

The 60th anniversary of "Centro Uno"

Virtual Two-day Event for Christian unity

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The Focolare Movement's commitment to Christian unity began without a pre-conceived development plan. The only norm was the life of the Gospel. Then, later, the need to know one another more deeply, in order to establish a true and sincere dialogue with brothers and sisters of other Churches and to heal the wounds of divisions was experienced. Thus, a search began for meeting spaces and structures in order to be formed in the acceptance of diversity and, above all, discover all that was shared in common and that united all of us in Jesus Christ.

The first steps of this journey were beginning when, on May 26, 1961, after meeting with Christians of the Lutheran Church in Germany, Chiara Lubich founded the "Centro Uno" Centre for Christian Unity. She envisioned a place of welcome in Rome that would serve as a focal point for the Focolare Movement's work for ecumenical dialogue. Its first director was Italian ecumenist, Igino Giordani. Over the past six decades, the Centre's readiness to follow God's plans in building bridges of evangelical love between Christians has attracted people from many cultures and Churches.

Two noteworthy events, fruits of those earliest initiatives, occurred in May of this year. The first was the annual, endowed 'Patriarch Athenagoras - Chiara Lubich' ecumenical seminar^{1,2,3} at the Sophia University Institute of Loppiano (Florence) with its focus on theological dialogue. The second was the "International Conference for Christian Unity"^{4,5}, marking the Focolare's contribution to the ecumenical journey and, in particular, a dialogue of the *people* and a dialogue of *life* which constitute the indispensable humus needed for theological dialogue.

Due to the pandemic, the conference was entirely online with IT and technical support from the Mariapolis Center of Castel Gandolfo (Italy) which permitted the last-minute request of simultaneous translation in 18 languages. Approximately 15,000+ people worldwide followed live or via uploaded sessions on YouTube. Program participants included noted personalities, bishops and a number of leaders from various Churches. The presence of young people was also not lacking.

In a world submerged in immense problems, from the pandemic to poverty, wars, disunity and natural disasters, the congress' title, "*Love one another as I have loved you*" (Jn 15:12), gave cause for hope. Focolare president Margaret Karram's opening words echoed this: "*Spurred on by the desire to hear Jesus' invitation 'that all may be one', we want to 'know the gifts of others and learn from one another without pretending to be the ones teaching'.*"⁶ She invited

participants to work creatively to be always more *"a family, like crossed logs that, in their burning, produce a single flame"*.

The many shared experiences, alternating with prayer and songs, bore witness to this at a worldwide level, from the Philippines to Mexico, the Congo to Cuba and Lebanon, from Peru to Great Britain and Venezuela to Italy. In each, there was a common thread: By going towards others in a spirit of concrete and authentic love, relationships are built and new friendships are often transformed into consistent and concrete initiatives over time. These initiatives can involve local Episcopal Conferences and various regional Churches, as was the case in the Philippines and Hong Kong, as well as the result of a youth festival in Cuba marking the occasion of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. In Mexico, during the pandemic, there were monthly, online visits to various Churches where for many it was the first time of "entering" into the church of another. And often, it was not just a question of organizing common prayer, but of becoming bridges between various ecclesial realities and the facilitating of reconciliation, as participants from the Republic of the Congo shared.

Moments of spiritual and theological insight from Catholic, Romanian Orthodox, Lutheran, Reformed, Syrian Orthodox and Pentecostal speakers and communities were also part of the program. While it is impossible to adequately speak about all the important interventions, we highlight two of them here.

Rev. Ioan Sauca of the Romanian Orthodox Patriarchate, and currently *Interim* Secretary General of the World Council of Churches (WCC), called the meeting "a pilgrimage of hope." Recalling various visits by Chiara Lubich to the WCC headquarters in Geneva, Sauca invited the Movement to contribute by offering its own testimony and presence at the next 2022 WCC General Assembly in Karlsruhe (Germany). He then reiterated that "communion between the Churches in one visible faith is a future goal, but here and now we are walking towards unity".

