

Between Tradition and Prophecy

The Impact of the Personality of Chiara Lubich

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Abstract: *How does change occur in society? How does it occur in religion? A sociological approach to these questions deals with issues not addressed by historians. Is a given change primarily a question of contextual factors, or do individual personalities have an independent role in bringing about such change? The author examines the case of Chiara Lubich and the foundation of the Focolare Movement. He asks whether Chiara Lubich and the Focolare represent phenomena that cannot be entirely attributed to the normal flow of historical processes. What is the role of tradition in this story, and what stems from innovation?*

Claritas: Journal of Dialogue and Culture, Vol. 7, No. 1/2
(November 2018) 60–71 © 2018

How does change occur in society? How does it occur in religion? A sociological approach to this question, especially if focused on a specific historical phenomenon and a particular personality, must deal with questions different from those faced by the historian. Is a given change primarily a question of contextual factors, or do individual personalities have an independent role in bringing about such change?

The retelling of the story of the Focolare Movement and its founder, Chiara Lubich, is an interesting case. Here one might ask whether Chiara Lubich and the Focolare really made an impact that cannot be attributed merely to the normal flow of historical processes. What part does tradition play in this story, and what part may be attributed eventually to innovation?

Regarding the appearance of the worker-priests, the French sociologist and specialist of recent Catholic history, Émile Poulat wrote: “On a long-prepared soil, patiently worked, but not ahead of them . . . they appear to be as a sudden invention.”¹ I think something similar can be said of the Focolare Movement and Chiara Lubich. At the beginning of my study² on the origins of the Focolare, I tried to understand the religious, social, and political context in Italy around World War II, especially the situation in the region around Trent. After a close study of the local context in which the Movement was born,³ I concluded that the Focolare

1. Émile Poulat, *Les prêtres-ouvriers: Naissance et fin* (Paris: Cerf, 1999), 35.

2. Bernhard Callebaut, *Les Focolari. La soudaine invention sur un terrain longuement préparé* (Roma: P.U.S.T., 2009) (Master’s thesis in social sciences).

3. This study included reading thousands of pages on the history of the region. See Ottavio Barié, ed., *Storia del Trentino contemporaneo: Dall’annessione all’autonomia* (Trent: Verifiche, 1978); Alfredo Canavero, *La Storia del Trentino contemporaneo*, vol. 3. *Gli anni della Regione (1948–1962)* (Trent: Verifiche, 1978); Armando Vadagnini, *Storia del Trentino contemporaneo: Dall’annessione all’autonomia*, vol. 3, *Gli anni della*

should never have been born, since it was too much of an anomaly in the Trent of its time. This was, of course, a prescientific starting point. It was necessary to see whether this impression would resist further historical-sociological study. In brief, the question was whether Trent was or was not a fertile ground for the birth of the Focolare.

It seemed, in fact, that it might be useful to apply the Weberian idea of “negative privilege.” The Focolare was, in its earliest stages, eight times negatively privileged: 1. The movement was born of laypeople at a time when in the Catholic world the clergy dominated the debate. The analysis of several sociologists indicates that at the time, even in Catholic associations, ecclesiastical assistants decided the direction of and provided the expertise in religious matters. 2. The Focolare consisted of young people in a period before 1968, at which time although some youth movements have some importance, all important decisions affecting society were made by adults. 3. The earliest members were women in a world where men still dominated. 4. They were born, further, from within the Third Order of the Capuchins. This fourth factor represents a negative privilege, because at that time the associations of Catholic Action (AC) were in the dominant position in the Catholic world. The Capuchin Third Order appeared to be little more than a devotional group consisting mainly of older women. This, at least, was the common perception. Whoever wished to

lotta: guerra, resistenza, autonomia (1940–1948) (Trent: Verifiche, 1978); Armando Vadagnini, “Rosmini e Degasperi nella storia del Movimento Cattolico Trentino,” in *Antonio Rosmini e il suo tempo*, ed. Luigi De Finis (Trent: Asso. Culturale A. Rosmini, 1998), 137–60; Vincenzo Cali, *La storia del Trentino contemporaneo*, vol. 1, *Lo stato liberale e l'avvento del fascismo (1918–1926)* (Trent: Verifiche, 1978); Paolo Piccoli and Armando Vadagnini, *Degasperi un trentino nella storia d'Europa* (Trent: Panorama, 1992); Vittorio Carrara, *I cattolici nel Trentino* (Trent: Il Margine, 2009).

