

**Sermon at the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity**

**Focolare Community, Chicago**

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Good Evening, sisters and brothers! Thank you for inviting me today.

I first came to know the Focolare community when I was pastor of Ellis Avenue Church, located just a block from here. I started receiving notices for the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, and I wondered who is this, doing what I should be doing? Soon I discovered our common concern for Christian unity. Later, in the months leading up to the Iraq war, when my church decided to hold candlelight vigils every Sunday night, the Focolare community was always well represented. There, I discovered our common concern for justice and peace as well. Indeed unity must go hand in hand with justice and peace. At the WCC, I had the opportunity to come to know the international Focolare movement. Indeed, they are an important partner in the work of interreligious dialogue. It was my privilege to host Maria Voce, visit Rocca de Papa, and participate in interfaith events organized by Focolare. And now that I am back in Chicago, it's good to reconnect.

Today, I serve as president of SCUPE – a consortium of eleven seminaries that includes Loyola University and a partnership with University of Zurich. We specialize in urban contextual theological education. The easiest way to describe this is to say that the starting point for theological reflection is the questions, struggles, hurts and pains, and stories that come from the neighborhoods of our cities. We listen to the questions, engage in an analysis of the power dynamics of the city, and with those questions and analysis go to scripture and tradition. This is a

different method than what we typically use in our churches and seminaries, but it's what I have been committed during my entire career as a pastor, theologian and ecumenist. Now SCUPE is going to specialize in interfaith relations. There too, we will bring our unique method of contextual theology and begin our reflection by engaging with living religious communities.

Those of you who are a part of the movement for Christian Unity know that all is not well with our ecumenical institutions. Our churches and people don't particularly feel the energy behind Christian unity or ecumenism anymore. Indeed many are asking what does Christian unity, or ecumenism mean in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This question is urgent and requires substantial reflection by the churches and theologians. But because today we are among our friends from Focolare, a movement that is deeply respectful of the traditions and institutions of the church, rooted in the principle of the suffering and forsakenness of Christ, and with characteristic humility, generosity and love, it gathers people from all walks of life, all cultural and even religious backgrounds to be community, they could become for us an illustration of Christian Unity. Let me offer you three suggestions.

**First, unity can be broadly defined.** The word "ecumenism" comes from the Greek *oikoumene*, which means the whole inhabited earth, which Christians use to describe this movement for Christian unity. Today, churches in many parts of the world are calling for a "wider ecumenism" that is more consistent with the original meaning of the word, the whole inhabited earth. I think there are two reasons for this.

People around the world are experiencing religious diversity in new ways. Religious diversity is of course, not new. This is how God created us. But as people from one part of the world easily move and take residence in another part of the world, religious differences are

becoming more obvious and are creating new challenges and opportunities. Today, the US is the most religiously diverse country in the world. With the result, that many ecumenical councils are becoming interfaith councils. Right here in Hyde Park is one of the oldest Interfaith Councils in the country. Then churches are also recognizing that the world's problems are not Christian problems requiring Christian answers, but human problems that must be addressed together by everyone. We know today that whether it is the issue of justice, peace, human rights or the destruction of the environment, we need to work across boundaries of religions, nations and cultures.

But wider ecumenism does not mean that we abandon the work of Christian unity, but that we provide space for Jews, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, as well as non-religious people and movements to participate as well. This is fundamentally a theological question. It requires us to rethink and ask new questions about our understanding of God, God's saving work, and the meaning of the church as the body of Christ including who the agents of God's mission are.

In a very practical way, Focolare offers an answer to this question of wider ecumenism. It is evident in the founding of the movement. Chiara Lubich, the illustrious founder of the movement, when her town was destroyed in bombing raids during the second world war decided that she needed to stay with people in the devastated town rather go to the mountains with her family. The apartment they lived in provided a warm place a "hearth" (focolare). Their focus was on loving one another as Christ had commanded them (This is my commandment that you love one another as I have loved you, Jn 15:12), and seeking unity for which he prayed (that they all may be one, as you Father are in me, and I in you, Jn. 17:21). Chiara says, "One thing was clear in our hearts; what God wanted for us was unity. We live for the sole aim of being one with him,

one with each other, and one with everyone. This marvelous vocation linked us to heaven and immersed us in one human family.”

So the first lesson I take from Focolare is that Christ is bigger than our attempts to confine our ecumenical vision to “Christian” unity. It has used the same principle of unity in reaching out to Jews, Muslims, Buddhists and Hindus. The depth of Focolare rootedness in Christ makes their invitation even more attractive to other religious persons, as amply described by Imam Warith Deen Mohammad in an encounter with Chiara, he said, “what we are experiencing is not a mere dialogue of words... we are experiencing the presence of God.”

