, and which can also help us to understand what God wants from it.

We must go back to 1939, many of you weren't born yet. I was nineteen years old at the time, and I went to Loreto where I had been invited to go for a course along with other Catholic students.

I went, but I don't remember anything about the course. I only remember that during the breaks between one talk and another, I ran to the little House of Loreto, where they say the Family of Nazareth lived.

I didn't have time to consider whether the story was true historically; I found myself there on my knees, close to those darkened walls in the little house, which is inside a larger church which is like a fortress. I was immediately overcome by great emotion, by a great desire to cry. I was taken by something I would define today as divine, and I felt that the divine was crushing me. I thought: Mary must have passed from this part of the room to that part; perhaps St. Joseph made these beams; these walls must have heard the sound of the Child Jesus' voice. And the more I thought about these things, the more I felt crushed by this... this something divine that overpowered me.

Then I would return to the talks, and as soon as there was a break, I would run back to the little house and each time I had the same experience, the same experience. It was as if that little house of Loreto, as if that Family of Nazareth had something to do with me.

I remember that we had all gone into the church on the last day. It was a beautiful church, bigger than this one. I was at the back of the church, and at a certain moment, I had a very clear sensation; it was as if someone were saying to me: you will be followed by an array of virgins.

I returned home; I was teaching at the time, even though I was young. And I met the pastor of the town where I was teaching. He saw that I was very happy and he asked me: "Has something happened? Have you found your way?" I replied: "Yes." He asked: "Are you going to get married?" "No." "Are you going to enter the convent?" "No." "Then will you stay at home and not get married?" "No." These were the three ways available to young people at that time. I understood in that moment that it was a fourth way, but I couldn't describe it. All I knew was that it had something to do with the little house of Loreto, with the Family of Nazareth, with the Family of Nazareth, with many virgins, two virgins with Jesus in the midst.

Then I returned home, some time passed, a few years, and in 1943 the war broke out. I was in Trent then... at home. I was teaching in another valley and still studying, I was studying philosophy. I remember that one day... I told this story the other day in a television interview, perhaps some of you heard it, right after the Pope's *Angelus*. They asked me about this vocation of mine, and so I explained that I was at home, with my little sisters, and it was cold outside, terribly cold. We were rather poor, and my mother had asked one of us to go and get some milk. She didn't ask me because my parents wanted me to concentrate on my studies; she asked my sisters who, poor things, weren't very enthusiastic about going because it was very cold.

In that moment, I felt urged to make an act of love. I said: "Mom, I'll go!" I took the bottle and went for the milk.

The farm that sold milk was about a kilometre and a half away. I remember that when I was half way there, I stopped because I became aware of something. In that moment, even though nothing happened, it was as if heaven had opened up, it was as if a voice came down and said to me: "Give yourself completely to me." I understood that it was the call, a call to give myself completely to God, to choose God as the ideal of my life.

When I returned home, I wrote a letter to my confessor, who immediately wanted to see me in order to explain this to me and to prepare me, also to make me aware of all the difficulties I would come up against. Among other things, he said: "Your sisters will get married, your brother will get married, and you'll remain alone for the rest of your life, you'll be alone." But I thought to myself: For as long as there is a tabernacle, I will never be alone.

He saw that I was very convinced, and so a few days later, he sent me a letter telling me that on the day before the feast of the Immaculate Conception, 1943, I should go to the church, where everything would be prepared, so that I could give myself completely to God.

On that morning, the day before the Immaculate Conception, I remember that it was very cold again, and there was also a storm. I walked... holding my umbrella in front of me so that I could go ahead. I reached the top of the hill where the little church was. The priest had prepared a kneeler in front of the altar. He asked me to take my place at the kneeler and Mass began.

I brought a small missal with me, which was customary at that time: it was nice and small, and in Latin. I followed the Mass with the missal. And then, just before Communion, the moment came for me to pronounce the formula of my total consecration to God.