influence the direction of Italian Catholicism would do so from within the AC. 5. The movement was born as a “spirituality” in a church that emphasized charity rather than spirituality for laypeople. At the time, spirituality was a matter for convents rather than for the laity. 6. The movement was born with great attention to the Word of God at a time (before Vatican II) when Catholics did not have a developed biblical culture. The early members of Focolare were labeled “Protestant” (vangelisti). 7. Further, in Trent, these laypeople also practiced a kind of communion of property, and for this reason they were accused of communism. The norm among Catholics was almsgiving; the communion of goods was associated with convents rather than with laypeople. 8. They were born in Trent. In Italy, if one wanted to influence the direction of Italian Catholicism, one should be born in Rome, Milan, Florence, or Turin. Trent was the periphery, almost more Central European than Italian.

You will have noted that at least three of these eight elements are signs of the times that were dear to John XXIII: women, the social question, youth. It is also not difficult to identify a certain “elective affinity” with four avant-garde movements that prepared the way for the Second Vatican Council:⁴ 1. The biblical movement: The Focolare has an affinity with this movement in its attention to the Word of God, which the Focolare called the Word of Life. 2. The patristic movement: The movement emphasizes a number of gospel realities that are less commonly highlighted in the second millennium and in the theology of the Catholic Reformation. The Focolare spirituality likewise presents as central to the

4. Etienne Fouilloux, “I Movimenti di riforma nel pensiero cattolico dal XIX al XX secolo,” *Cristianesimo nella storia* 23 (2003): 659–76.

Christian life the life of communion. 3. The liturgical movement: This movement, which aims to favor again an active role for the whole people of God, finds many connections with the spirit of the Focolare, which is conceived as a people gathered together not primarily distinguished by age, sex, or field of action. 4. Finally, the ecumenical movement, with its slogan “That all may be one”: The Focolare Movement is especially attuned to the ecumenical movement, giving prominence to this verse from scripture as early as May 1944, just months after the birth of the group around Chiara Lubich.

In some sense, then, it seemed that the Focolare should never have been born, and certainly not in Trent. Nevertheless, after studying the matter deeply, I arrived at a second strong impression. For each of the eight elements whereby the Focolare seemed to be negatively privileged, they could also indicate on the same ground those items whereby, in contrast to the elements listed above, the Focolare was prepared already to be part of the future of the Italian Church. That is, the groundwork was already laid and the most vital forces in the church were already evolving in the same direction as the Focolare. The ground thus had been prepared for the Focolare for a long time and patiently worked for several generations, even in the Tridentine Church!

My final impression, which I arrived at through a synthesis of the contextual factors of the 1940s and their influence on the history of Chiara Lubich and her group, is that while the ground, particularly the ecclesiastical ground, was being prepared, it was not for the Focolare. It was being prepared for a more active laity, for a church more attentive to social questions and more able to exert an influence on society through the laity. And then up springs the Focolare, despite the fact that no one was waiting for

it! In this peripheral world of Trent, in the reserve of fresh forces in the church—the young people and women and laypeople in general—the Movement freed people from dominant cultural patterns of thought and would approach old and new problems in a different way. The surprise, the sudden invention, consisted in the move from Catholic Action association style to that of an ecclesial movement. But perhaps even more important was the switch in the content, in that the very first rule approved by the archbishop of Trent as early as in 1947, which labeled their insights as a “spirituality” that emphasizes the theme of the relationship of communion. Poulat formulated in the same sentence the long preparation and the effect of the sudden invention; in other words, his formula combined tradition and innovation, the approach of the “priest” and that of the “prophet,” to use ideal types dear to the German sociologist Max Weber. But what balance was achieved between the two trends in the actual history of the Focolare?

