

The charism of unity and a synodal spirituality

Journeying together with Jesus among us

An Interview with Focolare President, Margaret Karram

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On July 1st, Focolare president, Margaret Karram, participated in a Day of Study and Reflection promoted by the General Secretariat of the Synod of Bishops on the characteristics of a synodal spirituality. Participants included those responsible for twenty charisms, including religious orders and ecclesial movements. We spoke with Margaret Karram about the contribution that Chiara Lubich's charism of unity and the experience of the Movement could offer in this regard.

In view of the upcoming Synod of Bishops, Pope Francis has called for a synodal process that would involve the entire people of God, on the theme "For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation and Mission." What does this reality signify for the Focolare Movement?

The launching of the worldwide synodal process signifies openness to dialogue and conversion to fraternal relationships at every level. In the synodal preparatory document, I saw how much the present-day wounds of the world challenge us: grief, inequality, persecution, suffering and how we want to face these wounds by "listening to the cry of the poor". It was a joy to see that the final document our General Assembly also aligns almost exactly with these same challenges. It calls the Movement to courageously search for ways to listen to the suffering cry of humanity and to discover the very many faces of Jesus Forsaken present in every part of the world.

Going through the preparatory document, I was struck by a decisive initial statement that rang out like a new awareness/acknowledgement: "To 'journey together', we need to let ourselves be educated by the Spirit to acquire a truly synodal mentality, entering with courage and freedom of heart into a conversion process". It is a call to "discover the face and form of a synodal Church," in which "everyone has something to learn." This is what the document says: "The faithful people, the college of bishops, the Bishop of Rome: all listening

to each other and all listening to the Holy Spirit, the 'Spirit of truth' (Jn 14:17), in order to know what He 'says to the Churches' (Rev 2:7)."¹

I was struck by this vision which is so clear and grounded in Scripture that it shows the true way to relate to one another in order to give space to the Holy Spirit. It is a vision that involves people and hierarchy and undoubtedly requires conversion and constant vigilance.

A synodal Church, therefore, values the "variety of gifts" and is an outward looking Church which by her nature is open to dialogue. The document continues, "This includes the call to deepen relationships with other Churches and Christian communities with which we are united by the one Baptism." It continues: "The perspective of 'journeying together', then, is even broader and embraces all of humankind whose 'joys and hopes, griefs and anxieties' we share (GS n. 1)."

It is increasingly evident, then, that there is a grace underlying this pressing invitation to be open to synodality so that it becomes the new way of the Church. Having received this charism of unity, I have reflected on how, as a Movement, we must seriously hear this call and respond to it.

Pope Francis affirms that "the path of synodality is what God expects from the Church of the third millennium."² What did synodality mean for Chiara Lubich and what does it mean for the Movement today?

This synodal dimension suggests a life program that has been characteristic of the Movement from its beginning: the life of the Mystical Body, life with Jesus among us. It's a program that we want to implement today more than ever, making the encouragement given by Pope Francis our own.

I came across one of Chiara's writings when she was called by Pope John Paul II to participate as an auditor at the 1999 Synod. This was how Chiara appealed to the family of the Movement in the world to live this event with her. Here are her words:

"What should we commit ourselves to? How can we do our part? By frequently renewing in our hearts the serious intention of always wanting, night and day, the presence of Jesus among us and by acting accordingly. In fact, it is an act which calls for sacrifice. It requires, for example, overcoming human respect, overcoming laziness, practicing humility to silence self-love, in short, paying the price for a communitarian spirituality. [...] Reminding each other of how the duty of having Jesus among us can contribute to living on a supernatural level [...]."³

Synodality, "journeying together", is exactly what I felt at the time of my election: the new stage that was opening had to be for all of us, both members and adherents of the Movement in the world, a continuous "journeying together"! In other words, to live that *Holy Journey* which we began in the 1980s. We know that it came from the wise intuition that Chiara had to help us "become saints together" and witness love to the world.

The sharing of experiences of living the Gospel, of the challenges and of our aims are important steps to strengthen the family spirit and multiply cells of authentic fraternity among individuals and peoples. This sincere communion commits us to living for one another, to giving of ourselves to those in need, not stopping in front of difficulties on a path towards collective holiness.

Our entire spirituality helps us because it leads us to discover the preciousness of relationships. It forms us in the dynamic of love for our brothers and sisters which is always new and helps us live in accordance with the Gospel. This is the newness of the charism that allows us to build relationships on the model of the Trinity and thus embody the heart of Jesus' message! It is a very timely call and one that I feel is eagerly awaited today, more than ever.

In what ways do you feel the spirituality of unity is most connected to synodality?

From the beginning, the path of the Movement developed in a way that we could call "synodal," because the rediscovery of God Love - the "inspirational spark," as John Paul II called it - *opened a way to go to God together*. The two main cornerstones of the spirituality that accompanied this development are: unity and Jesus forsaken.

Unity. It was round about 1946 when Chiara Lubich and her companions, who were already committed to living the Gospel, read the testament of Jesus together. Those difficult words became clear, one by one: "That they may be one as we are one", "That they may all be one". It was the discovery of God's plan for humanity. Chiara perceived the profound reality of the relationship between the Father and the Son and the greatness of that relationship being communicated to us. And this desire of Jesus was translated into a firm commitment: "We were born for this page."

This gives rise to a responsibility that was primarily personal: that of living the Word in our daily lives to conform ourselves to being and acting as Jesus did. It is a commitment, however, that is not only personal but also collective, which recalls the new commandment, to love one another as He has loved us (cf. Jn 15:12). This led to a collective decision, marked by a pact of mutual love, consciously and solemnly made, to be renewed often and with confidence, especially in the face of moments when there has been a lack of charity.