I said it, but an instant before doing so, I understood what I was doing (I was 23 years old, I was young, still studying): I was leaving everything, not so much studies or work, but the world, I was leaving the world.

In realizing this, I remember that in that moment, a tear fell; I had the impression... that a bridge was falling behind me. And it's true. I would never be able to return to the world.

On my way home, I bought three red carnations with the few coins I had. Now red carnations have remained as a sign for all those who consecrate their lives to God in our Movement. There are always red carnations on that occasion which we put in front of the same crucifix I had then. I had prayed a couple of hours the night before, in order to prepare myself.

I went home. It was a secret, of course, between me and my spiritual director, but it was such a contagious joy that my companion, who had come for lessons in philosophy, immediately realized that something had happened. Of course, we started talking and the secret came out. Shortly afterwards, she too expressed the desire to do as I had done. Then I met the other girls: they told me that they wanted to do the same, and this is how the first group of focolarine was formed... all virgins and all consecrated to God. This was on December 7, 1943.

Time passed and we come to May 13, 1944. There was a very big, terrible bombardment in Trent. When we heard the alarm, my whole family ran for shelter to the woods outside of the city; that night we slept there in the woods.

There was a starry sky, I remember, but I was suffering terribly because I knew that I wouldn't be able to leave the city with them. I had to continue my contacts with the newly-born Movement, with these companions of mine, etc. Instead, I had understood that my family would have to leave, and I was the only one working and supporting the family.

How could I tell my mother and father that I wouldn't be able to leave with them? And so I kept crying, and my mother tried to comfort me: "You'll see," she said, "everything will be fine." Also my little sisters... were lying on the ground under the trees. And I kept looking up at all those stars. All I remember that night is stars and tears; in fact, we call it the night of "stars and tears".

When morning came, we began to go towards our house. We could already see from a distance that the house had been hit. In fact, bombs had fallen all around and the interior of the house had crumbled.

I was the first to climb up into the house because at this point, I had already decided even to die out of love for God... I went first so that nothing would happen to my relatives. Then they came in after me. I went up to my father and I said: "Dad, I can't leave. I promised God that I wouldn't leave." My father replied: "I give you my blessing." And my father wasn't a religious man!

Then I went to my mother. I was sure that my mother, who was very, very religious, would say the same thing. But my mother told me: "You... You're really ruining everything...", in other words, she used rather strong words. But I couldn't leave.

Then, they decided to set out towards the mountains around six in the morning. At a certain point, I had to put the mountain sack I was supposed to carry on my mother's curved back. I could hardly stand it any longer, but I watched them as they went towards the mountains; not even they knew where they would go.

Then I went towards the city. The war had really destroyed everything; it was a disaster: trees had fallen onto the streets, St. Claire's hospital had also been hit, and there were many victims. As I was going towards the city, all of a sudden a woman came up to me; she took me by the shoulders and shouted: "Four of my family have died, four of my family have died!" In that moment I understood that I had to put aside my small suffering in order to live the sufferings of humanity.

I kept walking, and then what did I do? I went looking for my companions to see if they were still alive or if they were under the debris. I looked for them and I found them all; no one had been killed.

So then we started looking for a place to live; we found a little apartment - two rooms - and we began to live there.

Of course, the war continued and the bombs kept falling; we had to take refuge in the closest air-raid shelters. But these shelters were not very safe. There were no doors, so if a bomb fell close by, we

were finished. Fortunately, there was a lot of rock nearby. I remember that once a bomb fell over our shelter, and a great deal of dust entered; we were all on the ground, etc., but fortunately, we were saved.

We couldn't bring anything with us to the air-raid shelters, but I had put a small copy of the Gospel in my pocket. So when I was there with my companions, waiting until it was safe to go out, we opened the Gospel and read it. And there, something absolutely new happened: those words, which we had read many times in the past, heard so many times from the pulpits, appeared to be extraordinarily new; they were filled with light. We understood that those words could be put into practice at once. They were universal words, made for every man, woman, and child... for everyone. They were eternal words, for all times, therefore also for our times.