At this point, I felt authorized to address one of the most traditional approaches of the sociology of religion, as Max Weber did with his ideal types of the priest and the prophet,⁵ and to situate my address within Weber’s reflection on the bearers of charism as agents of change in traditional societies. The Italian pre-conciliar church seemed in some ways still rooted in tradition, and a charismatic figure could be a factor in stimulating change. Could the figure of Chiara Lubich be understood as the bearer of a religious charism, a prophet, then, that initiated some change in the Italian religious world? To address this question, I draw not only on Weber but also on other contemporary authors, including especially Enzo

5. Max Weber, *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft* (Tübingen: Mohr [Siebeck], 1980 [1922]), 259–79.

Pace, Bryan R. Wilson, and the late Jean Séguy.⁶ The great advantage of Weber's ideal-type approach is that it doesn't force us to say that the Catholic Church is the "tradition" and Chiara Lubich the "prophecy." The ideal-typical approach does not say that this here is tradition and that there is prophecy. Tradition and change do not exist in any pure form, as we cannot consider the figure of the priest only and always as a mere actor of the religious system and the prophet as the figure who revolutionizes everything. The ideal type is an abstract concept, and life is always more complex than that.

The ideal-typical approach only says that, in this time and place, a given historical figure approaches the ideal-type of priest or prophet. On a spectrum ranging from the priest to her double, the prophet, a concrete figure is located more or less near to this or that ideal type. Nothing more. In his article on Grignon de Montfort, a Catholic priest and founder of the Company of Mary, Séguy shows the heuristic value of the concepts of priest and prophet for drawing out the charismatic aspects of a figure who at first appears closer to the type of the priest. And it is precisely this aspect that interested me: Montfort, although obviously not located halfway between priest and prophet, being closer, as a priest, to the ideal type of the priest than to the prophet, turns out to have manifested several prophetic traits. This, in turn, leads to a much more complete understanding of this complex French religious figure of the 1700s.

6. Enzo Pace, *Ascesi e mistici in una società secolarizzata* (Venice: Marsilio, 1983); Bryan R. Wilson, *The Noble Savages: The Primitive Origins of Charisma and Its Contemporary Survival* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975); Jean Séguy, "Charisme, sacerdoce, fondation: Autour de L. G. de Montfort," *Social Compass* (1982): 5–24.

I felt intuitively that Chiara Lubich, who had always situated herself within the Catholic world and was therefore in part closest to the ideal type of the priest and on the side of the dominant religious system, exhibited some traits that had more affinity with the ideal type of the prophet. Furthermore, Chiara Lubich represented perhaps much more than a brief "flash in the pan," with little real impact on the world church and even less on the contemporary world. It is precisely her impact that interested me. Hence the title of this essay, "Between Tradition and Prophecy: The Impact of the Personality of Chiara Lubich."

In my study, I dedicated pages to the presence of charismatic traits in different periods of Chiara Lubich's life. First, I would like to name a few in brief, to indicate at least their impact or elements that indicate an impact. We observe a gradual emergence of the originality of the experience lived and proposed by Chiara Lubich and her first companions. Second, we observe the process of recognizing this originality and its institutional legitimacy and its convergence with the teaching of the Second Vatican Council. The work also illustrates the balanced exercise of charismatic leadership on the part of Chiara Lubich and her companions. The Focolare's original aspects within the universal church include the fact that a woman sat at the head of a secular church movement that also involved priests and the religious.

The first period runs from 1943 to 1949. In 1949, the Focolare group found itself finally free from any commitment with other associations and related only to the Archdiocese of Trent and the Diocese of Assisi. During this period, the most salient charismatic element is not what it seems. Of course, in the figure of a young elementary school teacher who interrupted her studies in philosophy to deal with a growing group of girls in an ever-intensifying

experience of new life, there is already the basis for a study of Chiara Lubich as a charismatic leader. There is a leader, a group that believes in this leader, and the perception, though undefined, of some kind of extraordinary gift. But this is also a very particular kind of charismatic leader.⁷ The young Lubich demonstrated a special capacity in human relationships; she knew how to blend into the group, how to create a family, how to put the most timid at ease, and how to arouse unexpected capacities in those around her. But in one capacity, she was particularly striking: With her speech, she knew how to evoke passion in those who listened to her with an open heart. Without repeating the usual formulas, she showed herself capable of creativity and originality in religious matters and inventiveness in acting effectively, particularly in the social commitment to the poor.

