

The Charism of Unity in Dialogue with Contemporary Culture and the Paradigm of Fraternity

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In this article based on her speech to the Economic Science Faculty at the University of Buenos Aires on April 12, 2012, the author begins by asking the question: Does the charism of unity have something to say to contemporary culture? She presents Chiara Lubich's experience of unity and her vision for contributing to a more united and peaceful world. Looking briefly at the cultural situation in Europe today, the author presents the difficult cultural situations on that continent. But she quickly turns her attention to Latin America and the positive social, economic, and political changes that have recently taken place there as well as the challenges that still remain. She presents Chiara Lubich's thoughts and proposals on her visit to Latin America in 1998 concerning those challenges. Lubich proposed an interreligious and intercultural "360 degree dialogue" that is based on fraternity. The author

explains what fraternity meant to Chiara Lubich in the history of her own experience, in the Focolare spirituality of unity, and how it can be a paradigm for cultural development that overcomes the challenges facing Latin America—as well as the global community—today.

The title of this article poses a basic question: does the charism of unity, given by God to Chiara Lubich, have something to say to contemporary culture? Right from the beginning of her spiritual and human experience, Chiara intuited that the charism God was giving her had a universal breadth. It was universal in two ways. It had to do with the whole human family in the most diverse geographical and cultural situations. And besides containing a spirituality to be lived, it would be able to have an impact on the different fields of knowledge, as well as the different social, political, and economic realities. This was an intuition that in time revealed itself in history. In order to grasp how much this charism can give to today's cultures, it is important that we focus on its most authentic and innovative content.

The word that God, through Chiara, wished to highlight for humanity today is all contained in Jesus' Testament: "May they all be one" (Jn. 17:21). Chiara's story has a simple flavor, but, at the same time, is also solemn and foundational:

The war was on. A few girls and I were huddled together in some dark place, perhaps a cellar. By candlelight we were reading the final testament of Jesus. We read through the whole passage. Those difficult words seemed to light up for us, one after another. We felt we understood them. Above all, we felt the solid conviction that what we had before us

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was the “founding charter” of this new life of ours, and of all that was about to be born around us.¹

Much later, Chiara explained: “Unity is the word that sums up the life of our Movement. For us it is the word that carries in itself every other supernatural reality, every other practice or commandment, every other religious approach.”² The charism of unity was thus able to produce a spirituality that is communitarian: “. . . in which love awaits love in return, and giving awaits receiving. . . .”³ From this spirituality of unity came forth a current of life and thought that would find both followers and animators in the five continents, in different cultures, in many faiths, and in all expressions of personal and societal life where the needs of humanity show themselves. This current of thought, bears a doctrine and a culture that is innervating the different fields of knowledge and

1. Chiara Lubich, *Essential Writings; Spirituality, Dialogue, Culture* (New York: New City Press, 2007), 16.

2. Ibid., 26–27. Father Jesús Castellano, a Discalced Carmelite well-known as an expert of spirituality and mysticism, consultant of various congregations of the Holy See and member of the Abba School, wrote the following: “There is no doubt that a supernatural wisdom, a charism of the Holy Spirit was at the basis of such a new and high discovery, I would say a novelty up to this moment in the Church, even though it is intuited and preached in the Christian spirituality. We can affirm that here we find ourselves in front of a charism born from a page of the Gospel that this time is not the page of poverty, of prayer or works of mercy, but a page that reveals the mystery of unity, the same goal for Christ’s coming among human beings, of his death and resurrection. . . . It’s a novelty that raises the communitarian and ecclesial spirituality to be a Trinitarian spirituality, a spirituality of unity in which love and therefore the demands of this love, possesses a Trinitarian measure: ‘as you in me and I in you.’” (Chiara Lubich, *Unity and Jesus Forsaken*. New York: New City Press, 1985, 11–12 [editor’s translation])

3. Chiara Lubich, *Lectio Magistralis* in occasion of the conferral of an honorary doctorate by the University of Trnava (Slovakia); June 23, 2003.

disciplines for a constructive and dialogical rapport in the building of a more human and united world.

Unity can be lived by everyone, really by everyone, on the condition that it be the fruit of love, of what Chiara calls a:

love that lives deep in the heart of every human being. For the followers of Christ, this love can be a participation in the very love that is the life of God. It is a love that is strong, capable of loving even those who do not reciprocate but instead attack us as enemies. It is a love capable of forgiving.”⁴

Love for followers of many faiths is expressed in the Golden Rule: do to others what you would like done to you. It is also a love that for those who do not have religious faith is manifested as solidarity, good will, and non-violence. Love of God and of neighbor was the initial inspiring spark that was increasingly refined up to the point of discovering anew Jesus’ new commandment: “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you” (Jn 15:12).

