

*Chiara Lubich, founder of the Focolare Movement, died on 14<sup>th</sup> February 2008. Many fondly remember her visit to Ireland in 2004. In this article Fr Brendan Leahy outlines some aspects of her life and mission.<sup>1</sup> The author is Professor of Systematic Theology at St Patrick's College, Maynooth and a longstanding member of the Irish Inter-Church Committee. The article was printed in Intercom (June 2008, p15) and is reproduced with the author's kind permission.*

At her funeral service in Rome on February 18<sup>th</sup> last, three simple carnations lay on Chiara Lubich's coffin before the altar at the basilica of St Paul's Outside the Walls—a reminder of the three carnations she bought after consecrating herself to God on the morning of December 7th, 1943, the date that was to mark the beginning of the Focolare Movement.

About 30,000 attended her funeral. Cardinal Bertone, Secretary of State, who presided, captured the heart of things in saying "the life of Chiara Lubich was a song to the love of God, to God who is love," the God she and her companions had chosen when they saw the many ideals they had in life—study, medicine, art, marriage—put on hold or destroyed by the Second World War.

From the very beginning she had identified in Jesus' prayer 'that all may be one' his last will and testament and made it her own. In promoting a spirituality of communion at every level of church life, she also pointed to the secret of unity – a love for Jesus Crucified and Forsaken seen and discovered in every division, suffering and disunity.

To embrace him "always, immediately and with joy" and continue to love was one of her mottos. It was a way of encouraging fidelity to him, making of every obstacle a launching pad to always start again in living the Gospel art of loving and so always reaching out again to re-build communion. And since "love conquers all" she evoked worldwide a lively response to her ideal of unity.

As early as 1948, when she moved to Rome, she met Igino Giordani, a founding member of the Christian Democrat Party. He saw in her a 20th-century Catherine of Siena, whose ideas would influence not only the Church but also the political and social fields. He soon became with her a co-founder of the new movement then spreading not only through Italy but also beyond. The Italian Prime Minister Alcide De Gasperi, one of the founding fathers of the European Union, was also inspired by her life and vision. Much later Chiara Lubich's intuitions resulted in a new school of economics - the Economy of Communion, which applied the movement's practice of sharing material goods to business enterprises - and the International Political Movement for Unity.

After a very difficult examination by the pre-conciliar Holy Office, Focolare was granted official Vatican approval in 1962. Throughout this period Chiara always affirmed the Church is "protector and mother". As it turned out, through the movement she was to contribute prophetically to the Church's own reassessment in Vatican II of the importance of the lay vocation, its return to scripture and emphasis on communion.

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<sup>1</sup> For an excellent anthology of her writings see Chiara Lubich, *Essential Writings* (London: New City, 2007).

Soon new branches were formed for diocesan priests, religious, seminarians, young people, professionals and families. Chiara also had the idea of establishing small towns, such as the project in Prosperous, intended to envision what society could be like based on living the Gospel of mutual love in all areas of life.

As early as the 1950s Chiara enthusiastically took up the cause of ecumenism, firstly with German Lutherans and then with Anglicans and the Orthodox Christians. She met all the Archbishops of Canterbury from Archbishop Ramsey to Archbishop Williams.

From the mid-1970s she became involved in multi-faith dialogue. She was the first Christian and the first woman to preach in the Malcolm X Mosque in Harlem, New York, where in May 1997 she addressed 3,000 African-American Muslims. By special permission of the Vatican, Focolare was the first Catholic organisation to admit members of other Christian churches and other faiths to its communities.

In her eighties Chiara's activities actually increased and she received numerous civic awards and honorary degrees. To mark her 80th birthday in January 2000, in an extraordinary warm letter Pope John Paul II, who had made a practice of calling her personally each year on the feast of Saint Clare, hailed her as "a messenger of unity and mercy among many brothers and sisters in every corner of the world".

At her funeral it wasn't only Catholic or Christian leaders who expressed their appreciation of what Chiara did. For Ajahn Thong, the abbot of a Buddhist temple of Chiang Mai, Thailand: "Chiara has lit a light for all in this dark world." But Pope Benedict's letter to Cardinal Bertone captured the sentiments of all. In saying there are many reasons to thank God for her life and mission, he spoke of her as a "woman of intrepid faith and a humble messenger of hope and peace" who founded a vast spiritual family "that embraces many fields of evangelization."

I conclude on a personal note. I met her for the last time in November last. She was quite feeble and could speak only with difficulty. She was obviously suffering. Apart from previous moments of darkness and difficult, the past four years were characterized by a "dark night" that time she said she was living "for society and culture". Her eyes still smiled and penetrated with that loving glance that had captured the hearts and minds of many worldwide. It reflected the initial choice made during the War and re-made so many times in life: "and we believe in love" (1 John 4:16).<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> The Focolare Movement will be holding its Assembly in July to elect a new leader who, according to the Statutes, must be a woman. This provision was approved by Pope John Paul II in 1984.