The other cornerstone is the discovery of *Jesus forsaken*. Even before focusing on the passage in John 17, Chiara and her companions had "discovered" Jesus' cry of forsakenness on the cross. They understood it as the experience of his greatest suffering: experiencing being forsaken, he who had said: "I and the Father are one" (Jn 10:29-30). It was a culmination of suffering in which the greatness of his love is revealed, bearing the fruit of the redemption by reuniting a torn and divided humanity with God. He is the key to unity with God, therefore, and the key to the unity of people amongst themselves.

So, it was for her and so it is for those who follow the path of Unity, which leads us, like the disciples of Emmaus, to walk with the Risen Lord. "Jesus Forsaken" and "unity" are two sides of the same coin⁴ and those who want to live in unity and for unity "can only go ahead by leaning on a suffering-love as strong as that of Jesus Crucified and Forsaken."⁵ By living in

this way, we enter an Easter journey, from forsakenness to the light of unity, which is essential in any synodal path.

After Chiara Lubich's death, how is all this continuing in the Movement today?

The compass to indicate a path forward is in our Statutes, the premise of which states: "Mutual and constant love, which makes unity possible and brings the presence of Jesus among all, is, for those who are part of the Work of Mary, the basis for their life under every aspect: it is the norm of norms, the premise to every other rule." Mutual and continuous charity to reach consensus must therefore be the style of our synodality. Pope Francis urged us to do this when he welcomed the participants of the General Assembly of the Work of Mary at the Vatican on 6th February 2021. Among other things, he said: "With regard to your effort within the Movement, I urge you increasingly to promote synodality so that all members, as holders of the same charism, may be co-responsible for and participate in the life of the Work of Mary and its specific goals."

Another characteristic is the *man-woman relationship* proper to the nature of the Movement, that is open to all vocations, to men and women of all ages. The governance of the Movement at all levels, precisely because it is based on the presence of Jesus in the midst, is entrusted to a man and a woman as co-responsibles. In the case of the President, who according to the Statutes will always be a woman, she will be assisted in her responsibility as the guarantor of the unity of the Movement by a co-president. This too is a permanent school of synodality that bears fruit.

Another eloquent example for contributing to a synodal spirituality to be given to the Churches and to the world - as I have been saying constantly - is to witness to *the spirit of family everywhere* and *in governance* at the central and local levels. It signifies a spirit of listening and giving priority to interpersonal relationships and to that fraternal love of truth and charity that illuminates the place that belongs to each one.

The Focolare Movement's General Assembly in 2021 was a strongly synodal experience . . .

Without a doubt. In fact, this event was prepared for more than a year through widespread consultation that involved youth and adults from five continents, not only members, but also adherents, including people from various Churches and religious traditions. This process went forward by being rooted in a culture of trust, a culture that we had tried to foster during the previous six years. The broad sharing that we had in our Assembly produced a great wealth of reflection and proposals so that we were able to come to the point of agreeing on a vision and direction. This then matured with further discussions and was summarized in the final document.

Thinking back on this period, I feel that the grace of the *sensus fidei* of the people, the grace of the Assembly, as it is considered in our own Statutes as the supreme organ of governance, really worked. All of this was certainly based on the pact of mutual love and being open to continuous conversion. The condition for success was the striving to not give up listening to

one another with love until we experienced the inspiration on which to focus joyfully as a sign of the presence of the Risen Lord.

I see that this process is now continuing in the different parts of the world, in the light of the Pope's words and of the Assembly's final document, looking for ways to listen to the cry of suffering of humanity.

To conclude, could you indicate for us - in light of the Movement's own experience - a few important considerations with regard to the implementation of a synodal process?

I can describe some important reference points, knowing full well that they remain a challenge and oblige us, when we make a mistake, to apologize and begin again. And, of course, it is not enough to know the principles. It is necessary to give witness.

- *The pact of mutual love*, renewed and put at the basis of every discernment process, implies the commitment to be ready to love each other as Jesus loved us; it leads to benevolence, to valuing the positive in the other, to a culture of trust and to a spirit of family.

- *Putting oneself in an attitude of listening*, "setting out to learn", because we truly can learn, as Chiara said, if we believe that the other is created as a gift for me, as I am for him or her.

-- *Loving everyone. Being the first to love. Loving the other as oneself.*

-- *Making oneself one with the other* which, referring to St Paul (*cf.* 1 Cor 9:22), is an attitude filled with meaning and practicality because it implies making room for the other, understanding his or her point of view and cultural reality. This creates a closeness in relationships that enables community discernment.

- *Speaking with respect, sincerity, and clarity*, because everything can be shared openly and honestly while putting ourselves before God and keeping the reality of the new commandment alive.

¹Pope Francis, Ceremony Commemorating the 50th Anniversary of the Institution of the Synod of Bishops, October 17, 2015.

²C. Lubich, *Costruendo il "castello esteriore" (Building the Exterior Castle)*, Rome 2002, pp. 83-86.

³Writing from December 2, 1946: C. Lubich, *L'unità*, in «Nuova Umanità» (New Humanity) 29 (2007/6) n. 174, p. 605.

⁴Cf. C. Lubich, *Lettere dei primi tempi. Alle origini di una nuova spiritualità (Early Letters. At the Origins of a New Spirituality)*, F. Gillet e G. D'Alessandro, ed, Rome 2010, p. 149.

⁵*Ibid.*, p. 158.