

Igino Giordani, ecumenical 'trailblazer'

# Converging Towards One

Gianna Sibelli

*Among the voices that first paved the ecumenical path in Italy and beyond was Igino Giordani (1894 – 1980), a well-known Catholic writer, politician and expert on the Church Fathers. From an initial apologetic stance in the early 1930s, he shifted to a more open view and saw ecumenical relations as a converging together of those who already belonged to one another. Beyond its historical value, Giordani's ecumenical thinking brings into focus such fundamental aspects for the journey toward Christian unity as getting to know the other better and shedding prejudices. Author Gianna Sibelli is a contributor at the Igino Giordani Center in Rocca di Papa, Rome.*

Immersing one's self in the vastness of the different aspects of the life of Igino Giordani, particularly those periods during which he underwent significant human and spiritual development, seen, for example, in *Memoirs of a naïve Christian*<sup>1</sup> and *Diary of Fire*<sup>2</sup>, can leave one almost with a sense of vertigo. The depth of his culture, his visionary political activities and his role as an advisor to popes, does not make him seem remote for me but more like a close and trusted guide. Described as a giant with the "great heart of a patriarch", Giordani was a pioneer on many fronts including ecumenism. "In this field, he was one of Italy's most authoritative voices on a global level"<sup>3</sup>.

But how did such a transformation occur for one who was first a strenuous and passionate "defender" of Catholic doctrine from the 1920's as a collaborator and then director of the Italian Catholic news publication, *Fides*<sup>4</sup>? Giordani's history was irreparably marked by the war and the wounds he received at the front in 1916 which left him with an intense yearning to put the gospel into practice. He wrote: "When I saw a wounded Hungarian or Austrian soldier in a rock crevasse or crouched in a grenade pit, I could not hate him [...] I

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<sup>1</sup> I. Giordani, *Memoirs of a naïve Christian*, Città Nuova, Rome 1981.

<sup>2</sup> I. Giordani, *Diary of Fire*, Città Nuova, Rome 1980.

<sup>3</sup> G. Fallacara, *Pioneer of ecumenism*, in «Città Nuova» n. 9 of 1980, pp. 49-50.

<sup>4</sup> *Fides* was the official organ of the Pontifical Society for the Preservation of the Faith. "Not a Catholic magazine," G.B. Montini called it, "but the Catholic magazine" (cf. I. Giordani, *Memoirs of a Naïve Christian*, cit., p. 86).

remembered that saying of Jesus: 'You saw your brother, you saw the Lord.'<sup>5</sup> And he never pulled the trigger.

## **The Beginnings: Apologetics and Fraternity Under the Radar**

In his early writings against "the Protestants" in the Italian Catholic publication, *Fides*, Giordani was often influenced by the works of Tertullian, both in its stringent logic and heated language. However, there was always a vision of fraternity that remained in the background, even in the harshest polemics. Tommaso Sorgi, inaugural director of the Iginio Giordani Center, stated that as early as 1925, in an article in *Il Popolo*, Giordani foresaw a new era and explored the prospects of the unification of Orthodox and "Protestants". It spoke to the importance of coming to know one another in order to get rid of the many prejudices and overcome "national, political and economic obstacles" which had sometimes caused and always consolidated divisions. [...] This article was the first document to reflect Giordani's constructive attitude, which even among Catholics would later be called, 'ecumenical'<sup>6</sup>.

A further step came with his nine-month stay in the United States, from August 1927 to May 1928. He had gone there to learn modern cataloguing techniques when, because he had incurred the displeasure of the Italian fascist regime, he lost his job but was subsequently offered a position at the Vatican Library. It was during his time in the Vatican that he became aware of what was going on in the ecumenical field at a worldwide level. In his book, *The Protestant Crisis and Church Unity*, Giordani speaks to that experience in a forcefully true analysis, one "with a wise amount of both criticism and recognition of the positive. The book had a great resonance, even outside of Catholic circles."<sup>7</sup>

## **A blossoming church in the presence of love for each neighbor**

Giordani was born in 1894 at a time when the ecumenical movement was taking its first timid steps. The 19th century had already seen a desire by Christians in individual Churches to unite, even although the birth of the ecumenical movement is commonly traced back to the World Missionary Conference in Edinburgh (Scotland) in 1910. Eventually, 60 years later, the Catholic Church officially took note of all this ferment at the Second Vatican Council with its decree on ecumenism, *Unitatis Redintegratio*<sup>8</sup>.