Latin America: A New Birthplace of Fraternity

Let us go back to the initial question: does the charism of unity have something to say to today’s cultures? I think everyone is well aware that in the context of the economic crisis which has especially affected the West, there is the existence of a crisis which is much more profound: that of the European culture. The reflections and research by sociologists reveal the demise of a culture in which, after having reached important thresholds, lacked the light

4. Chiara Lubich, Speech at the Symposium “Towards a Unity of Nations and a Unity of Peoples,” at the UN in New York in 1997. See *Nuova Umanità* XX (1998): 58.

of reason due to the weakness and/or incapacity to at least perceive the reality of the light that is the wisdom of God which is able to illuminate and support our quest for the truth.

But in this moment, my attention goes to the Latin American continent, the so-called “continent of hope” that is living a truly extraordinary moment in history. In the context of the celebrations around the independence of South America, the *Roman Observer* recently published an article with a title that seemed very indicative to me: “South America is no Longer the Continent of Lost Opportunities.”⁵ There is a *kairós* for this continent, an opportune moment in which the virtuous interweaving of various elements is leading it to a full blossoming that was certainly hoped for, but not foreseen so soon. The whole region is for the first time finding its own voice, with an *intercultural identity* that enriches the diverse roots—those of the indigenous peoples, of the Spanish and Portuguese, and of the immigrants coming from all over the world since the end of the nineteenth century—but which at the same time emerges as something new.

The sufficiently clear signs that nourish this hope are: the relative political stability reached by the different democratic systems; the growth of the economy and the social policies that have undoubtedly improved the quality of life of millions of people; a proper system of production that seeks also the integral development of persons; and last but not least the strong tendency towards regional integration, to the unity of the continent:

Even though pluralistic, South America has powerful roots of unity, like no other region of the world, both for its

common origins, events and historical destiny, and for the dominant language and its Catholic tradition, which nourishes a shared sense of solidarity in this enlarged fraternity. What in Bolívar’s vision was truly a utopia . . . today begins to decisively take shape and to grow within the internal integrative processes of the last 50 years, which took a leap of quality with the MERCOSUR (Common Market of the South) that, despite all its daily difficulties, broke through the traditional isolation of Brazil with regards to the Hispanic American nations and today emerges also in the UNASUR (Union of South American Nations) and the Community of South American and Caribbean Nations.⁶

In these same signs of hope are hidden the challenges now before the continent: the persistent social inequalities that surface in a deficient “social cohesion”; the more or less profound difference between cities with a high indicator of school enrollment, university culture, research and services and vast peripheral regions with low integral development; the persistence of widespread corruption both at a public and private level. The push to overcome and positively resolve these challenges is found in the very values of the Latin American culture. We said that it is a real and pluralistic culture that also has the instruments to forge corresponding structures for an effective integration.

In 1998, Chiara spent more than a month in Argentina, meeting also with her people who came from Peru, Chile, Uruguay, Bolivia, and Paraguay. It was a memorable month, characterized by events and public and private encounters: the honorary doctorate

5. Carriquiry Lecour, *L'Osservatore Romano*, March 8, 2012, 4.

6. Ibid.

at the University of Buenos Aires, the proclamation of honored guest by the City Administration of Buenos Aires, the meeting with the Argentinean Episcopal Conference, and the visit to our little town in O'Higgins. Towards the end of the month, she met over 8,000 members of the Movement.

A 360 Degree Dialogue and the Concept of Fraternity

On that occasion, in summing up her encounter with the realities of these lands, she underscored a specific message: It is not enough only to go ahead with the growth of the Movement, but the Movement needs to help make a deeper impact on their social and cultural fabric, on their political and manufacturing sectors. This was sort of an inspiration that was maturing within her while she was in contact with the peoples of Latin America, with their sufferings and their hopes. Chiara explained:

Here too, something absolutely new was born. This already became clear during the university ceremony. Present there were people of different convictions but also Muslims, Jews, Christians, all united. I said to myself: the charism not only develops Christian people, but it also brings about the universal human family, because it takes in everyone. Therefore, my advice to you here, then, is a 360 degree dialogue, that is, to love everyone. . . .⁷

This underscoring of a dialogue of love by Chiara would then emerge when she continued her trip to Brazil as an appeal addressed

7. Address to the members of the Movement of Argentina, Uruguay, Paraguay, Chile, Bolivia, and Peru in Buenos Aires, April 12, 1998 (unpublished).

to the whole Focolare Movement in the world: to develop, starting from the charism of unity, a doctrine that in the different fields of knowledge would give intellectual and scientific rigor to love in dialogue with culture and different cultures.