And so we took one sentence, for example: "Love your neighbour as yourself." We wondered: who is our neighbour? Oh, it's that lady there, that poor woman, that other elderly woman, so you can go to her, you to that other... you can accompany her home, you can take those children, you can buy some food, etc. And then we went outside, of course - when the alarm had stopped and there was no longer any danger of bombs - to help all those who were suffering. There were people who were wounded, sick... women waiting for their husbands who hadn't returned; orphans.... We went out trying to help our neighbour, our neighbour, all kinds of neighbours.

They came to our little apartment too and they ate at our table: there was a focolarina and a poor person, a focolarina and a poor person, a focolarina and a poor person. Also words like: "Whatever you did to the least, you did to me", made us immensely happy: we can love Jesus continually. "Whatever you did to the least, you did to me, you did to me, you did to me...". The universal judgement came into evidence here, where Jesus says: "I was naked and you clothed me; I was hungry...", we did it to Jesus: "You did it to me," and at the end of our lives he will tell us: "You did it to me."

Since some of us were still studying, you know how it is, to know the questions of a final exam is fantastic. If we had only known the questions we would be asked by our professors at the university, we would have prepared ourselves better. Here, we can see that Jesus is much more understanding than our professors: he told us ahead of time: "I was naked, and you clothe me..." "But when, Lord, did we see you in need, when did we see you hungry, when....?" "Every time you did this to one of my brothers, you did it to me." So we must always do things for Jesus, for Jesus, etc. So everything went ahead very well because we had the Gospel in our hands.

The war continued and we wondered: "How can we truly have God as our Ideal? How can we love him truly with all our heart?" Because the war was a tremendous lesson for us: it explained to us that everything is vanity of vanities, that everything passes; it's the lesson that the war gives now too in the world. When our young men of *Gen Rosso*, that music group, went to Sarajevo, and they told this story of the war, the people there understood because they experienced first hand that everything passes, that everything is vanity of vanities.

In fact, we understood... because at that time I was studying in Venice, but I wasn't able to go ahead with my studies, which was my ideal; another wanted to get married, but she couldn't because her fiancé never returned from the front; still another wanted to enjoy her beautiful house, but it was hit by the bombs. We saw that all our youthful ideals were shattered and that everything was vanity of vanities.

In fact, I said to my companions: "Is there an ideal that doesn't crumble, that no bomb can destroy?" Within me I felt that the answer was: yes, there is, it's God. And so among us, girls, we said: "Let's make God the Ideal of our life."

Then we asked ourselves: "How can we do this, practically speaking, how can we do this?" There again we opened the Gospel and found: "Not whoever says: 'Lord, Lord' (not sentimentalism, feelings), but whoever does the will of my Father... that is the person who loves me."

So then we understood: in order to love God, we had to do his will well.

At this point, we understood that doing God's will was a way to holiness open to everyone, especially to us, lay people: a mother must be a good mother, a good child, a good student, a doctor... we understood that this is the way to become holy.

But then we asked ourselves: "Is there a will of God that Jesus likes in a special way. We can die at any moment. Yes, we're only twenty-years old, fifteen, twenty-three, but in these circumstances, we can die. Is there a special will of God? We would like to go before him at the end of our life having fulfilled that special will of God.

I remember that we opened the Gospel and found: "Love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than to lay down his life for his friends."

And so we looked at one another, and I said: "All right, I am ready to die for you." The other: "And I for you. I want to be ready to die for you." "And I for you. I want to be ready to die for you." "And I for you." All of us were ready to die for each of the others.

None of us died, but we could die to ourselves by beginning to put our things in common, to live a communion of goods: if I had two jackets, I gave one to the others; if I had two pairs of gloves, I gave one pair away; we could also share worries.

Something else in the Gospel that struck us very much were the promises that Jesus makes. For example, he speaks of the hundredfold: whoever leaves father, mother... We hadn't... yes, I had left them, but this wasn't the case of everyone. In our heart, we had to put God in the first place. So we had to put aside father and mother, and Jesus promised: "the hundredfold in this life and eternal life."

