

Christian-Hindu Dialogue and the Charism of Unity: An Introduction

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Abstract: *This article provides an historical introduction to Chiara Lubich and the Focolare Movement's work in interreligious dialogue with special attention to the Christian-Hindu dialogue. It introduces the various personalities and encounters, but also the spirit which informs this unique experience of dialogue. It makes particular use of Chiara Lubich's diary entries in which she recounts her own discovery of dialogue as "one of the most beautiful expressions of love". It introduces the reader to the innovative and fruitful experience of the Christian-Hindu symposiums organized between Hindu scholars and scholars associated with the Focolare Movement.*

Christian-Hindu dialogue is a complex, challenging, and important frontier. From its beginnings, Focolare founder Chiara Lubich was quick to attribute the Movement's involvement in interreligious dialogue to a plan from God, one for which she considered herself to be a simple instrument.¹ She often wrote of her wonder in seeing how the charism of unity at the heart of the Movement's spirituality was able to bring together and provide points of encounter for members of the great religions, and to do so in ways that fostered understanding, friendship, and respect for one another.² Focolare's mode of dialogue, rooted in a charism of unity at the heart of the Movement's life, has generated interest and appreciation not only from Hindus but also within the Catholic Church, of which Chiara Lubich and the Movement are an expression.³

1. "I feel a wave of emotion, if I think only for a moment at what I have in front of me: a new world born from the Gospel, spread throughout the world, an immense work that no human effort could have brought about. In fact, it is a 'work of God,' for which I was the first one chosen to be his 'useless and unfaithful' instrument," *Vita Trentina* newspaper on the occasion of the 60th anniversary of the Focolare Movement's birth in Trent, Italy. Published November 24, 2003.

2. "The Focolare Movement, which I represent, has sixty years of experience, and yet we are always amazed to see that God has led us along a spiritual pathway that intersects with all the other spiritual ways of Christians as well as faithful of other religions. . . . While maintaining our own identity, it enables us to meet and come to a mutual understanding with all the great religious traditions of humanity." Excerpted from Chiara Lubich's talk, "Can Religions Be Partners in Peace Building? How to face a World of Terrorism and Violence," at an interreligious seminar sponsored by Initiatives of Change in association with the World Conference on Religions and Peace (WCRP) at Caux (Switzerland) on July 29, 2003, and published in *New Humanity Review* 11 (2005): 5-18.

3. Writing to Chiara after her return from her first trip to India, Cardinal Francis Arinze, then the president of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, wrote: "The meetings so rich in harmony and friendship that you have had with Hindu representatives will not fail to bring about good results in the future for a

Interreligious Dialogue, Chiara Lubich, and the Focolare Movement

Before delving into the Movement's journey of dialogue with persons of the Hindu tradition, we will look briefly at the broader milestones of interreligious dialogue in Chiara Lubich's life and that of the Movement as a whole, which preceded later encounters with the Hindu world.

Chiara's initial intuition that the Movement would have something to do with persons of other religious traditions came in 1966, during a trip to the remote African village of Fontem in the heart of the Cameroon jungle. On that occasion, she met with persons from the Bangwa tribe who practiced traditional religious beliefs of the region and with whom there was already a powerful rapport.⁴ Reflecting later on that moment, she spoke of a personal and powerful perception of God as a huge sun that enveloped all of humankind in love. It was an insight that would remain with her during the years that followed and was an intuition whose significance she did not yet fully understand, nor what was to later come about.⁵

The visible "founding event" that marked the beginning of the Movement's engagement in interreligious dialogue came more

dialogue ever more characterized by understanding and respect." Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, then prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith, also expressed: "I am delighted with the positive results and for the promising dialogue established with significant Hindu representatives. These are signs of hope brought forward with untiring zeal." See Michele Zanzucchi, *Mille Lune: In India con Chiara Lubich* (Rome: Città Nuova, 2001), 6, n 4.

4. References on the history of the rapport with Fontem can be found in "You did it to me," Fontem's Story as narrated by Chiara Lubich, available at <http://www.focolare.org/en/news/2013/02/10/lhai-fatto-a-me-storia-di-fontem-narrata-da-chiara-lubich/>; see also <http://www.focolare.org/en/focolare-worldwide/africa/camerun/>.

