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***Dialoguing with People of other Faiths
in Chiara Lubich's Thought and Practice.***
Brother and sisterhood, way and aim of interreligious dialogue.

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A few days after the attacks of 11 September 2001, Chiara Lubich gave an interview to a radio station. One of the questions referred to an increasing sentiment against Islam. What can one do to avoid this? She replied: “since a long time our movement – but it is not alone – has been in the process of building a strong unity with Moslems, particularly in the USA with a large Moslem movement of Afro-Americans. I know that it is now a great help to them to be in union with us Christians, as we have the same commitment to bring a universal brotherhood into the world. We Christians and Moslems must recognize the fact that we are brothers and sisters. We are all children of God. Therefore we Christians should act like this. That is the way to go.”¹

Assisi. 24th January 2002. Some months after that fatal day in September when the whole world held its breath over the outburst of terrorist violence, the representatives of various religions held a meeting together in the town of *Poveretto*. They were there to bear witness before the world that the religions are dedicated to the building of bridges of fellowship instead of walls of hate. In front of a mostly male audience a woman took the stand in the name of the Catholic Church: Chiara Lubich, who founded a Catholic lay movement which also includes members of other churches (over 350 churches) and believers in other faiths. She said: “For us Christians Jesus is the God of Peace. For this reason peace is one of the Catholic Church's most sincere goals”. (Lubich, 2002a, p. 149) She attracted considerable attention with her dialogues to expand peace amongst the churches and the great religions. She has received several awards including the UNESCO Prize for education and peace in

1996. On that occasion the president of the jury stated: “At a time when ethnical and religious differences lead too often to violent conflict, the spread of the Focolari Movement has made a contribution to a constructive dialogue between people of different cultural backgrounds and religious faiths, a dialogue very much in harmony with the mission of UNESCO”.(Smoker, 1996, p. 7)

Can religions be united together for peace? Many people are doubtful about this as they feel that terrorism, the war in Iraq and the tensions in the Middle-East are all “conflicts of civilizations” fuelled by religion. Religion seems to be part of the problem, not of the solution. In spite of all this pessimism Chiara Lubich will not let herself be discouraged by the vicious interpretation of religion. She is one who commits herself to a “strategy of sister and brotherhood”: “We are here, she said at the World Conference of Religions for Peace in Amman in 1999, because we are firmly convinced that to work for peace is the essence of our innermost calling, it comes from the deepest aspirations of the human heart. In other words, it corresponds to our being of men and women of religion”. (Lubich, 1999b) In her eyes the causes of terrorism are to be found in the intolerable gap between the rich and the poor in the world. Can one fight against this evil with political and diplomatic means? The answer of Chiara² is negative, because there is a spiritual element which all religions must take into account: “You wish that there be more equality, solidarity, a fairer share of resources. But resources do not move by themselves, there must be a conversion of the heart. There should be a communion of hearts”. (Lubich, 2003b, p. 1) Therefore although religions must first of all pray, this is not enough. One must bring about a movement of brother and sisterhood in God: “Only through brotherhood can one create the heart and the basis of a more equitable distribution of riches amongst people and nations, as it is the lack of such a brotherhood which is the deepest cause of terrorism” (Lubich, 2002d, p.2), she said during a meeting with some Muslim friends. “The only

¹ Interview by Radio Vatican, 17.9.2001

² It is under this name that she is familiarly known, and I shall refer to her in the following pages.

true response against a strategy of hate and death is to elevate peace within justice. However there will not be any peace without brotherhood. Only through brotherhood can individuals and the people ensure a peaceful future” (Lubich, 2003b, p. 2)

Can then sisterhood exist between the different religions? On what basis is Chiara so firmly optimistic? What are the historical events, the foundations, and the spirituality of Chiara Lubich’s dialogue with members of other religions? What is her contribution to the “dialogical movement” – a movement becoming more and more widespread, but which however encounters all sorts of resistance? The reply to these questions constitute the various chapters of this essay.