In just a few months, from this impassioned inspiration an unprecedented spirituality emerged. I want to indicate here the most evident, I think, dimension of Lubich's prophetic capacity: namely, the invention of a new approach to Christian life, a new spirituality. Nobody had ever asked her for this, neither her pastor, nor the Capuchin who served as her advisor, nor the archbishop. Not everyone is capable of inventing, of producing new speech, of articulating something new. Here, we find a full correspondence with Weber's assertion that the bearer of a charism must say or do something that is new or perceived as new. The first true

7. The examples are taken from my publication on a sociological interpretation of the story of Focolare, limited to the years 1943 to 1965, drawing on the Weberian approach to charismatic leadership and other approaches from studies inspired by the school of Social Constructivism. See Bernhard Callebaut, *Tradition, charisme et prophétie dans le Mouvement international des Focolari* (Paris: Nouvelle Cité, Bruyères-le-Chatel, 2010), 243–56.

theologian who met this young girl from Trent, the Swiss professor Léon Veuthey, was a specialist in spiritual theology.⁸ This encounter occurred in February 1947, in Rome. He marveled as he listened to Chiara tell her story, so much so that he wished to merge his movement with the nascent Focolare. For Weber, it does not matter where the novelty comes from, be it an inspiration from heaven, as Chiara Lubich was later to affirm, or a personal invention. To the sociologist, the origin is secondary, even though in this particular situation, the question has a certain importance.

And what was the impact of all this on the Trent of the time? It is well known that a prophet brings about not only consensus but also confusion. Indeed, dissent and criticism can be taken as signs of possible novelty. The first effect on the region around Trent is partially hidden by the fact that Chiara Lubich and her first group are part of the Third Order of Capuchin friars. Thus, for those who do not look more closely, the whole story seems to be best explained as a Franciscan story and as the work of the director of the Third Order. This continued until 1947.

The Archbishop of Trent, trying to preserve the originality that he had already perceived in 1945, pushed to make the Focolare into a canonically recognized independent group that was at the service of the Third Order, Catholic Action, the Crusade of Charity, or other local or regional initiatives. Chiara's resistance to the various frameworks of regulation that were offered to her became one of the most interesting problems of this period, and one that calls for further investigation. Why, Chiara asked, if they wished to live "that all may be one," would they need to establish themselves

8. Léon Veuthey, OFMConv, *La Crociata di Carità: La spiritualità del Movimento dei crociati* (Rome: Miscellanea francescana, 2001).

as a particular group, apart from other Catholics? Would it not be enough simply to be Christians like everyone else? The young Lubich was probably aware that becoming a distinctly constituted group would mean building barriers and divisions. Were not all Christians called to live in unity? This question persisted into the 1950s, until it became clear that a longer path would have to be taken to reach the same objective, one that required establishing a distinct identity to feed their contribution back into the church at large. It was not without difficulty that Chiara Lubich learned this lesson.

The effect in Trent in these first years can be identified in various ways. At the end of the war the group had become quite numerous and had become capable, for example, of organizing the reception for prisoners returning from Germany and elsewhere. In the weeks following the end of the war, in the square in front of the archbishop's palace, a reception center was set up to offer soup. At the time no other Catholic group was able to coordinate such an initiative. This center continued what the Focolare had been doing in the preceding months to assist the resistance. Their communion of goods had helped a few dozen families during the long years of postwar poverty, with the support of members of the Third Order and others who were confident that their contributions would make it to the poor of Trent.

But their notoriety and evangelical radicalism, and their effect on the youth also raised opposition. As is often the case, opposition emerges among those who are closest. The existence of the Focolare meant that Catholic Action was deprived of many of its young girls, and this created opposition to the Focolare throughout Italy. Beyond Trent, Catholic Action experienced some benefit from the contribution of focolarini, which often helped revive

sections that were experiencing difficulty and contributed strong leaders and managers. But in Trent in the 1940s, things did not work out that way, and so mistrust built up between Focolare and Catholic Action.

This mistrust emerged despite the fact that the archbishop himself supported the Focolare. The clergy tried to put the members of the Focolare to the test, and in the minds of the less qualified this produced a sense of mistrust and suspicion. I have already noted that the members of the Focolare were known as “vangelisti” (Protestants) and sentimentalists. From 1947 onward, the Focolare began to expand outside the region of Trent, and similar dynamics occurred: enthusiastic reception alongside criticism and resistance.