5. Roberto Catalano, *Spiritualità di Comunione e Dialogo Interreligioso: L'esperienza di Chiara Lubich e del Movimento dei Focolari* (Rome: Città Nuova, 2010), 49.

than a decade later, at the 1977 conferral of the Templeton Prize for Progress in Religion to Chiara Lubich. She later wrote:

After my speech at the Guildhall in London, in front of qualified representatives of the great world religions, I had, for a second time, that same profound feeling that all of us present, although of different faiths, were enveloped by a huge sun, by the love of God. When I came out of that hall, the first people who came to greet me were Buddhists, Sikhs, Hindus, Muslims, Jews.⁶

In another context, she repeated the experience to others, recounting, "The differences disappeared, and it seemed, for a moment, as if that hall was a realization of Jesus's dream: 'That all may be one!' Perhaps, because there was a profound faith in God. . . . It was as if we were all enveloped by His presence."⁷ After that moment, there was no turning back. New relationships and collaboration with representatives of different religions began to develop. In 1979, just two years after the Templeton Prize, Lubich met with Rev. Nikkyō Niwano, founder of Risshō Kōsei-kai, a worldwide Japanese Mahayana Buddhist movement.⁸ Close ties

6. See "The Interreligious Dialogue of the Focolare Movement (Part I)," an excerpt from a talk by Chiara at Aachen (Germany), November 13, 1998, <http://www.centrochiaralubich.org>.

7. Catalano, *Spiritualità di comunione e dialogo interreligioso*, 50.

8. Rev. Niwano was among the most distinguished promoters of interreligious dialogue and cooperation of the twentieth century and one of the founders of the World Conference of Religions for Peace. He was invited by Paul VI to attend the opening session of the Second Vatican Council. To read about his movement, visit <http://www.rk-world.org/>

were established and the friendship between these two organizations continues today.

Between 1981 and 1985, Chiara Lubich established the Movement's office for Interreligious Dialogue under the direction of two of her early companions, Natalia Dallapiccola and Enzo M. Fondi. The first school for the study of Asian religions also formed during this period in the Philippines as an experience of life, dialogue, and study between persons from Risshō Kōsei-kai and the Focolare Movement.⁹

Contacts with other schools of Buddhism also occurred during this period, including warm, constructive, and ongoing relationships with a number of followers of Theravada Buddhism through Phra Thongratana Thavorn, a Buddhist monk and his Great Master, the Venerable Ajaan Tong. The latter invited Chiara to Thailand in 1997 to meet with 800 students at the Buddhist Mahajularacha University and 170 Buddhist monks and nuns at Wat Rampoeng monastery. The Great Master introduced Chiara as a Christian, a woman, and a layperson, saying: "The wise person is neither man nor woman. When someone lights a light in the darkness, one does not ask whether the one who lit it was a man or a woman. Chiara is here to give us the light she has experienced."¹⁰

In 1996, Lubich was awarded the UNESCO Prize for Peace Education. Then, in 1997, during a trip to the United States for the conferral of an honorary doctorate from Sacred Heart University in Fairfield, Connecticut, she accepted the invitation extended by Imam Warith Deen Mohammed to speak at the Malcolm Shabazz

Mosque in Harlem, New York, to nearly two thousand African American Muslims. Although she had been in contact with the Islamic world in Algeria since the 1970s, this marked the first time Chiara was invited to speak in a mosque. It was also historic in that it was the first time a white woman, of European Catholic descent, had spoken in that renowned place of worship about her Christian experience. Three years later, in November 2000 in Washington, at a follow-up gathering of Muslims and Christians with both leaders present, Imam Mohammed responded to Chiara's words, saying: "I read in the Bible that when Jesus Christ, peace be upon him, invited his followers to wash each other's feet, I think that's just what we are doing. We are washing each other's feet."¹¹

Chiara also made deeper contact with the Jewish world during this time, especially with the Argentinian Jewish community of B'nai B'rith, which Chiara visited personally in 1998.

Christian-Hindu Dialogue

The Focolare Movement's dialogue with Hindus had its early roots in a cordial relationship built over several years between Indian statesman and Shanti Ashram founder Dr. M. Aram and one of Chiara's early collaborators, Natalia Dallapiccola. Aram and Lubich were both honorary presidents of the World Conference of Religions for Peace (WCRP), and Dallapiccola had frequently represented Lubich at interreligious gatherings in the years before Lubich's first visit to India. Then, through these contacts, the Movement's community in India (which had been present in the

9. Paolo Frizzi, *Cristianesimo e Religioni nel '900: l'intuizione e la Vicenda di Chiara Lubich. Storia, Teologia, Società*, (Rome: Città Nuova, 2014), 204–5.