1) History of the Dialogue

The fundamental event which initiated the Focolari movement’s entry into interreligious dialogue was the Templeton prize “For the progress of religion” given to Chiara in 1977 in London. She spoke about her experience in the presence of people of various faiths. Her speech gave rise to an unforeseen response within the audience and there was a strong feeling of mutual understanding in the room. “I had the impression,” she wrote, “that it was an occasion which gave a new direction to the Movement. From then onwards we shall endeavour to bring our soul, our life, not only to other churches or Christian communities, but also to our brothers and sisters of other faiths”. (Lubich, 1992, p. 22)

Dialogue with Buddhists. The first dialogue took place with Buddhists. The contacts started in 1979 when Chiara met Nikkyo Niwano, founder and president of a vast lay movement for the revival of Buddhism – the Rissho Kosei-kai with about 6 million members - and who was an observer at the Second Vatican Council. He was one of the initiators of the World Conference of Religions for Peace. In 1981 he invited Chiara to come to Tokyo to speak of her Christian experience before 12’000 Buddhists. It was an opening to mutual values and the

beginning of a fruitful collaboration in the humanitarian field. (Lubich, 1986) Contacts were made between the Focolari and the Buddhists in various parts of Asia. A school for interreligious dialogue was created at Tagaytay, near Manilla in the Philippines. It is a meeting centre for the followers of other faiths in all of Asia. This discreet and enduring “dialogue of life” prepared the second stage of the important dialogue with Buddhism. In January 1997, in Thailand Chiara spoke of her experience to 800 monks and laymen, at the Buddhist University of Mahachulalongkorn, and at the Buddhist monastery of Chiang Mai. It was the first time that a laywoman and a Christian, spoke to Buddhist monks. The grand master of *vipassana* (concentrated meditation) Ajahn Thong, who had invited her, introduced her as follows: “The wise is neither man nor woman, neither child nor adult....When someone brings light to darkness, one does not ask who he or she is. Chiara is here to bring us light”. (Coda, 1997, p. 54) She also met the supreme patriarch of Thailand’s Buddhism Somdet Phra Nyanasamvara, who gave his approval to the dialogue and said to her “the followers of all religions must cooperate together as one for peace, for they have a common purpose for good”. (Coda, 1997, p. 34)

Dialogue with Muslims. In 1966 a Focolari community was set up in Tlemcen, Algeria, after which a group of young Muslims came into contact with the spirituality of the movement. Encounters also took place in other countries, for instance in Pakistan where an Islamic-Christian centre was built in Darwal. (Fondi, 2003, p. 391s) However it was in the USA that a true and proper dialogue with Muslims began, in May 1997, in the famous mosque of Malcom X in Harlem, New York. Chiara was invited by the imam Warith Deen Mohammed, president of the American Muslim Society with two million members of the black community, to speak of her spirituality to an audience of 3’000 Moslems. The imam said: “Today is a great day for us. This is a moment which will go down in history... God wishes us altogether to bring goodness to the world, so that humanity will follow His plan”. (Lubich, 1997, p. 25) Since then

Muslim friends of the Focolari Movement from all over the world have held a meeting every year in one of the Movements' centres, in Castel Gandolfo. In Washington a large meeting of 5'000 Christians and black American Muslims from the American Muslim Society was an occasion to experience the meaning of brother-sisterhood when they heard both Chiara and W.D. Mohammed speak. (Lubich, 2000) A profound study of those points common to Islam and the "spirituality of unity" of the Focolare movement has started in several American cities. (Lemarié, 2003) Finally, subsequent to a preparatory visit in Iran by Piero Coda, who is a theologian and a member of the Movement, a dialogue has begun with the Iranian Shi'ites. (Coda, 1998b) Muhammad Khamenei, the brother of the highest-ranking religious authority in Iran, met Chiara in Rome, in September 2001. He stated that "within a true and mystical love lies the basis for a dialogue between Islam and Christianity". (Fondi, 2003, p. 401)

Dialogue with Jews. The Jewish community in Rome offered an olive branch to Chiara as a sign of gratitude for her dialogue with the people of the Menorah. This took place in 1995, and the following year the Jewish friends of the Movement convened in the same city, which has now become an annual event. In 1997 the rabbi Jack Bemporad, who is the Director of the Centre for Understanding between Christians and Jews at the Sacred Heart University of Connecticut (USA), took the initiative for the award of a doctorate *honoris causa* to Chiara. In 1998 the Benai Berith of Buenos Aires invited Chiara to meet the Jewish community of Argentina and Uruguay. Upon lighting up the seven branch candelabra, Chiara and Jaime Kopec, president of Benai Berith, sealed a pact of friendship. The latter expressed it as "a pact of good-will, of faith for the future, and an occasion to put aside centuries of intolerance". (Coda, 1998a, p. 13) Since then a day consecrated to peace is celebrated every year in several towns of this country, and especially in the centre of O'Higgins. The Focolari Movement takes also part in Judeo-Christian Friendships in several countries. In 2002 the Focolari Movement joined the International Council of Christians and Jews as an observer.

