Chiara Lubich and Gender Sociology

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“Every time the church shakes on her columns, we see that a woman rises up to support her as the church stands on the verge of the precipice.”

This article sets out those points that define the societal influence of Chiara Lubich on relationships between men and women from the perspectives of sociology and the women’s movements. Di Nicola highlights four structural aspects, including Chiara’s status as a young woman founder, diarchy, sisterhood, and the rule of a woman president. The author also discusses six cultural aspects, including love at the center, the dignity of lay vocations, the conversion of masculinity, the conversion of femininity, going against the current, and wise ignorance. The author presents issues of concern and emphasizes that we are still far from solving the issues in our culture, society, and the church. But the Focolare Movement makes an important contribution, generating in its communities new relationships between men and women and new models of masculinity and femininity.

Premise

I would like to begin by establishing a few relevant points in order to qualify Chiara Lubich’s impact on society with respect to the relationships between men and women in light of sociology and the women’s movements. I will briefly illustrate four structural aspects (Part A) and six cultural aspects (Part B).

Part A: Structural aspects

A Young Woman as Founder

Even though contemporary historiography tries hard, it is not easy to write the history of many women who founded charitable religious institutions and associations such as Catholic Action, Project Woman, and so on. These women greatly impacted the work of the church by strengthening its charity toward the sick, the poor, and the education of young women. Sociologists of religion, historians of the so-called circumstantial history (who work

1. This article is based on a talk Di Nicola gave at the University of Trent, Italy, sponsored by the Sophia University Institute, December 16-17, 2011. It was translated in to English by Giovanna R. Czander (Dominican College).

3. See C. Dau Novelli, Società, Chiesa e associzionismo femminile: L’Unione fra le donne cattoliche d’Italia (1902–1919) (Rome: AVE, 1988); and also Paola Gaiotti De...
with indirect witnesses as well as diaries and letters), and general sociologists interested in the processes of change and in the type of attractive power that Max Weber labeled as “charismatic”⁴ have made numerous attempts to write these histories.

It is a fact that it was much more difficult for women than for men to gain recognition for their charisms when they were leading organizations and movements. It was necessary to find male tutelage willing to affirm the orthodoxy of these women’s teachings. In the collective fantasy, women founders remained under tutelage and were considered in biblical terms as “assistants” to the work of a priest, who would often end up replacing the woman and being considered the founder. In the Catholic collective fantasy especially, the model for women has remained for a long time that of mother—a generous and helpful assistant and a tireless worker but also someone who needs to be watched over and, when needed, reined in to conform to human and spiritual maturity. In fact, women’s creative work has remained partly hidden, forgotten, or simply undervalued. The cases of Jacques and Raïssa Maritain and of Hans Urs von Balthasar and Adrienne von Speyr exemplify this point. Jacques Maritain and Hans Urs von Balthasar felt the need to make known publicly the roles of Raïssa and Adrienne, not just as their partners but also as their intellectual and creative collaborators.⁵

Chiara Lubich, who was immediately recognized by her first companions as the leader of what became the Focolare Movement, was aware of the charism that God had given to her. When she perceived with sufficient clarity something that would go against or could potentially suffocate or change her charism, she was as strong as iron. Chiara was not a young woman who broke with the tradition. Rather, she was obedient both to her family and to her confessor. It would be useless to discuss gender conflicts. Nobody would have called her a feminist, and yet she did for women what many feminists would like to have done but were unable to do. For Chiara, goals and methods stemmed not from theoretical planning, nor from anxiety about finances or about social and gender conflicts. Goals and methods were not supposed to fuel the naive trust in leaders and their revolutionary projects but were simply and decisively to come from following God.

Chiara reasoned that because equality among human beings depended on the infinite dignity of being God’s children, it was necessary to find in the gospels the guide for a change in lifestyle and relationships. So, to those who approached her Chiara gave the certainty that they were loved by God, and as a consequence they found dignity, the ability to share their stories, and to communicate the Word publicly in their own way. When in those days after World War II did common women and men ever have the opportunity to go on stage and talk about God’s design on their lives, to be listened to, and to be applauded?

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⁵ In addition to various articles and collected essays, I have explored issues concerning the relationships between men and women in the following works: Uguaglianza e differenza: La reciprocità uomo donna (Rome: Città Nuova, 1988) and with Attilio Danese, Lei & Lui: Comunicazione e reciprocità (Cantalupa: Effata, 2001).
Chiara effectively changed the relationship between theory and praxis so that they operated in a way opposite to how things are done by governmental agencies such as the United Nations or NGOs, whose intellectual elites plan important projects using statistical data to generate abstract recommendations for new economic priorities that they hope might be turned into concrete actions. In reality, they have generated only grandiose and ineffective statements, mere slogans on the dignity and rights of women and sporadic charitable efforts, while the institutions continue to follow self-referential criteria, ultimately wearing out people’s trust. It is impossible at the same time to have an impact on culture and lifestyles, to render mandatory obligations and deadlines, and to control and sanction the actions of organizations and governments.

Instead Chiara placed first conversion of the soul. This was not a theory to be discussed or a practice to be analyzed. It was a process in which the assessment of concrete life was in no way underestimated but included in an effective and lasting revolution. From the beginning Chiara guided her young women companions in how to produce change in one’s own environment through making changes in their own identities and relationships. And she showed them how to do so together in order to improve society, which is what sociology has always aspired to do. Organization and structures would come later.

**Diarchy**

A significant aspect of the structure of the Focolare Movement is the presence of two leaders, a man and a woman, for each branch of the Movement and for each of its activities. This aspect ensures the possibility of a truly “two-voiced” representative leadership, consistent with the “uni-dual” anthropology of which John Paul II spoke. Both voices have equal weight and may speak freely, with no male clerical oversight.