10. Piero Coda, *Viaggio in Asia con Chiara Lubich in Thailandia e Filippine* (Roma: Città Nuova, 1997), 54.

11. Amelia J. Uelmen, "Chiara Lubich: A Life for Unity," in *Logos, A Journal of Catholic Thought and Culture* 8 (2005): 58, accessed April 8, 2014: <http://mirrorofjustice.blogs.com/mirrorofjustice/uelfmen/alifeforunity.pdf>.

country since the 1980s) also established personal contact with Dr. Aram. He deeply desired to spread Lubich's vision and understanding of God to many in India. In the years before his death in 1997, Aram would organize informal gatherings at his New Delhi home, bringing together his friends, associates, and local Focolare members.

Dr. Aram and Chiara Lubich would have their first and only personal encounter at the Sixth World Assembly of the WCRP, held at the Vatican in 1994. He greatly appreciated Focolare's collaboration with WCRP and hoped one day to welcome Chiara to India and honor her work for peace and unity among religions. On his return to India that year, he expressed this desire to his wife and collaborator, Minoti Aram, his daughter Vinu Aram, and other close Gandhian associates.¹²

In October 2000, to the surprise of many, and with just a few months' notice, Chiara announced her intention to visit India in early January 2001. Although in India the Movement had spread within the Christian world and in various parts of the country, contacts with Hindus were still relatively limited. So, when the Aram family heard of Chiara's desire to visit India, Mrs. Minoti Aram immediately saw it as an occasion to fulfill her husband's dream of honoring Chiara in a Gandhian way and to introduce the charism of unity to a wide swath of Gandhian friends and collaborators. This resulted in an invitation to Chiara to visit Coimbatore to receive the prestigious Defender of Peace Award. Chiara willingly accepted this invitation.

The Focolare community in India thus began to prepare for this seemingly unprecedented event in the journey of dialogue with

Hindu brothers and sisters. With the support and guidance of the Catholic Church, the Focolare had spread, touching a number of persons in various regions; as is typical of the charism of unity, these included laypeople, religious, priests, and even some bishops. The community's strongest presence was in Mumbai, Goa, and Bangalore. Thus, news of Chiara's upcoming visit spread in a number of Christian communities and resulted in an invitation to address the Conference of Catholic Bishops of India (CCBI) as well.

One particularly providential contact came through the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue undersecretary, Rev. Felix Machado (now archbishop of India's Vasai diocese), who was instrumental in a later encounter between Chiara Lubich and Dr. Kala Acharya, director of the K. J. Somaiya Bharatiya Sanskriti Peetham, an institute of Indian culture and research at the Somaiya University Campus in Mumbai. Acharya had been the institute's director since 1989 and represented Hinduism in a number of international, interreligious meetings organized by the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue and was later an ambassador to the Parliament of the World's Religions. Dr. Acharya was happy to know about Chiara Lubich and would travel to Coimbatore for the award function that took place there.

Another deeply spiritual Hindu personality who was open to dialogue was Prof. S. A. Upadhyaya, director of the (Sanskrit studies and research) Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan. After hearing about Chiara Lubich through some Focolare members who were studying with him to learn Indian culture and Sanskrit, he too wanted to meet her.

Dr. M. Aram had also introduced members of the Focolare Movement to Mr. Rajmohan Gandhi, grandson of Mahatma Gandhi. Mr. Gandhi had met Chiara before her visit to India,

12. See Catalano, *Spiritualità di comunione e dialogo interreligioso*, 62–63.

and that encounter had profoundly touched Lubich. She had asked Rajmohan Gandhi for his thoughts as she prepared for her visit to India. Rajmohan had advised her to “listen,” saying that when a person is in India they must listen. Lubich was very struck by this and felt urged to follow this counsel. In fact, her profound attitude of listening touched many hearts during those days of encounters, as many were also well aware that Chiara herself would have had much to share.

The Defender of Peace Award was presented by two Gandhian-inspired movements, Shanti Ashram and the Sarvodaya Movement (in collaboration with Gandhigram Rural University and Bharatiya Vidhya Bhavan) in the state of Tamil Nadu.¹³ Chiara accepted the invitation to be present for the award ceremony and on December 29, 2000, embarked on her first trip to India. It turned out to be an extraordinarily important moment in the Movement’s work for Christian-Hindu dialogue and would bring the foundress back to India in 2003. Chiara herself would follow this dialogue and the relationships she built with various of her “Hindu brothers and sisters” in the years that followed, up until her death in 2008.