Dialogue with Hindus. A visit to India in January 2001 played an instrumental part in launching a dialogue with Hinduism. The prize “Defender of peace” was awarded to Chiara in Coimbatore by two Gandian institutions, the Shanti Ashram and the Sarvodaya movement. The motive for the prize-giving, as written by two Hindus, is interesting as it says among other things: “Chiara Lubich, by the use of the most powerful human strength of love, and with a strong faith in the unity of all humankind, as it is espoused in the teachings of Jesus Christ, has been chosen to play an indefatigable role to sow the seeds of peace and love among all peoples”. (Defender, 2001)

During the ceremony in the presence of 500 Hindus and members of other faiths, Chiara spoke about her spiritual experience while underlining the elements common to both the Gospel and Hindu writings. While in Mumbai she took part in a meeting with the Cultural Centre of *Bharatiya Sanskriti Peetham*. Chiara also had personal talks with high-ranking members of Hinduism, such as priests outside their temples. (Zanzucchi, 2001, p. 40s, 56s) When summarizing the spirit of this visit to India and its mysteries, Srimati Minoti Aram, the daughter of Dr. Aram, a personality of first importance in Hinduism, said: “I have long prayed for this day. In spirit we are just one family, we are working for the same purpose, you in a major way, and we in a minor way. The one ideal which drives us is to defeat violence and to sow peace in peoples’ hearts”. (Zanzucchi, p. 32) Chiara returned to India in early 2003 where she set up a relationship with an important movement, the Swadhyaya, whose goal of unity in diversity, brother-sisterhood and the propagation of the message of love for God and for human beings is similar to that of her movement.

The Focolari Movement prefers “*duo*”, to have bilateral dialogues between Christianity and other religions. It does however participate in inter-religious events such as the General Assembly of the World Conference of Religions for Peace, of which the Focolari

Movement is a member. During the 7th Assembly in Amman in 1999, Chiara, who is one of the honorary presidents since 1994, spoke on the topic of “*A spirituality to live together*” before 600 delegates from 60 countries and several faiths. In 1999 the Movement was engaged in the inter-religious Assembly which was concluded on St Peters Square in Rome with representatives from 25 religions. Today there are more than 25’000 youths and adults from faiths other than Christianity, including 6’000 Muslims, who are engaged in the Focolari Movement, working for a common goal and to keep alive as much as possible their ideal of unity.

2. The theological groundwork of the dialogue

What are the spiritual roots which enliven a dialogue with members of other faiths? Why have Christians been called upon to take this path? There are various answers to these questions. For this reason it is especially important to search deeply into the roots: i.e. one’s understanding of the relation between God and human beings, between Christ and religions.

A Humanity under the sunlight of one Love: referring to the Bible, the World Council of Churches stated in its new policy on inter-religious dialogue that it is based on a “common humanity” before God. (WCC, 2003. No 10) God is the Creator of all things and upholds the creation in life: “Render to the Lord the earth and its riches, the world and those who live in it!”. (Ps. 24,1) The God of Israel is also the God of all nations, and He has never ceased to bear witness at all times to all the people, “by filling their hearts with joy”. (Acts 14,17) In the same manner Vatican II declared in *Nostra aetate* (No. 2) that the basis of inter-religious dialogue lays within the unity of origin and of finality of the human family. Consequently the point is not to unify religions, but to reconcile people, bearing in mind that they are all one family. (Gonçalves, 1977, p. 389)

Chiara's experience of the love of God during the bombing of her home town of Trent bore already the seeds of an inter-religious dialogue. Reading the Gospel in the shelters gave Chiara and her companions a meaning to life. They discovered that God loved each one of them, and they saw that everyone was an object of this love. This encouraged them to approach every person, especially the poorest ones and those who had suffered most from the war. "Every human being is a candidate for unity" she wrote in 1946... "Before anything else we must keep our eyes on the one and only Father of so many sons. We must then see all creatures as the children of this one Father. We must go continuously with our hearts and minds beyond the limits of our human life and accept the idea of permanently striving for a universal brotherhood with one Father who is God". (Lubich, 1985, p. 14)