Can such diarchy be extended to all structures? If it were, politics (from the Greek *politikós*) would be structured less vertically, in the Weberian sense, around the search for power, which is understood as the legitimate potential to influence other people’s actions. Rather, the Aristotelian public space in which all citizens are called to participate, aiming their conversations and actions toward a common good, would become more visible. Indeed, one wonders whether those institutions that do not practice a dual component (man-woman), from educational institutions to government institutions, are truly representative.

After a period in which the Movement was influenced by the church to separate men and women to a degree that was excessive but consistent with the Catholic culture of her times, Chiara Lubich became a leader in this new field of dialogue. She educated people to dialogue, to look at things from two perspectives, and consequently to change their distorted perceptions by integrating them with the “other half of heaven.” By giving women a voice in their families and in the groups and various institutions to which they belonged and by teaching them to share in the decision-making process, Chiara Lubich transformed the tendency of women to let men take over and to delegate to the men all public responsibilities (Incidentally, a study done by Russo showed that only seventeen percent of women accept roles of responsibility.).

In the meantime, Chiara promoted in men an attitude of avoiding unilateral decision-making. As Abigail Adams, wife of U.S. President John Adams, wrote in a letter to her husband on July 1, 1776, “I wish you would rely more upon yourself and less upon the aid of others.”

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president John Adams, claimed in her letter “Remember the Ladies”: “We will not hold ourselves bound by any Laws in which we have no voice, or Representation.” However, even without such representation, laws are still binding. Olympe de Gouges (1748–1793) knew this all too well. In her “Declaration of Women’s and Citizens’ Rights” (1791), she argued that if women could be given the death penalty, then they should also be given the right to vote. She ended up on the guillotine (1793).

Chiara’s so-called diarchy was a huge step. It was not a compromise taken to avoid a feminist rebellion. Rather, it stemmed from the need to give visibility to what would later be termed “uni-duality.” Indirectly, Chiara promoted the embodiment of the biblical statement, addressed to man and woman in the beginning, “have dominion over . . . the earth” (Gn 1:28). Today this need is becoming increasingly felt in light of the value of the respective gifts men and women bring to private and especially to public collaborations, as in “having dominion over the earth.”

What is the current status of such collaboration? I will not explore in detail the analysis most feminists present on women who advance to atypical positions, on women’s quotas in the workplace, and on the much debated issues of gender representation. I am going to focus only on the importance of concretely educating boys and girls from childhood on to collaborate, like the young people of the Focolare’s GEN youth movement. Chiara injected the GEN with those civic and Christian virtues that are indispensable to their future public responsibilities, virtues such as listening, loyalty, prudence, courage, and so on.

Since its beginning the Focolare Movement has effectively reoriented relationships, beginning with the ways of thinking that shape identity and guide social behavior. The Movement, inspired by the Trinitarian model of unity in diversity, has worked toward playing an active role in society through its many groups, convinced that diversity without equality is tantamount to discrimination. Equality without diversity remains overwhelmed by past anger, by a lack of alternate models, and by the reduction to a single model—usually a male model—underestimated aspects of genetic differences, such as pregnancy, delivery, and nursing, as well as differences in anatomy, hormonal cycles, the aging process, longevity, and causes of mortality. Diversity is life’s richness, but it requires maturity in relationships to allow for creativity, to promote resources, and at the same time to recognize the realistic limitations of one’s gender.

This maturity is connected to the meaning of the “lay vocation,” which refers to the unique characteristics of each person who comes into the world, bringing his or her own talents to be developed in the course of life. This marks the difference between personalism and existentialism, as well as between communitarian personalism and those false forms of personalism that give absolute priority to a fullness of life understood as the assertion of self and of one’s rights. One cannot be happy without welcoming what nature gives as a gift and without taking on the task of putting that gift “to work” in harmony with the gifts of others (Jede Gabe eine Aufgabe!).

**Sisterhood**

A favorite theme in women’s movements is sisterhood, a concept that falls somewhere between utopia and reality and promotes the connection among women as an alternative to a male genealogical concept (“from father to son . . .”). Sisterhood is one of those lofty concepts that, if merely proclaimed and limited to one’s gender, is...
immediately proven wrong in real life. In fact, today those same movements recognize the failure of a sisterhood based merely on nature. There is an ideal consonance that unites individuals in a stronger and more powerful way and that goes beyond, not completely transcending, sociological categories such as gender, social class, and cultural models.

Chiara’s group was different from feminist groups, which targeted women who were upset by their exclusion and who belonged mostly to a middle-to-upper social class. The young women in Chiara’s first small group came from the lower social class and from the same geographical area. They could in a certain sense be defined by what they were “not.” They were not relevant in society, not powerful, not married, not owners of property. Chiara addressed everyone and especially attracted women who committed themselves to a silent, daily revolution, who worked like tireless little ants to build new and meaningful environments in their families, organizations, and workplaces. Chiara’s ideas were taken up by women who did not appear on TV or in public demonstrations, who from the viewpoint of public institutions looked pretty nondescript, but who actually carried the heavy task of generating, caring for, and protecting others and who day after day fought injustice from the bottom. They did this without relying on advocacy groups aimed directly at achieving public power, which seem to achieve greater goals in the short term than in the long term. Thanks to women, the Focolare has made lasting strides that are handed down and absorbed through the milk and blood of mothers.

The Focolare Movement, which has always argued for a gospel-based universal brotherhood/sisterhood, is organized into separate clusters of “new” men and women formed by Chiara who, nourished by the exchange of experiences, by listening to the Word, and by a commitment to work for a new society, paradoxically promote sisterhood. By initiating many small communities of women, Chiara gave them a “social home” from which they found it easier to carry on a human and Christian transformation, to live happily the dynamics of unity in diversity, and to be willing to put their lives on the line in order to solve complex situations and let life advance.