To illustrate another aspect of the impact of the Focolare, I would like to draw attention to the relationship that developed in the 1950s between the young Focolare Movement and Alcide De Gasperi and Giambattista Montini. A noted scholar and once a member of the University of Trent, Francesco Alberoni, in his book *Movimento e Istituzione*, pointed out that those who are actors in what he called the “nascent state” often find understanding among those at the center of the institutional system.⁹ There is no surprise, then, that in postwar Rome, the second city where the Focolare settled permanently, they found personal support in two of the most important players on the Italian scene of the time: the Prime Minister, Alcide De Gasperi, and Montini, the third in the Vatican at the time and a future pope. Furthermore, from 1948 onward, numerous contacts with seminarians, priests, and religious from all over the world opened up, and not a few ended

9. Francesco Alberoni, *Movimento e Istituzione*, 3rd ed. (Bologna: Mulino, 1986), 122.

up supporting the rapid expansion of the Focolare worldwide between 1958 and 1967.

Another indication of their impact is that in the 1950s, through Igino Giordani, the focolarini were to come into regular contact with a group of politicians who for years would gather in Parliament to share stories and the spirituality of the Focolare. Giordani was one of the best-known Italian Catholic authors, a journalist and member of parliament, a man of great moral and social teaching as a scholar, and the first married focolarino.¹⁰ In those years he was the best-known person to associate with the Focolare, which at this point was still in its early years. As for Trent, there was a real but limited impact.

The second period is from 1949 to 1964. These are the years of expansion for the Movement in Italy. In the late 1950s, the magazine *Città Nuova* attracted tens of thousands of subscriptions, and in 1959 a publishing house was founded to support to the cultural impact of this new inspiration. What relationship did the Focolare develop with ordinary believers, with the ruling classes, and with intermediate bodies in this period? The Focolare continued to grow and attracted a mostly favorable response from ordinary Italians. The group gradually spread throughout the nation. At the same time, however, at the highest levels of the Italian and universal Catholic Church, negotiations began as to whether and on what terms this new religious group might be accepted.¹¹ The popular response contrasted with the prudence of the church offices, following centuries-old procedures, that were tasked with approving and granting legitimacy in the Catholic world.

10. Tommaso Sorgi, ed., *Igino Giordani, politica e morale* (Rome: Città Nuova, 1995).

11. Chiara Lubich, *The Cry* (London: New City, 2001), 59–80.

Things got complicated for the configuration of the Focolare Movement in the 1950s. It was no longer as simple as it had been in 1947, when there was a small group of young laywomen. They now included young laymen and married people. From 1947 onward, as well, there were also men and women religious who began adhering to the spirit of the Focolare Movement and, some years later, the first diocesan priests joined. In 1950, the Holy Office became directly involved, studying the situation but coming to no immediate conclusion. The Focolare, through Bishop Montini and Igino Giordani, corresponded with Pius XII, pushing for approval. The Holy Office, however, did not see the usefulness of this lay reality, which, in its judgement, was still incompletely defined and so hard to categorize, compared to the already existing Catholic Action. But, after the third time that the congregation of the Holy Office failed to find a majority in favor of “allowing the Focolare to live,” in July 1957 Pius XII withdrew the dossier from the jurisdiction of the Holy Office so as to approve it himself. He did not manage to follow through on his approval, however, before his death. His successor, John XXIII, continued along the same lines, but the Italian episcopate remained closely tied to the opinion of the so-called Roman Party, to borrow the title of the book by historian Andrea Riccardi (1983) on the issue.¹² In 1960 the Italian Episcopal Conference (CEI) summarized in three points why it would prefer to see the Focolare integrate its members into the ranks of Catholic Action.

The CEI did not look favorably on this spirituality, which, in its judgement, seemed to favor doctrinally unclear points, in one

12. Andrea Riccardi, *Il partito romano' nel secondo dopoguerra (1945–1954)* (Brescia: Morcelliana, 1983).

of its sessions concluding that the Focolare followed a doctrine unknown to the church. The conference did not know how to deal with laypeople who, on the one hand, were so active and, on the other, beyond the control of ecclesiastical supervision. The system of such supervisors—called “ecclesiastical assistants”—had worked well for Catholic Action. Finally, these focolarini did not fit neatly into established patterns with clear separation into categories of gender, age, and modes of life, with a priest who as a neutral figure oversees the whole group.¹³ Somehow, without realizing it, Chiara Lubich had invented the category “ecclesial movement,” which follows the new commandment of mutual love and so puts clergy and laity on the same plane, the one that Jesus says marks his disciples. The prophetic development represented by the Focolare required the evolution of ecclesiology and a return of the concepts of the “people of God” and a royal priesthood. Such themes, however, were still rare in the theological reflection of the Italian Church before Vatican II.