Chiara's concept of unity of origin in God, as the source of universal brother-sisterhood, was twice vindicated by a mystical experience. The first time in 1960 during a visit to the Bangwa tribe in Cameroon. During a feast in her honour with songs and dances Chiara recounts: "I had the very strong impression, that God, like an immense sun, was embracing us with his infinite love. For the first time in my life I had the intuition that we were also going to do something with non-Christians". (Lubich, 2003, p. 419) After receiving the Templeton prize in 1977 before an assembly of representatives of the worlds' major religions to whom she had given a speech, Chiara remarked: "for the second time I had the strong feeling that God's love, like an immense sun, enwrapped us together with all our different faiths". (Ibidem) Thus dialoguing with a person of another faith is encountering a joy within the heart of this person, a ray of sunlight which brings warmth to all. (cf Mt. 5,45)

"Seeds of the Word". One can discover in the very beginning of the Gospel that there is a relationship between Christ and creation: "In the beginning was the Word.... all things were created by it, and nothing which exists was created without it". (John 1,1,3) This Word is also the

“the true light” which “shines on all men”. (John 1,9) According to Scripture there is, in one way or another, a relationship between this Word, which is Christ, and every person: “in Him all things were created”, (Col. 1,15) said St Paul. On this basis the Church Fathers spoke of an “evangelical preparation” (Eusebius of Caesarea) and of the “*seeds of Logos*” (Justin) by the heathen, whose writings indicated the presence of the Logos and prepared them to welcome the Gospel. Calvin spoke of a “sentiment of the divinity” which God imprinted into the heart of human being; he also calls it “*seed of religion*”. This is a “deep-rooted belief which cannot be taken away from the mind of man”.³ The 2nd Vatican Council speaks of a Grace working on humanity “owing to the secret presence of God” (Ad Gentes No. 9) which it calls “the seed of the Word”. (No. 11) The other faiths “often bring a ray of Truth” (Nostra Aetate No. 2) revealed by Christ. These rays of truth criss-crossing religions are a reflection of the true Light which illuminates every person, and which shone in the body of Christ during his transfiguration. This “hidden but active presence of Christ in other religious traditions”⁴ is considered as the theological foundation for inter-religious dialogue in an official document of the Vatican.

While admitting that this question is still subject to clarification, the documents of the Mission and Evangelization (WCC) conference in Salvador de Bahia in 1996 speak about the “signs of the Holy Spirit” such as humility, open-mindedness to God and human beings, commitments to justice and solidarity. Galatians 5,22 which speaks about the fruit of the Holy Spirit, is quoted as a criteria of judgment. More recently the WCC document “Mission and evangelization in unity” also recognizes “glimmers of God’s presence and action among people of other traditional faiths”. (WCC, 2000, No. 59-61)

It is also on this basis that Chiara contacts people of other faiths with an open mind to discover what God has sown in their hearts. When a group of Buddhist monks in Thailand asked her what she found in faiths other than her own, she replied: “God has not forsaken any

³ *Institutio*, I,3,1

⁴ Secretarius pro Non Christianis, *L’atteggiamento della Chiesa di fronte ai seguaci di altre religioni*, 198, No. 13

nation on earth, and as we Christians say, He has spread the seeds of the unique truth in every culture....I would be very interested to know more about them in your beliefs, your rites and prayers, your way of life so full of virtue”. (Coda, 1997a, p. 22s) One must bring out these seeds. In so doing they become larger, ripe, and thus push into the background the secondary aspects of religions. “We go straight to the essence which is love, because they also believe in love”, said Chiara in an interview.⁵ To discover and cultivate the seeds of Christ’s presence, one must be open-minded to others and ready to welcome them. In a word: to love, a benevolent love. Only through kindness can one see in every person of whatever faith, the presence of Christ, especially in the “least important brother and sister” (Mt. 25,40) : “We only have one right, said Chiara, that is to be at the service of everyone, as we serve God through each one of them... If we Christians are able to love as per the teachings of this spirituality, we will be more able to perceive and to discover the seeds of the Word in other religions... such a discovery will bring us closer together and facilitate a mutual understanding”. (Lubich, 2003a, p. 417)