Even before her departure at the end of December 2000, Chiara wrote of this first India trip to Focolare Movement members throughout the world, recounting her various preparations, to ensure that all participated and became protagonists with her in this important journey. Excerpts from her diary offer a glimpse of her attitude and approach to the various encounters she would have in this completely new culture. Her journal entries provide insight into both the charism of unity and the way Lubich lived interreligious dialogue on a personal level. In particular, one notes in her

writings: 1) an attitude of humility and profound respect for a different tradition, 2) a recognition of the richness contained within Hindu teachings and philosophy, 3) an openness to learning from the other by building authentic relationships, and 4) a readiness to offer her authentic Christian experience as a reciprocal gift.

Rome, December 29, 2000:

I have left Rome for Mumbai. . . . In my soul, a single idea: to love. . . . To love, to love every neighbor. . . . Because: “In the world is buried a God who wants to rise up through love.” To this end, I will meditate daily on love. If I do this, I’ll return home from India having “grown” (from this experience). This is what I want to do, what I must do: to keep improving, because those who do not go ahead, go backwards.¹⁴

Mumbai, December 30, 2000:

We landed last night at Mumbai airport. . . . [In] Rome, whenever I looked at a map of India, it always seemed very, very far away from me. But, today it’s as if we walked through a door from one room into another. . . . I’ve come here to learn about this land by remaining in silence as much as possible: I’ve been told it is a necessary attitude for those coming to India. In fact, I spent almost the entire day studying the materials that were prepared for us.¹⁵

14. Zanzucchi, *Mille Lune*, 12.

15. Zanzucchi, *Mille Lune*, 13.

13. See Catalano, *Spiritualità di comunione e dialogo interreligioso*, 62–63.

Mumbai, January 2, 2001:

We've only been here a few days. But the more we enter into contact with India, the more it reveals itself to us as an immense world with a multitude of realities and its own unique hallmark, one which is not easy for Westerners to decipher. It's a world that presents a picture of unity in all its richness, in all its diversity. It's as if a jewelry box were laid open before us, filled with spiritual treasures. One is attracted by its mysticism that encompasses the whole of human nature, a mysticism which is most certainly not extraneous to God's work. But this box can only be opened by those who approach it with respect, love, and above all with a conviction that God has much to tell us through this ancient culture. In our difficult and tormented world of today, this culture has an essential and vital message to offer, one which highlights the primacy of the interior life. It has caused me to reflect: What would happen if India were to encounter that Jesus offered by the Charism of Unity?¹⁶

On January 4, Chiara traveled to Coimbatore, a large, vibrant city in the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu. She had an immediate rapport with the family of Dr. Aram and his Gandhian friends. His wife, Minoti Aram, commented: "For a long time, I prayed for this day to come true. In spirit we are one family: you on a big scale, we on a small one, to carry out the same mission. The only thought that animates us is to overcome violence and to

sow the seeds of peace. . . . Chiara will find peace and serenity here. She will bring us unity."¹⁷

The Defender of Peace Award, which honors people actively involved in promoting nonviolence and peace, was jointly conferred by the Shanti Ashram and Sarvodaya Movements.¹⁸ The ceremony, on January 5 in the presence of important dignitaries and media figures, began with an introduction by Shri Krishnaraj Vanavarayar, local president of the Bharatiya Vidhya Bhavan educational trust. He spoke of Chiara as "a person who paves the way to overcome division and hate" and who has the strength needed to realize this dream, a strength that comes from her experience of God.

In presenting the award to her, the president of Sarvodaya Association, Dr. Markandan, asked Chiara to give particular priority to her work in initiating dialogue with Hinduism in Coimbatore, much as she'd done with Buddhist leader, Nikkyo Niwano, in Japan. He asked her to affirm and sustain those spiritual values that are still present in India but are now also threatened by rampant consumerism and technology.

He read the award citation aloud, which began with the words: "Chiara Lubich, using the most powerful human force of love and a strong faith in the unity of all humankind as espoused in the

17. Zanzucchi, *Mille Lune*, 32–33.

18. Shanti Ashram (literally, a community of peace) was founded in 1986 by Dr. Aram. His mottos "Think globally and act locally" and "Spiritually motivated and socially active" are the ideas behind Shanti Ashram. It is a social center formed according to Gandhian principles and is dedicated to the aid and development of women and children in the villages. Today, it works on an International level with UNDP, UNESCO, WCRP, GNRC, Focolare, and so on. Sarvodaya (well-being for all) is the name of the institution founded by Mahatma Gandhi. It is present all over India and works for the development of the lower strata of society at different local levels and also on an international level.