By that time, however, Giordani was already part of this ecumenical journey. In a 1940 *Fides* article entitled, *Sister Maria Gabriella, heroine of unity*, he wrote of the woman religious who had offered her life for Christian unity:

"Her sacrifice still bears fruit and continues to teach where unity can be realized, that is, in charity. It can be fully realized with the collapse of superstructures built

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<sup>5</sup> I. Giordani, *Diary of Fire*, cit. revised and expanded 2005 edition, p. 17. Cf. also I. Giordani, *Catholic Revolt*, Gobetti, Turin 1925, now Città Nuova, Rome 1997, p. 22.

<sup>6</sup> T. Sorgi, *The ecumenical journey of Iginio Giordani*, in «Nuova Umanità» 34 (2012/1) n. 199, pp. 113-130.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 119.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. J.P. Back, *Iginio Giordani, ecumenist. The Context of the Ecumenical Movement Before and Immediately After the Second Vatican Council*, in "New Humanity"» 44 (2022/1) n. 245, pp. 233-252.

by pride, prejudice and selfishness, upon the virginal body of charity. The problem of unity becomes, like the other theological problems, essentially a problem of love: Love of Christ in order to love those brethren from which the Church blossoms."<sup>9</sup>

In December 1942, also in *Fides*, he published a pamphlet translated from French by Paul Couturier<sup>10</sup> which presented an idea of unity outside the usual framework. The reunion of all Christian communities, it said, can be achieved in a unity that springs from "what is holiest in the life of all" and allows for the preservation of "the legitimate and fruitful diversities of spirit, culture and race" and which would be strengthened by their respective historical experiences.

## A "new" Giordani is born

When Giordani met Chiara Lubich in 1948, he immediately understood the newness of the spirituality offered through the young woman from Trent and the emerging Focolare Movement. What he himself called a 'second conversion' took place within him<sup>11</sup>. A 'new' Giordani was born in which he felt a "leap in spirituality", as the Baptist biographer Edwin Robertson noted<sup>12</sup>.

His own knowledge of spirituality before meeting Chiara Lubich led him to the prophetic understanding that her charism had to do with Christian unity<sup>13</sup>. In answering a question from Bishops who are friends of the Movement on November 26, 2003, Chiara spoke of seeing Giordani as a co-founder of the Movement with her, and added: "Woe to me if I had not met him in the development of that part of the Movement because he had the grace to help us open ourselves to all of humanity. [...] He had the grace of ecumenism because he was [already] an ecumenist."<sup>14</sup>

The testimony of Mgr. Eleuterio Fortino, part of the then Secretariat for Christian Unity, is significant. In 1967, the Focolare's Mariapolis Center in Rocca di Papa (Rome) hosted a conference for the Week of Prayer for Unity. Professor Giordani acted as the moderator with approximately fifteen experts who were present. During the meeting, there was an awkward reticence about the theological possibility of common prayer. At one point the discussion provoked moments of heated debate. "With his inner serenity," Fortino wrote afterwards, "Giordani succeeded in calming the atmosphere of the debate and clarified the theological and pastoral aspects of Vatican II's decree, *Unitatis Redintegratio* (1964)."<sup>15</sup>.

Pastor Edwin Robertson developed a deep friendship with Giordani. In an interview, he said: "I am a Baptist and he is a Catholic and we loved one another. We talked and I read

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<sup>9</sup> I. Giordani, *A heroine of unity, Sister Maria Gabriella*, in «Fides» 40 (1940), p. 228 ff.

<sup>10</sup> P. Couturier, *Christian Unity Week*, in «Fides» 42 (1942), pp. 564-568.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. T. Sorgi, *The ecumenical journey of Igino Giordani*, cit., pp. 113-130.

<sup>12</sup> E. Robertson, *Igino Giordani*, Città Nuova, Rome 1986, p. 121.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. J.P. Back, *Igino Giordani, ecumenist*, cit., pp. 233-234.

<sup>14</sup> C. Lubich, Dialogue on the theme "The presence of Christ in the midst of his disciples and the dialogue of life" at the Ecumenical Conference of Bishops Friends of the Focolare Movement, Rocca di Papa, 26 November 2003, in the General Archives of the Focolare Movement (AGMF), Chiara Lubich Archive (ACL), Discourses.

<sup>15</sup> E. Fortino, *Igino Giordani and the prayer for Christian unity*, in «Besa-Fede», Rivista greco-albanese, Rome, February 2004, pp. 7-9.

his writings. He had a forthright, sometimes sectarian style that could also be justified. But as he grew – particularly with Chiara [Lubich] – he understood that ecumenism is really a coming together, a coming together of those who already belong to one another. [...] Unity is central to his thought: He did not believe that the Church of Jesus Christ could be broken."<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Interview with Pastor E. Robertson, June 17, 2004, in AGMF, Igino Giordani Archives (AIG).