The “Golden Rule”. One of the typical elements of Chiara’s spirituality is its central focus on evangelical love: the love of God for all of us in Christ and through the Holy Spirit in our hearts, to whom we should respond with our love by giving to God first priority in our day to day life and by loving our neighbour as ourselves. Now this demand of love can also be found in most of the other religions in the form of the “golden rule”. For Christians it is known as follows: “As you would that men should do to you, do you also to them likewise” (Luke 6,31). This rule is one of the most visible seeds sown by the Holy Spirit in the hearts of every person and religious tradition. Chiara mentions it in practically all of her speeches on interreligious matters. For example during a meeting with the *Muslim American Society* she said: “I am convinced that if we want to work in favour of universal brotherhood, which I would invite

⁵ Interview for Radio Vatican, 8.1.2001

everyone here to do, we must first of all focus ourselves on what is called the ‘the golden rule’” (Lubich, 2000, p. 5) In her speech at Assisi in January 2002, Chiara underlined the fact that this rule is the basis for starting inter-religious dialogue, by “emphasizing the duty of love for our brothers and sisters, it creates a place for universal brotherhood where peace reigns”. These words of the Gospel are like a summary of all Gods’ revelation, both general and special. “It recapitulates all what we should do in our lives. It sums up the whole law inscribed by God in every person...Even though Christ pronounced it, it was already universally known...this tells us how God has set his heart on it, how He wants everyone to make it the basic rule of his life” (Lubich, 2003a, p. 175)⁶

Chiara is convinced that there lies a divine call to love in the heart of every man, as well in every religion, “a love written down in the genes of each man and woman, who are created in the image of the God of love, God the father” (Lubich, 2003b, p3) Christians believe in God as Trinity within who is a relationship of unity and distinction. Created in the image of the God of love, man and woman, like all that is created, reflect this unity-distinction and become whole in a free relationship which is both vertical and horizontal : in their communion with God, among themselves and with the cosmos. The golden rule summarizes all that human beings are called to live in the horizontal relationships of life. Chiara describes this rule as “a concentration of all Gods’ commandments. One should therefore give it a large place in the inter-religious dialogue. If the conduct which stems from this rule were applied, it would by itself be a powerful generator of harmony between groups and individuals” (Lubich, 2003b, p.3) This golden rule, she said quoting the *Hadith* (cf note 5) of Islam during a speech in the

⁶ This golden rule, whether it be in a positive or negative manner, is not specifically a religious rule. It can also be found in ancient philosophy, it is part of man’s moral heritage (cf. H. Merklein, *Die Gottesherrschaft als Handlungsprinzip. Unterzuche zur Ethik Jesu*. Würzburg, 1980, p.243). In Judaism, **loving one’s** neighbour is the “big principle of the Torah” (Raby Akiba): God created man in his image, and all what is done to man God considers it also done to him. In Islam one can find the golden rule as follows: “no one is a true believer if he does not wish for his brother as he would wish for himself” (*Hadith 13* as per Al-Bukhari). In Hinduism the golden rule is expressed as follows: «the essential duty: do not do to others what would hurt if done to you”. Gandhi said: “you and I are one. I cannot hurt you without hurting myself.”

Malcom X mosque, “is enough to guarantee a bond of love with all our fellow men and women, and this love suffices to bring all humanity into one family”. (Lubich, 1997b, p. 23)

3. An art of Dialogue

How dialoguing with people of other faiths? The “how” of dialogue is as important as its “why”. Jesus related himself in a dialogic manner with people of other faiths. He was not the kind to be shut up in a room, but travelled by foot to meet people, let himself be accosted when his disciples would have preferred that he avoid certain bothersome persons. He listened to people, asked them questions, was willing to change his mind and challenged them. Becoming more intimate with some persons, he spoke also about his secret, his relation with the one he called “his Father”. The apostle Paul invited Christians to have between them “the same dispositions as in Christ”. (Phil. 2,5) This means to seek what unites, consider people as superior to oneself, take an interest in them the same way as Jesus did. (2,2-4) It also means to share our personal and intimate experiences with others. (2,20)

To say that dialogue is an “art” implies that it leads to true relationships with people of other faiths. Dialogue is not just a matter of knowledge about other religions. With patience and perseverance one establishes a relationship of trust and friendship. The most recent document on interreligious dialogue published by the WCC underlines this point. (WCC, 2003, No. 21, 28) In the same manner Chiara does not miss an occasion to remind us in her speeches that an “art” or a “spirituality” of dialogue are necessary for it to be beneficial, so that “the seeds of truth” might grow and bear fruit.