**Second, the work of Christian Unity is not to be done apart from the world, but in the world.** For example, the preparatory materials for this week of prayer for Christian unity, encourage us to think of Poland, the people, the churches and their witness. When I think of Poland, what I remember most are the events that occurred there in the latter part of the 1980s with the solidarity movement. The churches were deeply involved in that struggle and today stands as witness for what can be accomplished when churches, labor unions and people movements come together. This is the movement that led what began as a Monday night prayer meeting at St. Nicolai church in Leipzig in neighboring East Germany to build into a massive movement that broke down the Berlin wall. When the people streamed over the broken down wall, they carried signs that said, “Wir danken der Kirche” We thank you, church. In a German movie about that, the former East German security chief testified about his desire to use force, but his inability to do anything other than stare out at the crowd in frozen amazement: "We were prepared for everything ... everything except for candles and songs and prayers."

Now, more than sixty years after the founding of the WCC, the excitement, expectation, hope and sense of fulfillment that accompanied its formation in 1948 has faded. At the time, the late Bishop Lesslie Newbigin said, "The WCC was born in the death-throes of `Christendom'... Christians were slaughtering each other in bloody wars. They had failed to address the monstrous evils of their own societies. They were fragmented and unable to speak and act together." Especially since the Reformation the churches had contributed to much of the fragmentation, division and conflict in Europe. The Orthodox, Roman Catholic and Protestant churches were so far from each other that they might as well have been three different religions. The growing conflicts between nations and the rise of fascism and Nazism threatened to throw the world into chaos and the churches were in danger of being sucked into enemy camps.

The movement for Christian unity was the answer to this question. When we use the phrase "visible unity of the church," it is meant to be like the light that is on the mantle and not under the bushel basket. It is meant to be the witness, the example that people who believe differently, think differently, come from different cultural backgrounds, have different political affiliations, the colonizers and the colonized can stand together and can stand strong.

So, if Christian unity must be done in the world, what does the ecumenical movement have to say to 99% that struggle for justice over the 1%, to Arab spring that is struggling for democracy? What does it have to say to a political system that has become so corrupted with unlimited and secretive money, that it threatens the very fabric of a democratic society, where the only viable critique comes from two comedians, when the most powerful voice should be that of the churches and the religious communities?

**Third, the work of Christian unity requires a deep humility and a spirituality rooted in love.** Let us remember that the victory of Christ did not happen without the cross, suffering and forsakenness. There is no Easter without a Good Friday. The hymn of the early church which Paul quotes in his letter to the Philippians in chapter 2, is very clear. It admonishes us to have the mind of Christ. It is one that led to emptying himself to take the form of servant and be obedient to death, even the death on a cross. Therefore (and this is a very important therefore) God exalted him.

May I say that one of the great advantages of ecumenical and interreligious dialogue is that it requires you to be humble and self-critical? I am a Baptist. For the longest time Baptists thought that there is no need to talk to Episcopalians or Methodists. Some still think so. The possibility of talking to Roman Catholics or the Orthodox didn't even occur to us. This way, we could say, we are right, and you guys are wrong. You don't interpret the Bible the right way, you don't do the liturgy the right way. But when you get into conversation with Lutherans and Presbyterians, you begin to discover that your theology and your practice of Christian living becomes richer and deeper, and then you venture into talking with Catholics and the Orthodox and a whole new world opens up. But you have to approach that with a sense of humility and an openness to be self-critical.

This is true for interfaith conversations as well. So what happens when a Baptist talks to a Buddhist. You begin to see things in the Bible that you didn't even imagine were there. But then, you need to be open to admit that for 500 years of colonial conquest Christians have done awful things to Buddhists, and that some of it is based on our interpretations of the Bible. You must then with even a greater degree of humility and self-critical reflection examine those parts of your scripture and tradition that might have harmed others.

The key is a spirituality rooted in love, a quality that the Focolare community demonstrates this is through sharing of resources and money. This is something that all of us who speak of unity and ecumenism must learn and reflect on deeply. The Focolare focus on the economy of communion is a principle that I think has deep resonance at a time when neo-liberal capitalism is changing political and economic structures that will have very serious effects for a longtime to come. This is the hardest task. For unless a grain of wheat to fall into the ground and dies, it will bear no fruit!

Friends, let us pray for Christian unity believing that God will bring about the victory through the cross of Christ, and that the Christian unity we seek will be as broad as God's love for all humanity. I, for one, am grateful for the opportunity to engage with Focolare friends to learn new ways of living out the gospel for our time. Thank you and God bless you.