Chiara Lubich and the Transformation of Relationships
A Response to “Chiara Lubich and Gender Sociology”

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Di Nicola’s essay offers an interesting view of Chiara Lubich’s charism of unity from the perspective of one of society’s main problems: the wound in the relationships between men and women. The violation of the human rights of women, women’s lack of access to political and economic power, and gender discrimination are examples of this wound. The author sheds light on the significance of Lubich’s contribution to this central aspect.

Lubich did not intend to promote women’s rights or social position but rather fraternity, since all persons have the same God-given dignity. Her focus from the beginning was on interpersonal relationships, which is evident in the goals and methods of Lubich and her first companions. However, as the light of the charism of unity is understood as a source of social transformation, it is conceivable from this perspective that social structures and cultures can also be changed.

Di Nicola calls our attention mostly to this “micro” focus of Lubich, which is centered in the transformation of interpersonal relationships and the structures of the religious organization Lubich founded. Nevertheless, time has shown that key categories advanced by her charism also have the potential to affect deeply “macro” aspects of society, including the sociological, political, and economic arenas. The practices and methods observed up to now in Lubich’s movement, rightly reviewed by Di Nicola, are only a contextual and dynamic example of the impact fraternity can have on humanity. Feminism has usually concentrated on these “macro” issues; by contrast, the “micro” issues must be examined because they generally cause the “macro” issues, and, in my opinion, are the most difficult to address. Lubich’s conception of human relationships based on Trinitarian bonds directly addresses both the micro and macro aspects of not only relationships between men and women but also relationships in general.

The order in which these two perspectives, the interpersonal and the social, should be addressed is not irrelevant. Living, practical, concrete deeds in all aspects of our everyday lives are required first. Di Nicola stresses the importance of an education to collaboration and dialogue about diversity as well as for public responsibilities.
Social structures may not change if people do not transform their interactions; but structures can create ideal conditions for these transformations.

An essential aspect of Lubich’s charism that Di Nicola puts forward is that a Trinitarian understanding of relationships, in this case between men and women, cannot be approached from the perspective of harnessing power, especially in a zero-sum situation. It is not about who has the power, or sharing the power, or how much of it either gender can exert; rather, it is about gratuitousness and love. Relationships are not a means for achieving power, or a place to wield it; they are essential to personhood and are characterized by the giving involved. This fact offers the possibility of re-creating power as a form of social capital to be developed through cooperation and trust. Furthermore, men and women are invited to give themselves (not only their power) to each other in a relationship that is an image of God, who is Love. As a guide for living such Trinitarian relationships, Lubich proposes Mary to both men and women. As a Christian, she also proposes Jesus to both men and women. Hence, masculinity and femininity are renewed when gratuitousness and love are placed at the core of relationships.

Mutual donation clarifies what it takes to heal the wound of relationship between men and women: both need to change, to enter into this dynamic. Di Nicola discusses this requirement in her sections on the conversion of masculinity and of femininity. One could expand her logic in these sections to the conversion of other significant concepts beyond the realm of sociology. For example, it can shed light on the situation of female workers and how families and companies view parenting from an economic perspective.

Further regarding the transformation of society, Di Nicola stresses that the construction of female and male identities is a journey and will continue to evolve as long as diversity between men and women exists. It is this diversity that calls for reciprocity and offers the possibility of unity. This continuous transformation is also reflected in social institutions. But the anthropological conception behind such institutions does not always come to light. Lubich’s initial experience focused precisely on bringing into plain sight the building of fraternity. However, as Lubich and her companions deepened the charism they had received (a task that continues beyond Lubich’s death), intellectual conceptualizations of unity and their implications for culture and knowledge developed. Both aspects—namely, a rich experience of living the Gospels concretely and the intellectual efforts of understanding unity—are essential.

Di Nicola, by the end of her article, addresses current gender issues in the actual life of the Focolare Movement. She states that too much unity may hinder plurality and diverse thinking. The proposed opposition between unity and plurality assumes a concept of unity that may not consider the fact that there is no unity without diversity. This opposition, however, more rightly regards unanimity or consensus than unity. The latter is a gift from God, which, as in the Trinity, is difference and oneness at the same time. Perhaps the manner in which people of the Focolare have tried to live their understanding of unity has gone more toward uniqueness or distinction over time. But this search for how the charism might illuminate the ways of society must unravel in history.

Finally, Di Nicola proposes that gender differences cannot be considered completely overcome through the mystery of the Trinity. The Petrine charism, for example, remains associated with
authority and with the role of mediator. This reasoning can be extended to many circumstances in which social structures still reflect strong disparities between men and women, as well as other differences such as wealth and religion. The passage from Trinitarian interpersonal relationships to social structures based on fraternity therefore appears to be a formidable challenge. The effort to analyze the micro and macro aspects of social structures, and to see society in its diversity, in its light and darkness, from the perspective of unity is, to my understanding, worthwhile. I thank the author for offering us this opportunity.