Communal life, consistent with the separatist culture of that time, absorbed the whole life of non-married women. For married women, this life required the ability, which could not be taken for granted, to harmonize their unity with their spouses and with the community in which they were in contact. Although the unity of the small groups was built around a person responsible for the Focolare center, or a “reference point,” the meaning of the community had priority over its organization, its roles, and the search for individual sanctity as a privileged “beautiful soul.”

While feminist groups worked to include women in the distribution of resources, planned great initiatives, and studied how to conquer the top positions, Chiara encouraged her followers to subordinate every project to Jesus, who is present in the communion among brothers and sisters. Change then would be a consequence of a communal lifestyle, of one’s attitude of giving everything to God and asking everything of God. In fact, an assessment of the implementation of a lifestyle based on reciprocity between men and women cannot be made using “male” criteria such as the achievement of power, because giving more power to women does not necessarily result in a better quality of relationships.

Chiara gave a face and a name—“Jesus in the midst”—to the added strength that came with a united community and that could
achieve lasting changes for the good of all. That is the “something more” that makes the difference but that sociology is unable to identify. Nevertheless, sociology does attempt to understand it and recognizes it as the “added value” that makes the difference among the masses, the crowd, the sum of individuals, society, and community. In the Focolare Movement, faith in Jesus’s presence in the united communities transformed the meaning of the church, enabling it to mature with respect to the traditional male dependence because “two or more” did not need the mediation of a priest. The small group of women needed to stand up on their own and lean on the Holy Spirit, who speaks in each person but makes his/her voice heard more powerfully and clearly when spiritual, mutual, and active sisterhood is lived out.

**Woman President**

Founding an organization does not always entail becoming its leader. The risks involved in such processes of founding and leading are well known in the fields of politics, sociology, and philosophy. In his early writings, Hegel noted that when it remained a small and informal community, Christianity kept its powerful and pure message. When it later spread and became an institution, Christianity gained visibility and stability but lost intensity and purity. An institution gives structure to a charism but also freezes its “warm current.” The spontaneous and informal character of the Focolare Movement underwent an increasing and inevitable institutionalization because it had to become a social and ecclesial organization. Chiara did all she could to avoid changing her charism and to preserve its original uncontainable force. Only with time will it become clear whether she has succeeded.

One of the points of innovation that Chiara wanted to be spelled out definitively in the Movement’s Statutes is that the president always should be a woman. The Vatican’s approval was obtained, but not without difficulties. Chiara succeeded in obtaining it, with the pope’s direct support, because she did not seek power in itself but underscored the Marian profile of the Work of Mary. She also emphasized the Movement’s lay character, so as to preserve God’s design for it, having entrusted its origin and development to a woman.

As a result, the organization of the Focolare Movement, being based upon the same principles, mirrors the magisterial church, which is built on a male priesthood and its related symbols. In the Work of Mary, there is a co-president, who, according to the Statutes, must be chosen from among the priests-focolarini. This power sharing counterbalances the fact that the president is a woman. Among the duties of the co-president is a typical one for priests, namely, “to do what is necessary to ensure that the life and activities of the Work of Mary conform to the faith, moral standards and discipline of the Church.” Critics point out that in a certain way the Focolare Movement, from a juridical standpoint,

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9. “Declaration by the Congregation for the Faith on the Topic of Admission of Women to Priestly Ministry”: “That is why we can never ignore the fact that Christ is a man. And therefore, unless one is to disregard the importance of this symbolism for the economy of Revelation, it must be admitted that, in actions which demand the character of ordination and in which Christ himself, the author of the Covenant, the Bridegroom, the Head of the Church, is represented, exercising his ministry of salvation—which is in the highest degree the case of the Eucharist—his role (this is the original sense of the word persona) must be taken by a man. This does not stem from any personal superiorit of the latter in the order of values, but only from a difference of fact on the level of functions and service.” (N. 31)
10. Article 93b.
remains under the old tutelage system. However, although the co-president is a priest, he is also a focolarino and therefore “obeys” the president. In any event, unlike in the case of movements whose presidents are priests, in the Focolare it is recognized that the woman president is faithful to the charism and has authority and power with respect to the Movement; but from a doctrinal and institutional perspective she is still subordinate because of the male representation.

Underlying this structure is the identification of femininity with the Marian charism and masculinity with the Petrine charism, a most significant distinction that underscores the plurality of charisms and ministries in the church. However, if both charisms are universal and if both men and women are invited to take on the Marian charism, then a believer who is not Marian would probably not be a true Christian or a true human being, while the Petrine charism remains strictly male and has priority in the hierarchy. This structure, which calls for theological and doctrinal involvement, remains problematic for some. In any case, the Focolare Movement’s goal of mediating between ideal and statutes, in an effort to preserve the innovative energy of the charism, is relevant and in many ways prophetic.

Part B: Cultural Aspects

Love at the Center

Putting love at the center of life and religion is a rather common concept today, though the term “love” has multiple meanings. In Chiara’s times, “love” was a revolutionary concept since God was then usually understood as a judge, all-powerful king, and a law giver. In the dominant Catholic culture of that era, love was understood as a feeling in relation to romance and the emotional life. With Chiara, love came to be understood as much more than just a feeling—it was the very essence of being. The emphasis on the Trinity required a reinterpretation of theology and sociology because it required thinking of interpersonal relationships as an essential part of personhood, both human and divine. Therefore, what previously had been considered “feminine” in a disparaging way now became the universal and essential part of everyone’s being and behavior in the image of God, who is Love. This must have been liberating for women. If they were more attuned toward love (“You women, who have loving intelligence,” Dante wrote11), then this meant that they were closer to God and somehow this moved them from a pre-rational condition to a meta-rational and paradigmatic condition. It is not by chance that in the insights of John Paul II, femininity is the archetype of the whole of humanity, as he writes in the controversial passages of Mulieris Dignitatem: “The Bible convinces us of the fact that one can have no adequate hermeneutic of man, or of what is ‘human’ without appropriate reference to what is ‘feminine’”12 And furthermore: “From this point of view, the ‘woman’ is the representative and the archetype of the whole human race: she represents the humanity which belongs to all human beings, both men and women.”13