In the following years, this dialogue of love was articulated in a concept of *fraternity* that was already present in the early years of Trent⁸ but which now was being developed in the most diverse areas of life and of knowledge as an actual social category—that of fraternity—able to address our lives and our attitudes in ways that tend towards unity. Chiara herself deepened this concept at different events and occasions, explaining its application in politics, economy, art, communication, health, the environment, and so forth. She saw fraternity as indispensable for the fulfilment of the common good of the community and of the universal human family.

In a message to politicians and administrators in South America, Chiara said:

The strong contradictions that mark our era need a *point of reference* that is equally penetrating and incisive, categories of thinking and of actions able to engage every individual person, as well as peoples with their economic, social and political systems. There is a universal idea that is already *an experience in action*, and which is proving to be able to take

8. “Before all else, the soul must always fix its gaze on the one Father of many children. Then it must see all as children of the same Father. In mind and in heart we must always go beyond the bounds imposed on us by human life alone and create the habit of constantly opening ourselves to the reality of being one human family in one Father: God” (Lubich, *Essential Writings*, 17–18). And also later: “Keep your heart open to all of humanity and teach those for whom you are responsible to do the same. May it not be that Jesus came on earth in vain to preach the universal family” (Ibid, 236).

on this epochal challenge; this idea is universal brotherhood [fraternity].⁹

In a deep dialogue with a prominent North American political leader who founded of the “Day for Interdependence,” Chiara wrote in a message she sent for the Day for Independence celebrated in Philadelphia:

Without fraternity, no person or people are really truly free and equal. Equality and freedom will always be incomplete and precarious, until fraternity will be an integral part of the political agenda and processes in every region of the world.

Fraternity today can give new content to the reality of interdependence. And fraternity can bring out projects and actions in the complex of the political, cultural and social fabric of our world. It is fraternity that makes us step beyond our isolation and opens the door to development for peoples who are still excluded from it. It is fraternity that indicates how to peacefully resolve the divisions that makes war part of our history books. It is because of fraternity lived out that we can dream and even hope in some form of communion of goods between wealthy and poor nations. . . . The deep need for peace that humanity expresses states that fraternity is not only a value, not only a method, but a global paradigm of political development. This is why a world that is increasingly interdependent needs politicians, business people,

intellectuals and artists who place fraternity—an instrument of unity—at the heart of their actions and thinking.”¹⁰

On another occasion, Chiara added:

[I]nterdependence implies a mutual relationship between two parties who condition one another. This relationship cannot be lived out perfectly between individuals or among nations if not characterized by mutual respect and understanding, by the capacity to embrace the difficulties and issues each one faces, and by the desire to welcome one another’s unique gift. Practically speaking, it requires mutual love as it is lived out among brothers and sisters...the choice of respectful dialogue as opposed to hegemony, and the practice of sharing among all as opposed to concentrating resources and expertise exclusively in certain parts of the world. . . . Animated by fraternity, interdependence, beyond being a simple “fact” or “tool,” can become the force that drives the process of positive developments.¹¹

Fraternity: A Global Paradigm for Unity in Diversity

Upon returning to Rome after her trip in South America in 1998, Chiara decisively launched the “Dialogue with Culture,” thus giving life to a Center for the different fields of knowledge, at which dialogue with experts and academicians from the most diverse fields of study, including those of non-religious convictions,

9. Chiara Lubich, “Cities for Unity,” a message at the meeting *Ciudades por la Unidad*, Rosario, Argentina, June 1, 2005 (unpublished).

10. Chiara Lubich, “Message to the Day of Independence,” September 12, 2003 (unpublished).

11. Lubich, *Essential Writings*, 265–268

could take place. There, the new paradigm of fraternity is beginning to find scientific backing. Through seminars, conferences, study groups, scientific reviews, the charism of unity is taking on a cultural task to penetrate culture from within through a creative dialogue. This cultural proposal is one and also plural. One is its origins and source: the charism of unity. Plural in its dynamic of welcoming and being welcomed in the most diverse contexts, in its many values, in its most distinct applications in personal life and in society. We live in times that are not only very difficult but also particularly complex. Humanity, in its growth curve, is going through a delicate moment: it can take a qualitative step of notable importance, or it could live a static moment, or worse yet, one of involution. The push to aim high and to go ahead can come from every angle.