And after doing so, we really saw this hundredfold arrive. We needed to feed half of Trent, and all kinds of things arrived - sacks of flour, powdered milk, which was used during the war; jam, eggs... the corridor of my house was full, full. People brought all these things to us and we gave them out to the poor of the city.

Another sentence that struck us was that which says that the rest will be given to us in abundance; if we seek the kingdom of God, which is the kingdom of love, which is the kingdom of the Gospel, the rest will be given us. And we did receive in abundance: exams that we had to take went very well, even when we weren't able to study as much as we should have, or other things went very well, because the rest was given to us.

We read: "Give and gifts will be given to you." How often we experienced this! We were at home one morning and we had only one egg in the house. We had nothing else to eat and there were six or seven of us. A poor woman came to the door and asked for something. I looked at the others and said: "We have only one egg. Well, let's give it. We gave the egg and on that same day a dozen eggs arrived. On other occasions, the same thing happened with potatoes... with all that we needed: "Give and gifts will be given you," "Give and gifts will be given you" - it always came true.

The same thing happened with other promises of Jesus, for example: "Ask and you will obtain."

Once, there was a poor man who said to me: "I need a pair of shoes; after all, I have to walk. I need a pair of shoes, size 12." So I went into a church and asked Jesus: "Jesus, give me a pair of shoes, size 12, for you in a poor man." I went out and right at the door of the church, a young lady I knew handed me a package. I opened it: what was it? A pair of men's shoes, size 12.

Things like this happen constantly in our Movement all over the world, and they make us all the more eager to live this way of life in our Movement. It really makes you understand that Jesus is still alive today.... In fact, we used to tell everyone what was happening, and in just two months, there were already 500 of us sharing the same ideal, living in the same way, living the Gospel.

Then, of course, we learned to love one another, as I said, and our spiritual life took a qualitative leap forward. Then we understood why. It's because Jesus says: "Where two or three are united in my name, I am in the midst of them." We couldn't see him with these eyes, but he was present. And what peace he gave us, what joy, what enthusiasm, what ardour! Jesus in our midst helped us to go ahead

always; we never wanted to lose his presence; he was there. And since he was in our midst, he began to make us understand what unity is, unity among us, among brothers or sisters, unity in the world, etc.

Another episode: one day we were in a cellar; this time we didn't go to the air-raid shelter... the alarm sounded, and we were in a cellar. But we always brought the Gospel with us. We had a candle, and we opened the Gospel and found Jesus' final prayer: "Father, may all be one." We read it. It's a prayer - try to read it - which was rather difficult, especially for us girls at that time. We could understand something, but one thing really became clear to us: we felt certain that we had been born for that page of the Gospel, that is, for unity, to bring unity into the world, unity with God and unity among all brothers and sisters.

But how could we bring unity? Well, we had already understood: by loving one another, loving one another so that Christ would be in our midst. But how could we love one another as we should?

I'll tell you another episode: one day, one of my companions was in bed with wounds on her face because she had gone out to the poor, to a poor lady. She had washed her floor, cleaned her house, and she caught an infection. A priest came to bring her Communion, I was there too, and he asked me: "Do you know when Jesus suffered the most?" I had learned that he had suffered the most in the Garden of Olives, and so I said: "In the Garden of Olives." He replied: "No, Jesus suffered the most on the cross when he cried out: 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?'"

Then the priest left, and I said to my companion: "Did you hear that? Listen, we have only one life, let's spend it well. Let's follow Jesus, certainly, crucified, but in that cry, in that cry, in his abandonment."

We immediately began to see his face everywhere, in all those who suffered, who resembled him: in divorced women, because they were alone; in orphans, because they were alone; in those who were abandoned, etc. And we tried to love him even more than before because we saw his face in all these people.