Dignity of the Laity

The encounter with the Movement has been well described by Igino Giordani in talking about his encounter with Chiara:

12. Mulieris Dignitatem, 22.
13. Ibid., 4.
As all married people, I shared, as we all did then, an inferiority complex according to which we laypeople, especially married people, considered ourselves inferior. . . . We felt like spiritual proletariat. [Chiara] put sanctity at everyone’s reach; she took away the gates that separated the world of laity from mystical life. . . . I recognized in that experience the realization of St. John Chrysostom’s deep desire—that the laity would live like monks except for celibacy. I had been nourishing this desire for a long time . . . and had supported efforts that could lead to eliminating boundaries between consecrated and lay lifestyles, between religious and regular people. The Church suffered within these boundaries like Christ in the garden Gethsemane.14

The Church today . . . also through the reform of consecrated life, puts again charity at the center in order to realize a vital communion between two categories: the religious and, as it was said, the . . . non-religious, between the chapel and the factory. For both are called to perfection.15

Thus, the Focolare Movement has been and continues to be a prophetic vehicle of change, both for its returning dignity to the laity, who are able to interpret the Word through their lives and share their experiences in the Movement and with the public, and for its focus on service, which is typical of the ministry of priesthood.

Where are we with the renewal of the church? Are we going ahead, taking small steps? Or is it true that sometimes, even laymen and laywomen get stuck in a kind of clericalism that, according to Vatican II, delays the “time of the laity” and allows not for true equality in baptism but rather projects a deformed image of communion in the church? Did the promising early prophetic seeds of the Movement Chiara planted come true? Maybe only in part, because it is difficult for innovative practices to find correspondence in traditional church structures.

Conversion of Masculinity

The men who approached Chiara’s charism have, since the beginning, been transformed into new men because they embraced a new model of masculinity in the context of a Marian spirituality. This transformation was not an explicit goal of the Movement but stemmed from Chiara’s ideal and from her way of presenting the characters of Jesus and Mary that went against the prevailing concept of masculinity at the time.

Chiara’s ideas even today struggle against antifeminist models: husbands and companions who hesitate to take on responsibility and caring roles in the family, and who on average enjoy more free time and have a hard time living out relationships based on real reciprocity. These attitudes are demonstrated by cases of violence against women, “which are consistent with a distorted, mistaken concept of sexuality.”16 The culture of mass media, though imbued with feminism, is still focused on crimes and violence: a pregnant young woman is buried alive by her lover to avoid a scandal; a brother kills his sister for failing to abide by family rules on marriage; a young woman disappears and is found dead, killed by three

of her peers because she was pregnant; a Pakistani immigrant kills his daughter for having an Italian boyfriend; a woman is cut into pieces and thrown into a ditch. Cases of rape, both individual and gang rape, are numerous, not to mention more common behaviors such as harassment and stalking.

Women’s groups too often promote initiatives aimed at opposition, advocacy, and punishment only in the judicial sphere while failing to do enough to oppose the masochistic mentality absorbed through culture. Yet the struggle is lost from the beginning if the goal is to effect change through the promulgation of new decrees. Furthermore, any freedom for women is impossible unless there are corresponding changes in men. In an open letter dated 1997, the group “Project Woman” wrote:

We write to you men because we want to dialogue with you. As Christian women, we are convinced that both men and women are similar to God who is a relationship and that communication is not accidental. We are writing in order to be listened to and to listen; to eliminate stereotypes and bring about true knowledge; to build a dialogue free from the wish to dominate and which, realizing that reality can be interpreted in many different ways, can create bridges. We are writing so that the richness of our different languages may not be lost, but may bring us to dialogue and to achieve the truth. . . . We await your input and trust that you will not disappoint us. Your companions on the journey.17

Encouraging answers were not lacking from men, for example:

By now, public opinion and common sense no longer tolerate these extreme manifestations of male sexuality and oppression. . . . Those who work in schools and social services in our country often speak up against the worrisome behaviors of adolescent males who are more inclined than their female peers to violent behaviors, both as individuals and as part of a group. . . . We are convinced that the mindset based on war and “clash of civilizations” can only be won by a “change of civilizations” based throughout the whole world upon a new quality of relationships between men and women.18

The Focolare Movement brought about this exact change by acting upon the individual souls and trusting that not all men are aggressors and not all women are victims, as the radical feminist positions of the 1970s would claim. Each individual is responsible for choosing which models to follow and for committing oneself to having an active role in society based on good practices. Young men and women in the Movement are encouraged to be well educated, to improve their skills, to learn to dialogue, and even to engage in healthy competition while respecting the rules and rejecting corruption and humiliating shortcuts.

Therefore, postwar societies owe to the Focolare Movement the birth of innumerable “new men and women” as an answer of the Spirit to the need to renew men’s identity. The “new man” is a


much later development, expressed by feminists such as Élisabeth Badinter and Raewyn W. Connell in their analysis of “gender order.” Observing any group in the Focolare Movement confirms the presence of such “new men” who have developed the sensibility for maintaining relationships and who are capable of caring for others, listening, and obeying. These men demonstrate an ability to reconcile with their own masculinity traits usually associated with femininity.

The Conversion of Femininity

When Chiara founded the GEN youth movement, the second wave of the feminist movement was developing first within the broader student movement of 1968 and later through involvement in political exploration and reflection, mostly autonomously. It was a time of civil and political struggle, of cultural change, of foundational theoretical reflection, which radically changed the terms of political and civil citizenship. It was a time that yielded numerous achievements, some of which were not true achievements, such as when women embraced as their own the model of masculinity they had set out to fight.