What are the features of this spirituality of dialogue as outlined and experienced by Chiara? It is almost a truism to state that a dialogue begins by *listening*. One should not only take time to learn the basic facts of the other faiths, but also to welcome those aspects considered most precious by them. “To dialogue, she says, means first of all to place yourself

on the same level, not to consider yourself better than others. It means to listen to what the other person has to say from the bottom of his heart. It means to put aside all our thoughts, all our affections. To suspend everything in order to be able to “get inside the other person”.

(Fondi, 2003, p. 400) This willingness to make the other person feel welcome, made possible by an inner silence, enables one to confront a religion different from ours, a religion which is not always easy to decipher. However it is also the chance to open a jewel box bursting with spiritual treasures.

The second attitude is one of *surprise* before the work of God in other religions. Concerning her contacts with Hinduism Chiara wrote: “this treasure can only be opened by those who approach it with respect, love, and above all with the conviction that God has much to tell us through this ancient culture. In our present tormented and difficult world this culture provides the essential words to bring out the prime importance of inner life”. (Lubich, 2001a, p. 238)

Thus *listening* and *surprise* are the first two pillars in the art of dialogue. Chiara has placed three more pertaining to the “*art of loving*”, an expression which she borrowed from the psychologist Eric Fromm.⁷ Chiara proposed it because she had reached the conclusion after many years, that the first thing the followers of other faiths expected to see from Christians was love inspired by the Gospel: “They all welcomed it as if they saw it as the vocation of love which is part of everybody’s human nature”. (Lubich, 2003a, p. 423) They are thus invited to put into practice this *ars amoris*.

What does it mean? First of all *do not make any distinctions*, as God does not make any distinctions between people. “We must not make any difference between people who we consider as likeable and those who are not, whether they are ugly or handsome, compatriots or foreigners, European or American, African or Asian, Christian or Jew, Muslim or Hindu.

⁷ Fromm writes “Our civilization very rarely seeks to learn the art of loving; in spite of a desperate search for love, everything else is considered more important: success, prestige, money, power. We waste nearly all our energy to chase these objectives and very little to learn the art of loving”. (*L’arte di amare*. Milan, 1971, p.18).

Love does not know any kind of discrimination”, so said Chiara during a meeting with Muslim friends. (Lubich, 2002d, p. 4) This is particularly true for those religions which refer to Abraham and which proclaim the unity of God and of all humankind. By admitting that God cares for everyone, they confess every person’s calling to respond to his love and act accordingly with mercy towards all.⁸

Another pillar is to *make the first move*, that is to say not to wait till the other person does it. One should take the first step without waiting for anything in return. We must always be first, take the initiative like God who always takes the initiative to love. “We were created to be a gift to each other”, said Chiara in Amman in 1999, “This is true when we make the effort to love our brothers and sisters with a love which is ready to take the first step without waiting to be loved in return. This is what the great founders of religions have taught us by their lives. For example Buddha did not only teach non-violence and peace. He stood up on the battlefield and personally intervened to avoid a war between people and religions”. Jesus also expressed this when he said ‘there is no greater love than giving one’s life for friends’ (John 15,13) and he effectively did give his life”. (Lubich, 1999b)

There is one last point, for Chiara it is the most important of all: *to make yourself one with the other person*. This refers to the famous words of the apostle Paul who made himself “servant unto all”, trying to reach each one: “unto the Jews I became as a Jew,... to them that are without law, as without law...to the weak became I as weak” (1 Cor. 9,20-22). *To make yourself one* has two meanings, first of all one must clear our head of everything, try to leave oneself empty, as Chiara wrote already in 1946: “One cannot try to understand a brother, to know him or to share his sufferings, if one’s mind is cluttered with an anxiety, a prejudice, a thought, or whatever. To ‘make yourself one’ one must be poor in spirit, a humble person. Unity is not