Chiara's legacy, that which she left to the men and women of our times, is the rediscovery of the gospel as a true propelling force in history, from the small and precious story of each person, as well as the great and equally precious story of peoples, and of all humanity. I think, however, that I cannot keep the key to Chiara's legacy for myself, the secret to every successful unity. Chiara herself did not often speak about it, but she did not remain silent about it. In her talk in 1997 to the UN, after having shown her spirituality as a way and instrument for peace, she added: "Nothing good, nothing useful, nothing fruitful for the world can be achieved without meeting and accepting weariness and suffering; in a word, without the cross."¹²

12. Lubich, Speech at the Symposium "Towards a Unity of Nations and a Unity of Peoples," 58.

The cross is not an assemblage of two crossed pieces of wood, but the wood that carried Jesus, the man-God. Jesus crucified and forsaken covers and takes on all the suffering of the world, and, in a wholly special way, the suffering and sacrifice for which love and unity call. In Chiara's words: "And, to love well, we must not see the difficulties, corruption and sufferings of the world merely as social evils to be resolved. Rather, we must recognize in these the countenance of Christ, who did not disdain to hide himself beneath all human misery."¹³ He is also the "place" of the full revelation to us of the love of God for humanity, and the mediator who recomposed our unity with God and among us:

[E]very physical, moral or spiritual suffering is nothing other than a shadow of his immense suffering.

Jesus Forsaken is the image of those who feel perplexed, doubtful, of those who ask "why?" Jesus Forsaken is the image of the mute. He can no longer speak.

In a certain sense, Jesus Forsaken is the figure of the blind—he doesn't see; of the deaf—he doesn't hear. He is the exhausted who laments. He seems to be on the edge of despair. He is the one who starves . . . for union with God. He is the image of the disillusioned; he is fearful, bewildered. He appears to have failed. Jesus Forsaken is the image of darkness, melancholy, conflict; the image of all that is

13. Chiara Lubich, "For a civilization of Unity." Speech at the Conference on A Culture of Peace for the Unity of Peoples, Castelgandolfo (Rome), June 11–12, 1988 (unpublished).

indefinable, strange, because he is a God who cries for help! He is non-sense.”¹⁴

It was therefore clear that that immense suffering had something to do with the mystery of unity. Not only, but He, who had not remained in the grips of that infinite suffering but, with a superhuman and unimaginable effort, had re-abandoned Himself to the Father, saying: “Father, into your hands I give up my spirit” (Lk 23:46), was teaching us the way to behave in the midst of different disunities, in the separations, in the abandonments and, therefore, the way to overcome them.¹⁵

the first female attorney in her city’s court system. Later she studied theology and canon law. From 1972 to 1978, she belonged to Chiara Lubich’s personal secretariat. For the following ten years she lived in Istanbul where she established ecumenical and interreligious relationships, especially with the then Patriarch of Constantinople, Demetrius I, and with numerous metropolitans. From 1995, she was a member of the Abba School; and from 2002 until their approval in 2007, she worked directly with Chiara Lubich in revising the General Statutes of the Movement. In October 2008, she participated and spoke at the Synod of Bishops on “The Word of God in the Life and Mission of the Church;” and on November 24, 2009, Benedict XVI appointed her as a Consulter for the Pontifical Council for the Laity.

Thus, a 360 degree dialogue exists in full circle with our contemporary cultures. People are together facing and addressing the pressing issues and sufferings facing humankind. Thinking of the projects to promote integration in our continents and between our continents, the charism of unity offers itself to contribute to building a global culture, a global culture that respects the diverse cultures of the world, that finds its paradigm in fraternity.

Maria Voce was elected president of the Focolare Movement on July 7, 2008. She is the first focolarina to succeed the founder, Chiara Lubich, who died on March 14 of the same year. She studied law and became

14. Chiara Lubich, “Unity and Jesus Crucified and Forsaken: Foundation for a Spirituality of Communion.” Speech at the World Council of Churches, Geneva, October 20, 2002; in *Nuova Umanità* XXV (2003): 26–27.

15. Chiara Lubich, “Jesus Crucified and Forsaken: Focal Point for a Spirituality of Communion.” Speech to the bishops of Baviera, April 23, 2003 (unpublished).