Cardinal Kurt Koch, president of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, explored *the contribution of Chiara Lubich's ecumenical spirituality to increasing unity among Christ's disciples*. In our postmodern society, so characterized by pluralism and individualism, the search for unity today is no longer at the center of the attention of Christians. In this light, Chiara Lubich's words from a March 30, 1948 letter appear particularly relevant today: *"The book of Light that the Lord is writing in my soul has two aspects: a shining page of mysterious love: Unity. A shining page of mysterious pain: Jesus Forsaken"*. *"The commitment to Christian unity,"* said Cardinal Koch, *"is as if inscribed in the DNA of this charism"*. Concretely witnessed at the social level through the "Economy of Communion", he said, it offers in the ecumenical sphere an important contribution to the dialogue of truth through the *"Abba School"* (the Focolare Study Center) and the Sophia University Institute in Loppiano (Florence); a contribution that can flourish only if *"sustained by an ecumenism of love and life"*. The Cardinal also cited the witness of the Movement's Ecumenical Centre at Ottmaring, near Augsburg. He then concluded by quoting Chiara Lubich once again: *"For a fruitful ecumenism, hearts touched by him, [Jesus] crucified and abandoned that do not flee from him, are needed"*.

Cardinal Koch also brought a message from Pope Francis on the occasion of the 60th anniversary of *Centro Uno*, signed by the Secretary of State, Cardinal Parolin. It contained the Pope's blessing and his hope that *"reflection on dialogue and the exchange of spiritual gifts, as well as sharing the experience of communion lived in recent years, will be of encouragement in the daily work towards the fulfillment of Jesus' prayer to the Father, 'That they may all be one.'"*⁷

A special part of the conference was the space dedicated to the Focolare Movement's dialogue with Pentecostals who compose a quarter of Christians worldwide (500 million) and is a dialogue strongly encouraged by Mgr. Juan Usma Gómez of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity. Even if the Movement and the Pentecostals look very differently at the concept of unity, ecclesial belonging and at adherents of other religions, he observed, it is true that they are "*two movements born from the actions of the same Spirit*". Thus, it can be said that "*the Spirit must recognize the Spirit*" and "*a drawing closer between people belonging to these two realities not only should be natural, but necessary in the light of the mandate of unity.*" This was confirmed by personal testimonies of friendship between pastors and Focolare members which also takes the form of projects to assist those in need.

These two days – noted Focolare co-president Jesús Morán Cepedano in the closing remarks – were an experience of "*navigating in the fruitful waters of mutual love*". As in the Copernican revolution, God has been put at the center during these 60 years, rather than one's own thought about who God is. In this painful time, he reiterated, "*Christian unity is an ethical imperative that cannot be postponed*". It is necessary to respond to grace with our unity, with bringing his or her typical contribution, so as to be "*the Body of Christ, the Church*" and so that "*the divine Jesus may return to the human sphere.*"



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- 1 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BM31EyMBafQ&ab_channel=IstitutoUniversitarioSophiaIstitutoUniversitarioSophia
 - 2 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iLeYRKG6wv8&ab_channel=IstitutoUniversitarioSophiaIstitutoUniversitarioSophia
 - 3 Cf. <https://www.sophiauniversity.org/it/news/chiese-sorelle-ancor-piu-di-prima/>. Cf. also the Message of the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew for the Symposium: <https://www.sophiauniversity.org/it/news/cattedra-ecumenica-patriarca-athenagoras-chiara-lubich-2021/>
 - 4 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EafWtQuRhtA&ab_channel=FocolareMovement
 - 5 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WklWt1hHEzg&ab_channel=FocolareMovement
 - 6 Francis, *Homily at the celebration of Vespers at the conclusion of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity*, 25 January 2017.
 - 7 *Message on the occasion of the 60th anniversary of the "One" Center*; <http://www.christianunity.va/content/unitacristiani/it/papa-francesco/2021/messages/video-message-for-ecumenical-pentecost-vigil-organized-by-charis1.html>