⁸ A Muslim proverb says “God forgives a hundred times, but He keeps his greatest mercy for those who have saved his smallest creatures” (G.M. Guzzetti, *Islam in preghiera*, Rome, 1991 p.136), this ties up with the compassion taught by the Buddha :“Oh Monks! You should be working for the good of many, for their happiness, driven by compassion for the world, for the good ...of humankind”.

possible without this”. (Lubich, 1985, p. 93) ‘To make yourself one’ also means to go forth to other people in order to acquaint oneself with their religious experiences and to try to understand their view of the world. “To make yourself one means to take for yourself their worries, their thoughts, their sufferings, their joys. To make yourself one is particularly applicable to inter-religious dialogue. Someone has written that <In order to penetrate the religion of another person, one must walk in his shoes, see the world as he sees it, understand what it means for him to be a Buddhist, a Moslem, a Hindu, etc.>” (Lubich, 1999b, p. 4)⁹

If Paul was able to “become a Jew with the Jews”, “a heathen with the heathen”, on the model of Christ who made himself one with us by emptying himself (the “*Kenosis*” of Phil. 2,7), we could say today “Buddhist with the Buddhists”, “Muslim with the Muslims”. This stepping into another persons’ shoes is the secrete spring for a dialogue which can lead to an eventful meeting in which one not only shares information, but also one’s personal experiences. To open one’s heart willingly to another person lays the strongest foundation for a relationship of respect, trust, and fraternity. To open one’s heart means also sharing one’s spiritual experience. A Christian will talk about the hope which fills his life (Ac. 4,20; 1 Pet. 3,15). Chiara speaks then about her encounter with the God of Love, who manifested himself so strongly to her and her companions, when her town, Trent, has been bombed during the second world war. “We speak about life...and life is always appreciated”, she often says.

This straightforward “*art of loving*” was considered by the 7th World Conference of Religions for Peace in Amman in 1999 as the lowest common denominator for setting up bridges of friendship for a better understanding between different faiths. (Fondi, 2003, p. 387). To quote the final communiqué issued by this conference it creates the “culture of peace” which “declares and honours the diversity of the cultures and the traditions as much as one recognizes, shares, and honours those points common to all of us”. (Lubich, 1999b)

⁹ F. Whaling, *Christian Theology and World Religions. A Global Approach*. London, 1966, p. 130s

In October 2002, the general secretary of WCC, Konrad Raiser, together with Chiara Lubich signed a mutual declaration subsequent to her visit to the WCC. This declaration proclaimed the importance of a *spirituality of communion* for the advance of ecumenism deeply rooted in our own *Kenosis* in the image of Christ. What is mentioned therein of the steps taken by Christians of different churches is, in my opinion, also applicable to the dialogue between persons of different faiths: “As we strip ourselves of false safeguards, having found in God our one and true identity, having the courage to be open and vulnerable to each other, we shall then begin to live like pilgrims moving onwards. We shall discover the God of surprises who leads us on new unknown paths, and on which we shall meet new companions”.¹⁰

Are these new paths those of brother-sisterhood, where Chiara walks determinedly? In this paper, I spoke mainly about the work of a person. However what is important is not the person, as Chiara often says, but the charisma of love, which God has giving and longs to give not only to the churches, but to all people of different faiths. Does not her experience show that it is possible to receive and live this charisma and thus make room for God? He is the only one who can stir in our hearts a feeling of hope among the current pessimism. Moreover this union with God, fruit of an already real brother-sisterhood experienced with members of other faiths, opens for them as well as for Christians a new way towards Jesus, our brother. May I witness that since I know the Focolare movement, I was able, by the grace of God, to begin walking on some of these new paths? This is, in my sense, the special contribution of Chiara Lubich to interreligious dialogue.

¹⁰ *Spirituality of Unity. Joint Message of Chiara Lubich and Konrad Raiser*, Genève, 28.10.2002. The different points of this « Spirituality of communion » were presented by Chiara in her lecture *Towards a Spirituality of Unity*, in Bossey Ecumenical Institute on 26.10.2002, Cf. <http://www.wcc-coe.org/wcc/what/ecumenical/wcc-focolare.html> consulted on 23.12.03

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