What the Catholic world and the Focolare Movement suggested could not be classified according to the two main approaches to the nature of inequality proposed by the sociologist Anthony Giddens: “functional” and “feminist.” According to a functional approach, gender differences contribute to social stability and integration. Talcott Parsons’s position is well known: The family is an efficacious agent of socialization if it is founded upon a clear gender-based division of labor, where women have expressive roles while men have instrumental roles. The woman–mother role is emphasized as a function of the family because (according to Bowlby) it is essential to the primary socialization of children. Without the mother’s presence, the children’s socialization is severely compromised. The roles of mother and wife take priority over the woman herself.

As for the feminist approaches, there were clear differences between the three main approaches (not counting so-called black feminism):

- Liberal feminism focuses on the single factors that contribute to gender inequality, such as sexism and job discrimination, and on corresponding attempts to gradually reform the system from within by giving priority to rights.
• Marxist feminism maintains the Marxist dualistic model, substituting as its enemy the male for the bourgeoisie.
• Radical feminism considers the subordination of women the result of a whole system that must be defeated through the subversion of patriarchal structures, not just by advocating for rights and focusing on the material sphere.

Christian feminism does not want to engage in a struggle against masculinity but in a struggle shared by men and women for a better society. While the Catholic world has given clear signs that it rejects these other feminist approaches, one wonders whether it has succeeded in giving prominence to Catholic women who are both strong and feminine, who have authority, and who carry out constructive dialogue with everyone. Or did the Catholic world limit itself to homilies that expected such reciprocity to be implemented in the next world? As for Chiara, maybe she would have shared Marx’s position, taken up by Fourier, according to which “social progress can be measured exactly by the social position of women,” but she would not have agreed with the exaltation of the socio-economic sphere as the only sign of freedom and dignity of women.

Chiara demonstrated a commitment nourished by that prudence which allows the wise master of the household in the gospels to extract from his treasure “what is new and what is old” (Mt 13:52). She saw the need to work within a discontinuous continuity in order not to alarm the more conservative environments (the encyclical Mulieris Dignitatem, as well as John Paul II’s Letter to Women, was then far from being conceived). At the same time, she made a decisive thrust toward change. Concretely, Chiara did not share the common assumption that the essential spiritual vocation for a woman was to be a good mother and housewife. This assumption was responsible for the alienation of women from politics and from the social sphere and for attitudes of false humility and service that clash with contemporary culture.

Within the Focolare Movement, the term “feminism” is not used. Rather the term “revolution” is used to indicate a process of change initiated by sharing one’s choice of God as one’s Ideal. Having the gospels as a reference point in personal, family, social, and community life was liberating, as many women from different parts of the world maintain. It freed them from external and internal constraints, from ideologies, family stereotypes, and their own aspiration to false ideals. These women overcame their

23. Karl Marx, Lettere a Kugelmann (Rome: Rinascita, 1950), 89.
24. Jacques Perret, who had the task of providing the profile of a typical Christian woman, wrote, “Once the label ‘Christian woman’ was given to a kind of sorrowful virgin or a fatally joyful one, usually married to a non-believer whom she would persecute during her whole life with good service, patience, and virtue, in the hope that he would one day convert. . . . Once she was married, the young Christian woman tended to be committed exclusively to her work within her family. The whole Christian tradition on marriage tends to introduce to her this type of life as a way to forget about herself, to humbly devote herself daily to her husband and children, whom she desires in abundance. . . . A Christian woman saw all this very simply and joyfully because she believed that by behaving this way she did God’s will and lived according to her nature. However, in the name of humility and submission to the law of her status, this ends up being a dressing for misery, spiritual laziness, pure and simple stupidity, promoted once again as Christian virtues.” Jacques Perret, “The Christian Woman of Manners,” Esprit: 392–94, an article co-authored with Emmanuel Mounier, who edited in particular the second part, “And in Christian Thought,” 396–407. Concerning the relationship between feminism and the personalism of Mounier, see Giulia P. Di Nicola, “Man and Woman in the Personalism of Mounier,” in The Personalist Question, ed. Attilio Danese (Rome: Città Nuova, 1986), 150–67.
low self-esteem, their tendency to see themselves as victims, and the shyness that transforms intelligent, articulate, and bold little girls into adolescents affected by the “Cinderella complex”—the tendency to bury their talents and hide while waiting for Prince Charming.

It is difficult to estimate the repercussions of this “silent revolution,” whose results are not labeled, that spreads without publicity, and that does not match the evaluation criteria of those who measure the strength or fragility of women’s emancipation on the basis of women’s position in the “Gender Equity Index.” We know that in 2007, Social Watch, which includes a network of more than four hundred nongovernmental organizations from sixty countries, developed the idea of a Gender Equity Index (GEI) in order to make gender inequalities more visible and to monitor their evolution in various countries. The information collected is used to classify and rank these countries in accordance with indicators in three fields: education, economic participation, and empowerment.

While the Focolare may not have shown up on the GEI, the Movement, unlike many Catholic environments at the time, did not prevent women from being empowered. Women were considered adequate to take on positions of power, and they were invited to accept responsibly if the need stemmed from life circumstances and if everyone would benefit from their doing so. However, their conquest could not be considered a criterion of their emancipation. Their emancipation took place in their communities through living their spirituality, which led them to create their own identities and take on more responsibilities. In other words, the Focolare Movement aimed itself at mutually female and male types of commitments in its members’ communities. This focus promoted the shaping of dignified, well-balanced, and happy female identities.

Women were freed from the inner “dominion” of men that identifies them as “wife of” or “daughter of” or “the woman connected to.” Authority and autonomy in daily life could be achieved by treasuring love and by suffering in healthy ways that are the heart of Christianity. However it is important to note that Chiara avoided giving a fixed and static definition of gender, thereby avoiding the excesses associated with defining the metaphysical substance of femininity. In her eyes, the person, with his/her freedom and dignity, came before his/her sexual identity.