Moreover, the Focolare was initiated by a woman. The norm was that the priest, the parish priest, and the ecclesiastical assistant would be spiritual fathers, and therefore men would be the ones to teach matters of the spirit to everyone. Instead, in this case, even priests and religious came to follow a group of young laywomen as disciples. This reversal, in short, scandalized more than one prelate.

How was all of this to be resolved? As early as 1960, the Vatican wanted to approve the Focolare, and in the summer of the same

13. In an interview in Genoa on February 16, 1988 Cardinal Siri—president of the CEI at the time—told me the story from his standpoint. Then I went to check the details in the minutes of the meeting of the CEI, which are found in the archives in the current headquarters of the Italian Episcopal Conference.

year, the seven bishops gathered in the Episcopal Conference of Communist East Germany approved the Focolare for their territory.¹⁴ It was only the second approval, after that of the archdiocese of Trent in 1947. And this approval remained discreet: The Stasi, the East German secret police, were aware. The entire German Episcopal Conference would approve the Focolare for all of Germany in September 1961. But the previous year, the CEI had brought to the Vatican a resolution stating that the Focolare was unnecessary in Italy, and this resolution was accepted by 18 of the 20 presidents of the regional Episcopal Conferences. Their conclusions, however, were dismissed by John XXIII and by the second-in-charge of the Holy Office, the Lateran theologian Cardinal Pietro Parente.¹⁵ John XXIII approved the Focolare officially in 1962, a few months before the Council.

Poulat is correct when he observes¹⁶ that certain debates that take place in the church address not so much the need for change but the amount of change that can be supported at a given point. Italians saw the need to be united under the leadership of the bishops in order to counter communism. Others wanted to work for longer term objectives and to be guided by more religious motivations. The former did not see a place in the puzzle for the focolarini,

14. The details of the story are told in the interview with the dean of the Cathedral of Berlin at the time, Bishop Haendli, one of the four ecclesiastical assistants, who prepared the report to conclude about Focolare Movement in Germany at the express request of Cardinal Döpfner himself, a history recorded by R. Betz on November 12, 1987, and in my possession, as well as the partial transcript.

15. Cardinal Parente himself told the story to Giannantonio Sempio, then director of the Focolare for the region in and around Rome. Parente knew Sempio as a young man in Perugia in 1956 (interview conducted on January 11, 1997, in Grottaferrata, in my possession).

16. Émile Poulat, “La science de la vérité et l’art de la distinction,” *Social Compass* 44, no. 4 (1997), 504.

who they viewed as a disturbance and as difficult to control. The latter were already in agreement with the Focolare but were in the minority.

When the Council met a few months later, after the famous early vote that rejected the approach of the Roman Curia at the Council and set in motion a more communitarian method, Cardinal Höffner (Cologne, Germany) met Cardinal Montini and asked him how many Italians had voted with the majority. Montini replied “ten percent.”¹⁷ This proportion corresponds to that of the November 1960 vote in the CEI on the Focolare: two out of twenty. These are two more instances where we can compare contrasting responses by the church, even as we recall with Émile Poulat¹⁸ that rarely are things quite so clear, since positions are always subject to evolution. Basically, the two responses demonstrate the clarity of the church’s vision. They realized that the Focolare represented a change of course, something new.

Why was it that some of these authorities, unlike their colleagues, saw the Focolare as bringing something of value? To understand this, we should describe the impact of the Focolare within the social and political culture of the time. Among all the factors, one emerges as having a particular significance: the meeting of the Focolare with Riccardo Lombardi, the Jesuit founder of the *Mondo Migliore* (Better World) Movement. He dreamed of first renewing the Italian Church, and then the universal, in a top-down fashion that was largely supported by Pius XII. Lombardi and Chiara Lubich spent a few months considering a merger

17. Hilaire Raguer, “Fisionomia dell’assemblea,” in *Storia del Concilio Vaticano II*, vol. 2., *La formazione della coscienza conciliare*, ed. G. Alberigo (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1996), 194.