16. Zanzucchi, *Mille Lune*, 24–25.

teachings of Jesus Christ, has been chosen to play a tireless role in sowing the seeds of peace and love among all peoples.”¹⁹ It was a particularly significant occasion that served to deepen the rapport between the Focolare Movement and the Gandhian family. In the years that followed, this rapport would become a powerful witness of vibrant dialogue and collaboration in the journey toward peace and universal brotherhood.

On January 6, Chiara wrote in her diary:

To love, to love all those I will meet today so that the love of God may burn in my heart. This is my resolution. I was very struck by a phrase from a philosopher, a non-believer, who defines love as “the capacity to discover similarities in the dissimilar” (Adorno). Could our dialogue, then, be one of the most beautiful expressions of love?²⁰

While in Coimbatore, Chiara also had an important encounter with traditional orthodox Hinduism, meeting with two swamis (priests) in the region, His Highness Santhalinga Ramaswami Adigalar and Maruthachala Adigalar of the Perur Pateeswarar Hindu Temple, and with members of Yoga International. Particularly noteworthy was the fact that these two important swamis had accepted the invitation, signifying each one’s readiness to travel outside the confines of their own, respective temples to encounter Lubich. It was their first such meeting with the Catholic Church.²¹

19. Zanzucchi, *Mille Lune*, 42.

20. Zanzucchi, *Mille Lune*, 47.

21. Zanzucchi, *Mille Lune*, 62–65.

Another significant milestone for Christian-Hindu dialogue also occurred during those days in Coimbatore. In a meeting between Chiara Lubich and Dr. Kala Acharya, who had attended the award ceremony, there was an immediate sense of understanding.

Years later, Dr. Acharya described her personal experience of that first encounter:

When I was introduced to her, (Chiara) said, “I see God’s design in you.” These words ignited a blazing flame in me—a radiant flame constantly illuminating my actions, in its light I reflect: whatever I do is a divine plan. So, my actions must be good, worthy and free from any selfish motive; they should be for the good of many.²²

Dr. Kala returned to Mumbai after that first meeting. With Dr. S. K. Somaiya, head of K. J. Somaiya College, himself at the forefront of interreligious dialogue, in five days they managed to quickly plan and organize a campus convention, to which they invited Chiara. When she accepted, they titled the convention “Spirituality for Universal Brotherhood by Chiara Lubich.” Chiara was warmly welcomed by approximately six hundred participants.

During a first initial exchange of introductions, Chiara had humbly expressed her ignorance of many Hindu teachings and her

22. From a speech by Dr. Kala Acharya, “Dialogue with Chiara Lubich,” at the International Convention on Chiara and Religions, “Together Toward the Unity of the Human Family,” Castel Gandolfo, March 17–20, 2014, marking the sixth anniversary of Chiara Lubich’s death. See also: *Chiara and the World Religions, Together Towards the Unity of the Human Family*, Conference Proceedings Castel Gandolfo, Rome, March 17–20, 2014, ATC, India 2017.

need to grow in this mutual understanding of one another. Dr. Somaiya replied:

No, Chiara, I understood it in your eyes. There are leaders who know how to communicate their thoughts. You have a great ideal. Just one person like you can move an entire society. You are one of those very few persons. On our campus not everyone is committed to true religion because we don't have a "Chiara" among us.²³

Dr. Kala, in introducing Chiara Lubich and the charism of unity within the context of God's plan for humanity, said, "There is only one God, only one purpose in the world. . . . Then we will be one, and we shall live in peace, fraternity and in harmony, it is written in the Vedas. What Chiara says, shows us an anticipation of what this moment will be like."²⁴ Dr. Kala's words shed light on the novelty of Chiara's thought and experience of unity in God offered in the "here and now" as it relates to the Hindu concept of oneness in the afterlife. It was a concept that was appreciated and welcomed by Hindus.

Chiara's message and the testimonies by Focolare Movement members were received with admiration and openness by professors, students, and attending dignitaries. In his concluding words, Dr. Somaiya called the encounter "a unique experience" and "very elevating spiritually." He also said that "it greatly served the purpose for which this campus originated. . . . My hope is that this

movement will grow always more, because it is needed in our Indian society."²⁵

Two interesting comments²⁶ made by dignitaries present at the event express the particular interest that Hindus have in the ideas proposed by Lubich:

Although we underline these values in our religion too, there is a difference. Chiara wants us to put these principles of love into practice. . . . Whatever she speaks about she has already lived. That's why people follow her . . . not only Christians but also members of other religions. One beautiful thing is that she does not oblige anyone to change their religion. . . . She only expects you to follow two principles: the love of neighbor and universal brotherhood.²⁷

and

We believe in the unity and in the diversity of religions and cultures, but the concept that underlies everything is unity and universal brotherhood. Chiara Lubich emphasized very clearly the ideas that we already have in this country. This will be greatly appreciated by the great masses of people in our country because our people believe in this philosophical concept.²⁸

25. See <http://whydntwedialogue.blogspot.it/2011/01/sk-somaiya-and-chiara-lubich.html>.

26. Zanzucchi, *Mille Lune*, 100–101.

27. Zanzucchi, *Mille Lune*, 100–101.

28. Zanzucchi, *Mille Lune*, 100–101.

23. <http://whydntwedialogue.blogspot.it/2011/01/sk-somaiya-and-chiara-lubich.html> Blogspot of R. Catalano (acc. on 10/28/2019).

24. Zanzucchi, *Mille Lune*, 97.

In their words, we see the value placed both on the concrete aspect of a life of love and unity proposed by the charism of unity and on its relational dimension of unity, which invites reciprocity.

Chiara also met with the Christian world while in India, addressing the Catholic Bishops' Conference of India and speaking to the Sisters of Charity at their motherhouse, both in Calcutta. In Mumbai, she met with Cardinals Ivan Dias and Simon Pimenta, as well as with members of the Focolare Movement in India. At the end of this rich and important visit, we can intuit the fruits of those days in Lubich's later journal entries:

Mumbai, January 14, 2001:

We left Rocca di Papa (Italy) for India with a single idea: "To love, love, love." Doesn't it seem to have been a suggestion from the Holy Spirit? This love towards everyone that we tried to live has increased our union with God.

Our prayer life has improved, which is useful here in India, because beyond any doubts we might have, here we are in a nation imbued with an inner life. God is present, although at times obscured.²⁹

The Ongoing Journey of Hindu Dialogue and Encounter

Of the various types of dialogue³⁰ lived by persons of the Focolare Movement with members of different religions, the primary type is a *dialogue of life*. As the name suggests, it is rooted in a daily effort of living out dialogue in one's life (living the Golden Rule,

29. Zanzucchi, *Mille Lune*, 114.

30. See "I tipi di dialogo della Spiritualità di comunione," in Catalano, *Spiritualità di comunione e dialogo interreligioso*, 101–32.

getting to know others and their respective activities and projects, promoting collaboration and cooperation on shared endeavors, sharing each one's unique religious experience, and so on).

Among the fruits of this dialogue was a joint effort to promote deeper theological and academic exchange through "Hindu-Christian symposiums." The purpose of these Christian-Hindu symposiums, first proposed by Dr. Acharya and immediately supported by Lubich, is to provide an encounter between religious traditions and doctrines in the same spirit of brotherhood and love that marks the dialogue of life. The first symposium took place in June 2002 at the Focolare Movement's International Meeting Centre in Castel Gandolfo, Italy, and was titled "Bhakti: Way of Love Towards God and our Neighbors; Devotion in the Hindu Tradition, and in the Christian Experience of the Spirituality of Communion."³¹ Participants included more than a dozen Hindu scholars primarily from Mumbai University, Somaiya Sanskriti Peetham in Mumbai, Bharatiya Vidhya Bhavan, Shanti Ashram, and Ghandigram University in Tamil Nadu and a similar number from the Focolare Movement's interdisciplinary Abba School study center³² along with several other Focolare members working in interreligious initiatives.

31. "I tipi di dialogo della Spiritualità di comunione," in Catalano, *Spiritualità di comunione e dialogo interreligioso*, 128–29.

32. The Abba School, which began in 1990, is a fruit of the awareness, in the words of Lubich herself, "that the charism of unity brings its own culture, which is at one and the same time a child of traditional Christianity and through the light brought by the charism, something new. The growth . . . beyond the confines of the Focolare Movement, has highlighted the specifics of this culture, and made deeper study necessary: theological, philosophical, political, economic, psychological, artistic and so on. This is what we are doing within what we call the 'Abba School.'"

Notwithstanding their highly intellectual nature, these symposiums are unique for each participant's commitment to live concretely the pact of reciprocal love proposed by Lubich during the very first symposium in 2002. From that first symposium, one could sense the commitment to reciprocal love being lived out, both through the efforts made to deeply listen to one another during session presentations and through the respect with which observations, questions, and comments were exchanged. In fact, such a dense, supernatural atmosphere was created that, at the request of the scholars present, Lubich spoke of the mystical and intellectual experience she lived during the summer of 1949. Before that symposium, this experience had been shared only with the closest members of the Movement.