Once—and we are not nostalgic about this time—specific and rigid male and female behavioral patterns corresponded to specific physical characteristics. The male pattern was identified with strength, authority, and rationality, while the feminine pattern was identified with emotion, obedience, and intuition. Today, these stereotypes are broadly questioned, and we are witnessing a counter-reaction: the elimination of differences. Intuitively, Chiara succeeded in avoiding both extremes—the naturalization of gender differences and the cultural counter-reaction to this naturalization. On the one hand, a human being wants to feel self-made, and this entails taking responsibility for his/her actions. On the other hand, a person cannot develop his/her talents without or against his/her own body, with its specific morphogenic, hormonal, and physiological characteristics. Otherwise, when nature is violated, it avenges itself, violating us in turn, as wise thinkers from the past well understood: “Natura non facit saltum” [Nature makes no jumps] (Linneus) and “Natura enim non nisi parendo vincitur” [Nature to be commanded must be obeyed] (Bacon).

This ancient wisdom is neglected by those who exalt the uni-pluri-sex pattern, confuses what is exceptional with what is commonly found, and assumes that there are five possible and
equivalent sexual orientations. Feminists seem to have forgotten the years of Women’s Studies devoted to exploring difference in order to embrace it. Environmentalists, while promoting respect for the natural environment and fighting to defend endangered species, encourage an abstract type of freedom for human beings. They argue in favor of the principle of biodiversity when it comes to nature, but when it comes to human beings they exalt the irrelevance of difference.

Chiara’s effort, with its inevitable highs and lows, was decisive in maintaining a distance both from a traditional conservative Catholicism and from an equivalence of unisex, transex, homosexuality. The culture promoted by the Focolare Movement avoided the exaltation of a unique and undifferentiated androgynous self-centered identity, because such an identity could weaken the heart of relational anthropology: the original man-woman reciprocity that is at the basis of marriage and procreation, as found in all creation stories and in the Bible.

Ecology of Perspective
The members of the Focolare Movement are called to a constant conversion that simultaneously allows them to live in their contemporary world and to go against its currents. It is first of all a question of purifying one’s gaze and of focusing on frameworks of meaning other than the dominant ones. Of course, this is very far from the “pan-sexuality” (Pitirim Aleksandrovich Sorokin) that disconnects eroticism from interpersonal relationships and care. On these topics, Chiara, who in the Focolare had a “protective shell,” did not focus on or encourage forward-looking struggles against evil. She preferred to go ahead on her own journey, aware that a kind of new social “ecology” was being accomplished in the Movement.

Our distance today from the feminism that linked women’s empowerment with the conquest of sexual and emotional freedom is striking. Yet in the 1960s, feminism and the fight against pornography were aligned. Only later did they end up tolerating disparaging language, degrading shows, vulgarity, and the nauseating exposure of bodies without respect. Today, the positions are nuanced, but there are some who consider prostitution a job just like other jobs, as long as it entails increased sexual freedom. Yet the

25. In 1948, Alfred Kinsey, in his essay *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1948), began to revolutionize the concept of sex and to create awareness through the series of “Kinsey Reports.” The figure that ten percent of the population is homosexual came from these reports. Yet, when President Bill Clinton commissioned the best universities to perform the same research the percentage turned out to be about one percent. Most national surveys put the figure at between one and two percent.
27. Starting at the beginning of the 1980s, the feminist movement, at least on its organized side, experience a time of reflection and withdrawal even though some of its issues seem to be well rooted in the conscience of the new generation and present in social practices and in legislation, especially in European countries and in North America. The recognition of voluntary interruption of a pregnancy becomes widespread, sexual molestations are punished, attention is given to a “politically correct” language, and homosexual organizations become more visible. Feminists, and others, focused on the issue of the increasing exploitation of the female body in shows and images and on the degraded representation of sexuality provided by some publications. The radical American feminist Andrea Dworkin (1946–2005) published *Pornography: Men Possessing Women* (New York: Penguin Books, 1981). In 1983 she began a campaign to obtain the legal condemnation of pornographic publications on the grounds that they violate women’s civil rights. Minneapolis and Indianapolis promulgated two ordinances which were declared unconstitutional. However, her initiative was partially accepted in 1992 by the Canadian Supreme Court, which declared a kind of pornography to be a violation of gender equality. Dworkin’s anti-pornography campaign was supported by conservative movements not accepted by feminism and was criticized by several feminists including Erica Jong, who saw the risk of censorship of freedom of thought.
diffusion of a distorted, genital, and masculine view of sexuality decreases not only women’s dignity but also their sexual identity, which is more centered on tenderness than on genitality.28

The Focolare Movement’s position in this field could give the impression of being backward. But today numerous studies affirm the dangers connected to holding certain positions. This is not a case of advocating for moralistic censorship, but it would not be fair, for example, to pretend that pornography is harmless. Rather than aligning with intellectual women, who are often entangled in ideologies or “schools” of power, Chiara’s position was closer to that of regular women, especially the betrothed or married, who do not consider pornography to be harmless. Clinical trials confirm that habitual users of pornography, because of the release of hormones linked to pleasure, become addicted to it. The mind seeks increasingly powerful and extreme gratification, dreams, stimulation, and sexual experiences. Unstable or impressionable minds that are not inclined to critical thinking may be led to act out what they see in the images, whether it is a sexual act or a murder. Sex addicts tend to demand from their wives, even with the use of threats, frequent and ever more exciting intercourse, causing in these women decreased emotional involvement and feelings of betrayal, diffidence, anger, and low self-esteem. Sex addicts have a distorted perception of reality and regard people and environments as being driven by sexual needs. They believe that men cannot and should not restrain their sexuality and that women have constant and hidden sexual needs that should be satisfied. There is a connection between exposure to pornography and forms of aggression within the family, triggered by the tendency to impose one’s desire on reluctant partners. The Focolare counters this addiction not directly but within an ecology that is free and open to love and unity through healthy relationships within a divine landscape.