18. Émile Poulat, “La science de la vérité et l’art de la distinction,” 498.

of the two initiatives. Lombardi realized that the Focolare would in itself provide the strength and people needed to support the dreams of a living Church. Lombardi would see these dreams as largely fulfilled but also surpassed by the Second Vatican Council. I cannot go into detail here, but this encounter is among the most significant adventures of the Focolare in the 1950s.¹⁹

Another meeting, however, was to be even more crucial for the future of the Focolare. Because it was “living for unity,” the Focolare came into contact with communism both in Italy and behind the Iron Curtain. In the early 1950s, some observers noted that young Catholics were easily drawn to communism, in response to their thirst for social justice. So, too, the Focolare attracted youth through their communal lifestyle. In various places, this meant that individual communists were brought back into the bosom of the church, as they were attracted to the way of life of the Focolare. The significance of this, however, lay in the fact that while such episodes did not become a mass phenomenon, they mattered because there was a collective effort on the part of Focolare to meet the social situation of the time: That effort went so far as to have focolarini live behind the Iron Curtain and share the fate of Christians there. This effort took place from 1961 onward. When the Berlin Wall between East and West Germany fell in 1989, the Focolare was the best represented ecclesial movement in the countries of the former Soviet bloc.

The roots of this collective enterprise date back to an intuition that developed through the connection with Bishop Pavol Hnilica, a Jesuit, who had escaped from prison in his homeland, Slovakia.

19. Callebaut, *Tradition, charisme et prophétie dans le Mouvement international des Focolari*, 357–62.

In 1953 he was looking for an alternative to help the church survive under communism, as the model of Christian life and especially the parish model were too weak and easily controlled by the regimes. Bishop Hnilica sought a group of lay Christians who lived a community life and had a commitment to professional and social action. If possible, these laypeople would subscribe to maintaining a communion of goods and maintaining a fraternal spirit in a manner even more demanding than what was lived out in communist cells. And they would do so openly, as did the early Christians. He also sought priests who would live exemplary lives as ordinary citizens, but he was especially interested in the testimony of laypeople. He discovered the focolarini and became convinced that they were the answer to his search. This was the first time anyone outside of the Focolare had recognized the impact that Focolare could have on social systems and life.

In the early 1960s, others began to envision the Focolare occupying similar roles in ecumenism, and in 1961 the Movement organized the first elements of their ecumenism, encouraged by Augustin Bea, the cardinal that Chiara Lubich considered to have best understood her charism in the 1950s. In 1964, at the height of the Second Vatican Council, Paul VI asked Chiara Lubich to apply this approach to the dialogue with nonbelievers through the witness of secular fraternal and Christian life. In 1961 or 1962 Bishop Pietro Palazzini, later to be named a cardinal, made it clear to the focolarini with whom he was in contact that he valued their contribution but also faced some difficulty in approving them, stating that to do so would require a revision in canon law. As it happened, canon law was revised in 1983. But it was not the law but the spirit of the Council itself that promoted the Focolare and opened the way for what were later to be known as “ecclesial

movements.” The focus was not to be on laity alone but on all those who made of the People of God.

During a third period, from 1965 to 1991, the Focolare had a real impact but little visibility in the worldwide postconciliar Church. It developed and grew geographically and in number, benefitting from ecclesiastical approval and the spirit of the Council. During those years, its impact grew on young people and on the family and society. Its impact also grew in the ecumenical world and, perhaps more surprisingly, in the area of interreligious dialogue.

I will list here two events that indicate this impact, developments whose objective weight is still difficult to assess. They were important because they broke down symbolic barriers, as reflected in the Focolare’s practice and culture of universal brotherhood. The first is the world gathering of young people from the Focolare (called Genfest) during the Holy Year of 1975. Upon seeing the 25,000 participants, Vatican figures observed that Taizé was no longer alone. One prelate commented, “In our own house [he meant the Catholic Church] we now have somewhere to send young people who want to meet a young Church.”²⁰ Shortly after Pope John Paul II met personally with the youth of the Movement at the Genfest in January 1980, he was inspired to launch the World Youth Day, an event that for many years was directed by people linked to the Focolare. In the decades that followed, the Focolare’s impact on young people, which had begun to develop in 1968, became a way forward, especially seen against the backdrop of the Western churches’ general difficulty in transmitting its tradition to new generations.