The symposium allotted much time for dialogue and communion, as well as for moments of clarification on aspects of faith. So profound was the dialogue, for example, that Prof. Sureshchandra Upadhyaya³³ asked Chiara to shed further light on the reality of Jesus Crucified and Forsaken. Upadhyaya spoke of his own difficulty in understanding how Jesus, as God, could have felt abandoned. Because this feeling of abandonment is a central point of the charism of unity, Chiara embraced the occasion to present the Christian mystery of the Incarnation and offer her personal discovery of Jesus Forsaken. For the Hindu scholars present, it proved to be a fundamentally important and welcome introduction into a mystical dimension of Christianity.³⁴ At the end of the 2002 symposium, Dr. Acharya concluded by saying:

33. Sureshchandra Upadhyaya is the director of the Bharatiya Vidhya Bhavan, Mumbai, a prestigious institution of Indian Culture and study with about 119 branches in India and seven abroad.

34. See various authors, "Simposio indù-cristiano. Si spalancano gli orizzonti" in Mariapoli, *notiziario interno del movimento dei focolari*, XIX (2002/6), 11; Also

We did not aim at a pure academic exercise. Ours was a spiritual experience. . . . For any other seminar, people will speak about their topic; they discuss and debate and leave without a spiritual experience. Normally, a spiritual experience is not the focus. We instead, all together, really underwent a spiritual experience.³⁵

Acharya's words confirm one characteristic of the charism of unity that is at the heart of the Focolare's spirituality: its capacity to generate a lived, shared spiritual experience between Christians and Hindus, even within the structure of a formal symposium composed of discourse and discussion.

Another Hindu-Christian symposium at the Focolare Movement's Center in Rome followed one year later, in 2003, and Chiara Lubich made a second trip to India that year. During this trip, several important meetings took place. Through the Catholic Church, programs were organized in Mumbai by Cardinal Ivan Dias and in Delhi by Archbishop Vincent Concessao, who also organized an interreligious meeting. This second trip also strengthened contacts with the Hindu world, including encounters with the widespread Swadhyay Family of Pandurang Athavale and Didi Athavale, whom Lubich had first met at the 2002 Assisi Day of Prayer for Peace. The trip also included meetings in Coimbatore and at the Somaiya Campus in Mumbai.

Among the most anticipated appointments during Lubich's second trip to India was a post-symposium meeting with twenty participants, including eleven Hindu participants from the first

see Chiara's answer to Dr. Upadhyaya in R. Catalano, *Spiritualità di comunione*, 208–210.

35. Catalano, *Spiritualità di comunione e dialogo interreligioso*, 129.

symposium in 2002. Having requested that Chiara continue to share with them the illuminations she received in 1949, she spoke again of her Christian experience and the mystical and intellectual intuitions from that period, particularly those related to unity and the Trinity, the Word of God, Mary, creation, and heaven and hell.³⁶ “We had an experience of Paradise, thanks to Chiara’s vision,” said Dr. Lalita Namjoshi, assistant director at K. J. Somaiya Bharatiya Sanskriti Peetham. “What has deeply touched our hearts was the fact that we share the same Divine experience, the same divine inheritance and in spirituality, we stand together.”³⁷

Similarly, Dr. Upadhyaya commented, “It is something unusual and rare that Chiara has communicated her personal mystical experience in such beautiful words; things like these are normally not discussed, they are experienced.”³⁸ Likewise, Dr. Raja Lingam of the Gandhigram Rural University in Madurai noted: “You have to empty yourself in order to comprehend the spiritual and mystical experiences.” Through these comments, one sees the importance that Hindus place on a lived, spiritual experience in dialogue as well as their profound awareness of the need for a disposition of self-emptiness.

Two other symposiums have since taken place, one in 2008 and another in 2011. Both of these encounters enjoyed the participation of additional Hindu scholars who, in connecting with the charism of unity and the Movement’s way of dialogue, expressed

36. See “India, nuove luci per la fratellanza universale,” in *Mariapoli XX* (2003/1–2): 5.

37. Transcribed from the audio-visual documentary “In the Light of the Charism, Chiara’s Visit to India 2003,” by Margaret Coen, for internal use of the Focolare Movement.