More generally, pornography promotes “adultery of the heart,”29 which refers to individuals who, while not carrying out an affair, dwell in their minds on loving a different partner. This is what John Paul II was referring to when he echoed Jesus’s warning, “I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart” (Mt 5:28).

Adultery committed “in the heart” is not circumscribed by the limits of the interpersonal relations that allows one to identify adultery committed “in the flesh.” It is not these limits that exclusively and essentially decide the question of adultery committed “in the heart,” but by the very nature of concupiscence, expressed in this case by a look, that is, by the fact that this man whom Christ uses as an example “looks to desire.” Adultery “in the heart” is not committed only because the man “looks” in this way at a woman who is not his wife, but precisely because he looks in this way at a woman. Even if he were to look in this way at the woman who is his wife, he would commit the same adultery “in the heart.”30


29. When individuals feel respected and loved, they take from their heritage their very best in order to answer positively to other people’s trust. Hence, the importance of a “treasuring gaze” that is not reductive and possessive toward the other. “The eye is the lamp of the body. So, if your eye is healthy, your whole body will be full of light; but if your eye is unhealthy, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light in you is darkness, how great is the darkness?” (Mt 6: 22–23).

The concupiscence that arises as an interior act on this foundation (as we have attempted to show in our analysis above) changes the very intentionality of the woman’s existence “for” the man by reducing the wealth of the perennial call to the communion of persons, the wealth of the deep attraction of masculinity and femininity, to the mere satisfaction of the body’s sexual “urge” (which is closely related to the concept of “drive”). Such a reduction has the effect that the person (in this case the woman) becomes for the other person (the man) above all an object for the possible satisfaction of his own sexual “urge.” In this way, a deformation takes place in the reciprocal “for,” which loses its character as a communion of persons in favor of the utilitarian function. The man who “looks” in the way described in Matthew 5:27-28 “makes use” of the woman, of her femininity, to satisfy his own “drive.” Even if he does not use her in an external act, he has already taken such an attitude in his interior when he makes this decision about a particular woman. Adultery “committed in the heart” consists precisely in this. A man can commit such adultery “in the heart” even with his own wife, if he treats her only as an object for the satisfaction of drives.31

Should we not discuss all of this with young men and women rather than relying on sexual education presented in technical and hedonistic terms and considered only as liberation from taboos and “oppressive” relationships? Even better, young people should be taught to love, which involves learning to balance intelligence, feelings, self-control, and self-giving. Chiara educated her youth not so much through an explicit program against free love and pornography but through other youth and young adults sharing their experiences of recognizing the dignity and beauty of the body, according to an ecology of harmony that emphasized art, dance, song, sport, and dressing according to each person’s taste and personality.

Wise Ignorance

The formation of female and male identities needs to be advanced with the patience of a historical perspective and without preset assumptions. From a scientific viewpoint, the elements needed to qualify with absolute certainty the difference between the sexes are lacking. The biblical account suggests that we recognize the mystery that is disclosed little by little in history. Male and female were created “in the image of God,” but we cannot know the ultimate term of this analogy—God—and therefore all three terms, male, female, and God, cannot be the objects of “clear and distinct” ideas. We need constantly to keep in mind two needs: (1) the need to somehow hold an original difference that is the spring of reciprocity, and (2) the impossibility of reaching certain conclusions about its content. So many definitions of women are today incompatible with reality!

The Bible indirectly confirms this impossibility of reaching certainty. Eve—we rely here on the most metaphorical story in Genesis—cannot say who Adam really is because he comes before her, and Adam does not know Eve because he was sleeping peacefully when the woman was being formed by God. It is God, the creator, who introduces and reveals them to each other. Everyone—common people, scientists, clergy—need to have the humility to acknowledge that Eve and Adam cannot know each other without facing God together in the adventure of life. This is what Chiara’s spirituality does: It presents a journey with God.

31. Ibid., 3, 298-99.
through which men and women may discover God, themselves, and each other in their true identity and in reciprocity.

We know that precisely because we are made in God’s image, we are supposed to practice respect, fraternity, and mutual care and that these are not results that come only from above. Laws are necessary, but they are not enough. The most ambitious law addressed to equality can attempt to reduce the existing salary gap between men and women who perform the same job. This is useful to society and necessary for families to survive and for placing more women in decision-making positions. However, even laws abolishing discrimination, stereotypes, and violence against women cannot identify a process of building social relationships modeled on reciprocity as Chiara does.

True and lasting change involves hidden structures that need to be brought to light and discussed. The early sociologists were aware of this, as are the feminists who are part of the European Feminist Initiative (EFI), which argues for the need for a People’s Feminist Education project (EPF). The content, however, always changes. In the Catholic world in general and in the Focolare Movement in particular, the content is based on the ideal of the individual made in God’s image; therefore, it is focused more on being than on wealth, more on inner peace than on the satisfaction of needs, more on achieving union with God than on creating efficient systems, and more on mutuality and reciprocity in the image of the Trinitarian God.

Current Issues
When trying to assess and evaluate the relationship between Chiara Lubich’s inspiration, sociology, and all the related issues, one should try not to fall into making rhetorical assertions. Every movement, including the Focolare Movement, journeys within time and comprises individuals who support it and change it over time—whether these changes improve or degenerate it with respect to the original charism. Between an ideal and the manner in which this ideal is lived out in reality there are real people, groups, and environments that present issues. I would like to highlight just a few of these issues.