20. This comment was found in the archives of the World Gen Center, in the section related to the Genfest in 1975.

Another example of the impact of Focolare's action occurred in the 1960s, when an embryonic Focolare group began in the Maghreb, the Islamic nations of Northwest Africa.²¹ As a result, for four decades the region has hosted a growing Focolare community of Muslims, who have been able to express a warm, open Islamic version of the charism of unity. Despite their strong presence in these regions, none of the established Catholic groups (Dominicans, White Fathers, Little Brothers and Sisters of Charles de Foucauld,) have been able to succeed in doing what has come about: Catholics founding a Muslim group.

The impact of Focolare members, of Christians of other confessions, and of Muslims, Buddhists, Jews, Hindus, and others, is witness that Chiara Lubich's proposal for a viable path to universal brotherhood has not remained pure prophecy. The Focolare breaks religious and other barriers long thought impassable, even if the impact may seem limited if one focuses on numbers alone. All of this has been achieved without affecting such members' faithfulness to their respective churches, confessions, religions, or personal consciences.

In its first thirty years, the Focolare grew without making too much noise, and this also is the result of Chiara Lubich's clear decision not to respond to the media requests following her being awarded the Templeton Prize in 1977. At the time, she refused quite consciously, since the Focolare was still some way from realizing its potential, and other things demanded her attention. In brief, from 1965 to 1991 the Focolare unfolded and developed, especially internally, while maintaining its social and religious character.

21. Matilde Cocchiario, *Nel deserto fiorisce la fraternità: Ulisse Cagliani fra i musulmani* (Rome: Città Nuova, 2006).

We turn now to the fourth period: 1991 to 2008, when the Movement spread widely and became influential in the church. During these seventeen years Chiara Lubich made herself more available to the media and accepted honorary doctorates, honorary citizenships, and other local or international awards. These honors are, of course, always carefully chosen so as to acknowledge the needs of the Movement in its various contexts and in its service to the church and in other social or international situations. During these years, it became increasingly clear that the Focolare acted like yeast in dough. Rather than engaging in a few major issues that would give it strong visibility, it invests its energy in developing many paths that contribute to greater fraternity, not only in religious but also in social fields. It dedicates itself not to one or two areas but to many. This means that it is difficult to measure its impact using easily verified indicators. And since the Focolare is also participating in many projects with two or more partners, it is difficult to measure its impact directly. Further investigations would also need to be carried out regarding the impact of their "Marian," that is, female and lay, profile, to use the terminology of the Swiss theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar, and these questions in turn call for other indicators.

In conclusion, I would like to mention three important developments in the final years of Chiara's life. The first is the Economy of Communion (EoC), which is an answer to the call of many poor people who participate in Focolare life. The EoC is directly linked to a belief that Chiara adopted during the period of the bombings in Trent: She felt the call to resolve the city's social problems. Leonardo Boff, whom I met in 1988, told me that Liberation Theology was having difficulty solving the problem of the poor in Brazil because it did not attract the middle class. Without

knowing of this difficulty, three years later, also in Brazil, Chiara Lubich launched the EoC, which builds on the relationship between the middle class and the poor.

The second development is ecclesial in nature. In 1998 Chiara launched an initiative promoting collaboration and shared life between the Movement and ecclesial communities, including recent charisms but also older ones. This initiative still requires further study.

Finally, the third development encompasses Chiara's attention to the spirituality of unity's contribution to contemporary culture in general. Chiara, who had been a primary schoolteacher, had formed focolarini for decades with the idea of achieving universal brotherhood. She never forgot her dream of one day creating something like a devotion to the mind of Jesus, to his intelligence. Mysticism can also nourish culture and learning.²² The final, though not the only, result is the Sophia University Institute, which integrates interdisciplinary curriculum with a lifestyle that combines theory and practice in a mutually reinforcing cycle.²³

It is too early to say what impact this will have. Nevertheless, a number of universities have sought to establish formal agreements of various kinds with Sophia. In 1956 an important collaborator of Chiara Lubich's, Pasquale Foresi, said that that this charism could serve to unite various theological schools. Even as change has come about, as it always will, this vision has continued undiminished; fifty years later the Sophia University Institute seeks to unite cultures and sciences in finding a living relationship with Wisdom.

22. Lubich, *The Cry*.

23. Piero Coda, "L'Istituto Universitario 'Sophia': Progetto e programma," *Sophia* (2008): 4–11.

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