But what struck us the most about him was the thought that in that moment he had truly lost everything: he was dying, he had lost his physical health, he had lost his disciples who were not there, except for John; he had lost his Mother because he had given her to us. He had lost everything. He still had the very consoling presence of his Father who was one with him. And yet, the Father asked him for this too, and he cried out: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

Through this very mysterious separation - because it takes place in the bosom of the Trinity, where the Word feels abandoned by the Father - through this separation, through all his passion, Jesus pays for the unity of human beings with God and among themselves; he brings about the Redemption.

We understood then that he is the key to every unity and so we immediately ran wherever there was disunity, for example, among Christian Churches, also in the Catholic world, because one parish might not be on friendly terms with another parish... we ran to bring unity because Jesus forsaken was present there. And we continued on in this way.

One day we read in the Gospel: "Who hears you hears me." We said: who does this refer to? The bishop. Heavens, we made a lot of noise here all over Trent; we've got to go to the bishop and tell him what's happening. We asked the bishop for a meeting, he received us, and we told him what was happening. I said: "Your Excellency, this is what is happening, etc., etc." But we had said among ourselves: we are ready to dissolve everything if he doesn't want us to go ahead, because God speaks through him: "Who hears you, hears me," hears Jesus.

So we told him everything with great detachment. And the only thing he said was: "The hand of God is here", and he supported us for the rest of his life, until he died, and he immediately approved our first Statute, the diocesan one.

Then time passed, and we come to 1948. Along with the women's focolare house, which had multiplied, the first men's focolare began. A young electrician who had come to our focolare heard us

speaking about our ideal while he was fixing the light. He was interested in what we were saying and felt called to live the same way of life. He said to us: "I would like to follow your way." So then he looked for a place to stay, and found a former chicken house. Together with another young man, who is present here, they transformed this chicken house and began a men's focolare house, which has also multiplied all over the world.

Then we met a very important person here in Rome, in Parliament: Iginio Giordani. He was a deputy, a famous writer; indeed, maybe he'll be canonized. He wrote about a hundred books; he was very ecumenical. He was also a journalist and was interested especially in Church matters. I had gone to parliament to ask him for something and he asked me to tell him something about the Movement. I told him about it and I forgot to ask him what I had gone there to ask him. I told him something of our story and he was deeply impressed. As we were leaving, he said to me: "Write down what you told me because I'd like to publish it in 'Fides'," which was a Catholic magazine. In reality, he wanted to find a way to keep in contact with us.

In fact, he became part of the focolare as a married man with a family. And he was so deeply touched to see these young men and women consecrating their lives to God, almost always on the feast of the Immaculate Conception. He was enchanted, and with humility, aware that his situation was a little different, he praised this consecration to God by all these virgins.

One day, I said to him: "But you know, what is important for heaven is not so much virginity; there are some very proud virgins. Those who love go to heaven; there are also many virgins in hell. Those who love go to heaven, so also married people. Come with us. You, too, can enter the focolare, insofar as this is possible for you in your situation." He did so, and an array of married people came after him, married people who are thirsty for perfection, who want to share the same ideal and enter the focolare in some way. They come to the focolare whenever they can, in harmony with their family obligations, etc., etc.

In 1956 the volunteers were born: another array of persons who do not have the consecration that we do, but who have another type of consecration, a very strong one. They become the soul of the far-reaching New Humanity Movement which seeks to illuminate all the civil expressions of the world, such as medicine, art, science, politics, everything. They are the animators.

In the years that followed, all the other branches came to life.

...

This is something of our experience at the beginning of the Movement. All right, Andrea?  
(Applause)

**Andrea Riccardi:** I thank Chiara very much for what she has told us and for the way she told it to us... so spontaneously. And I know that we've listened to her with great love because her story is the story of a Christian of our times, who as she told us, had the small book of the Gospel. That small book of the Gospel is worth more and is more forceful than many other books, than many other powers.

Chiara's words show us the fruitfulness of the Focolare Movement, the fruitfulness of her experience, and for this we must truly give glory to God and give glory to the words of the Gospel.