38. “In the Light of the Charism.”

a desire to be a part of this ongoing experience and exchange between Hindus and Christians. Through the following comments of a few of those scholars, one sees the continuity of the experience of dialogue that was lived out in earlier symposiums. Dr. Uma Vaidhya, from the University of Mumbai and a participant in the 2008 gathering, reflected, “We were all like small candles which could potentially be lit. While dialogue was in progress, I felt that the attitude of love of those who were posing questions and those who gave answers, lit those candles.”³⁹

There was a continuous emphasis placed on the novelty of a lived experience of unity between Hindus and Christians based on a commitment to reciprocal love, which in turn illuminates faith and urges each to put into practice this experience of dialogue in their own lives. Dr. Shashi Prabha Kumar from Jawaharlal Nehru University in New Delhi reflected at the conclusion of the 2008 seminar:

In the Vedas there are expressions about being together, walking together, chanting together. I found these feelings expressed in a much better way in the experience of this symposium. It was a help to live the abstract aspect of culture together with the concrete dimension.⁴⁰

Bharatiya Vidhya Bhavan, a professor of Indology from Mumbai, spoke in a similar fashion:

39. “In the Light of the Charism.”

40. Editorial of Roberto Catalano in “God, Man and Nature in the Hindu and Christian Traditions,” published papers of the Hindu-Christian Symposium in Rome, May 26–29, 2008 (Mumbai: St. Paul Press), 6 (for private circulation only).

Chiara and the Focolare Movement have taught me to live simultaneously the abstract and the concrete aspects of culture. This is very important for us, because we study, we learn, we teach, but we do not practice what we teach: the holistic approach is important. Certainly, I will carry this experience, everything that I learnt, to my students, my colleagues, the institution, wherever I go and in whatever I do. If whatever we do is done with love and brotherhood, I'm sure we can truly create Heaven on this earth. It is our responsibility to take ahead this civilization of love, and we will have a life of peace.⁴¹

This dialogue of life between Hindus and members of the Focolare Movement has continued on fronts other than the symposiums. In 2014, at the interreligious convention marking the sixth anniversary of Chiara Lubich's death, Mumbai university educator Dr. Madhavi Narsalay spoke of the novelty of an experience of interfaith dialogue in light of a charism of unity. In her talk titled "The 'Different' and the 'Opposite': Constraints in Interfaith Dialogue," she spoke of a "sense of love, unity, harmony, peace and accommodative spirit of inquiry inculcated by members of the Focolare. The differences, which I mentioned at the beginning [of my talk] . . . were really experienced by me, and Focolare has helped me to give answers to those dilemmas."⁴²

41. Catalano, *Spiritualità di comunione e dialogo interreligioso*, 161–62.

42. M. Narsalay, "The 'Different' and the 'Opposite': Constraints in Interfaith dialogue in Chiara and Religions," at the International Convention Chiara and Religions. "Together Toward the Unity of the Human Family," Castel Gandolfo, March 17–20, 2014, to mark the sixth anniversary of Chiara's death (in press).

On the same occasion in 2008, Dr. Kala Acharya, in an interview with Vatican Radio, used an interesting analogy to speak of Chiara Lubich and the role of the charism of unity in interreligious dialogue:

Chiara's spirituality is always accompanied by action, action that for her signified to love humankind. . . . And that is why she has expressed this love she had for mankind through dialogue: a type of dialogue that is new, unusual. . . . She wanted that all the people she met could benefit from this spirituality. She was like the string of the necklace: in the necklace we have pearls, but if there is no string, the pearls are lost. She was like that string of a necklace, which brought thousands of people to live together.⁴³

The journey of Hindu-Christian dialogue continues between the Sarvodaya and the Focolare Movement. Roundtables have also taken place and are born from the desire to deepen the roots of Gandhian spirituality and the Focolare's charism of unity for the purpose of living together what each has in common with the other as well as what is different. In this way there may be reciprocal enrichment. Twelve such meetings have taken place to date. Additionally, in a very concrete way and with the strong support of Shanti Ashram, there is now a focus on exposing the younger generations to this way of dialogue. A number of youth exchange programs have been organized between the two movements,

43. Vatican Radio website with embedded interview links, accessed October 28, 2019: http://www.archivioradiovaticana.va/storico/2014/03/19/250_membri_di_diverse_religioni_in_dialogo_a_castel_gandolfo/it1-782885

including an International Super Congress for teenagers in 2009 in Coimbatore that involved more than a thousand young people from India and abroad. It was a concrete witness to dialogue between the two movements.

We have glimpsed the beginnings of Christian-Hindu dialogue as both a fruit and an effect of the charism of unity given to Chiara Lubich and the Focolare Movement. Deep bonds of friendship, as well as experiential and intellectual collaboration on a number of levels, have continued to develop since Lubich's death in 2008.

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