- The relationship with the institutional church has guaranteed the Movement’s faithfulness to the gospels and unity with the church during times when transgressing was all the rage and when dissenting from the magisterium was considered a sign of critical thinking and openness to modernity. However, there are some who became a-critically subdued, even when things were unclear, and thus took unity to the extreme, expanding the understanding of unity from unity of doctrine to unity of thought. Chiara’s position seemed too demanding given the women’s status and maybe insufficiently creative compared with a statement commonly attributed to St. Augustine: “In necessariis unitas, in dubiis libertas, in omnibus caritas” [In necessary things unity; in uncertain things freedom; in everything compassion].
- The Movement’s emphasis on virginity among its core members has been essential in its history. It is not necessary to underscore how valuable, both spiritually and socially, is the presence of individuals who are totally consecrated to the Work of Mary. This aspect, pushed to extremes, may have sounded like it diminishes the value of marriage, and, in general, of the centrality of each individual in the uniqueness and excellence of his/her vocation. This is necessary in a
society in which only the well-being of each individual builds the well-being and the good of the community. As a consequence, there have been difficulties in cultural and organizational aspects of the Movement.

- Gender differences, overcome within the broad horizons of the Christian Ideal, cannot be considered completely overcome in specific cases through the mystery of the Trinity. Even though the president will always be a woman, the Petrine charism, which is associated with power, continues to render the females in the community dependent on the church hierarchy in its role as mediator.

- The tension toward unity, understood as the overcoming of pure obedience and as aimed at the unity of thought, may slow down variety in thinking and stop the mind’s ability to progress and think outside of the box. Since unity cannot be homogeneous, each individual needs to learn how to live according to his/her belonging to the community while being aware of his or her gifts and boundaries. The “inner journey” takes place when one refuses to align one’s thinking with any direction perceived as contrary to one’s convictions. To respect the dignity of the individual and avoid slipping into dictatorial attitudes, it is necessary to learn to negotiate among the great ideals of reciprocity/unity/love, the concrete reality of one’s mind, and one’s conscience.

- We may wonder to what point the innovation of the charism, caught between the need to avoid breaking with tradition and the desire to address innovatively the challenges of society, and between unity and plurality at all levels, will be able to avoid tipping toward one of the two extremes without becoming contradictory and self-involved.

- It is well known that each individual develops his or her identity through the mediation of the group to which one belongs or would like to belong and whose goals, opinions, and possible prejudices one shares (as in the case of students or graduate assistants who take on the attitudes of their mentor, sometimes to the extreme, in an attempt to decrease the distance between themselves and the professor). Members of the Focolare Movement are no different: They share, at different levels of intensity and participation, the rules of the “group of reference” that implicitly or explicitly exert a certain pressure toward the charism of unity and that encourage individuals to conform to it in their lifestyle, ideals, and daily behavior. Each individual needs to become deeply attached to his or her group while avoiding attitudes that sociologists find which characterize “negative” reference groups, such as a conflict of values that results in following counter-rules and counter-expectations or even a full-blown rejection and struggle. William G. Sumner distinguishes between in-groups and out-groups, according to which the identification with the group one belongs to implies the “other” as part of the out-group or as the enemy. Under certain conditions, the “outs” can have a positive influence, and it would be important to explore what those conditions are. Studies in this field seem to help in avoiding a definition of belonging that closes the circle of “members” upon itself. This closed attitude would affect the quality of the group, since officeholders would be limited to those who are part of the in-group, regardless of their actual skills and competence. Is it possible to avoid an unintentional reiteration of the old clericalism in which the priest is always, because of his status, the leader in every field?
This clericalism pollutes the quality of relationships and the effects of every initiative. Can this behavior be modified so as not to nullify the specific features of a Marian and “feminine” work?

How can justice be reconciled with truth? It is not easy to fill the chasm between the proclamation of principles and actual realities. This chasm concerns all members of the Focolare Movement, but certainly it could be more damaging to women because they carry the DNA of a past culture and are ingrained with the mental structures of oppression, because structures that objectively are more penalizing for women than for men are still in place, and because an androcentric culture outlives any laws and continues to talk about “the feminine side” by filling it with “male” contents. As Pope John Paul II put it, we need “a further study of the anthropological and theological bases that are needed to solve the problems connected with the meaning and dignity of being a woman and of being a man.” (Mulieris Dignitatem, n. 1)

The great scenarios proposed by Mulieris Dignitatem certainly cannot end the work of a lifetime and of a thinking that needs to be re-explored and developed. Cardinal Ratzinger, in his letter to the bishops, wanted to focus the reflection not only on women but on the relationships between men and women.32 As Pope Benedict, he focused again on this topic:

At the origin of many tensions that threaten peace are surely the many unjust inequalities still tragically present in our world. Particularly insidious among these are, on the one hand, inequality in access to essential goods like food, water, shelter, health; on the other hand, there are persistent inequalities between men and women in the exercise of basic human rights. . . . Similarly, inadequate consideration for the condition of women helps to create instability in the fabric of society. I think of the exploitation of women who are treated as objects, and of the many ways that a lack of respect is shown for their dignity; I also think—in a different context—of the mindset persisting in some cultures, where women are still firmly subordinated to the arbitrary decisions of men, with grave consequences for their personal dignity and for the exercise of their fundamental freedoms. There can be no illusion of a secure peace until these forms of discrimination are also overcome, since they injure the personal dignity impressed by the Creator upon every human being.33

It is clear, however, that in our cultures, our societies, and in the church we are still far from resolving the issues that affect all the various cultures in the world and the movements themselves, which often diverge on these issues. We must also be aware of how these issues have sensitive connections within the development of interreligious dialogue.

Today in its communities the Focolare Movement continues to generate new relationships between men and women, thereby infusing hope and joy into a society that too often mistakes productivity and risk management34 as indicators of joy. The Focolare


has not underestimated gender-related issues, even if up to this point it has been more committed to living its charism than to elaborating it intellectually. In any event, the Focolare Movement has re-awakened in those who have approached it the desire to build healthy relationships, as are found also in the best of Christian feminism.

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