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Acceptance Speech upon receiving the UNESCO prize for Peace Education

By Chiara Lubich

My heartfelt thanks to those who chose to award me the prestigious UNESCO Prize for Peace Education. My intention today is not to speak on the history and structure of the Focolare Movement, which is an instrument for bringing about unity and peace on our planet. Instead, I would prefer to speak about the secret of the Movement's success.

This lies in the new way of life it proposes, a new approach adopted by millions of people. It is a lifestyle inspired by profound Christian principles, while also emphasizing similar values present in other faiths and cultures. In real terms, it has brought peace and unity into this world of ours—a world which still needs to find or consolidate both peace and unity. I'm speaking of a new spirituality that is both timely and up-to-date: the spirituality of unity.

Is unity, and the peace that comes from it, relevant today?

As we all know and can readily see, the world today is characterized by tensions between south and north, in the Middle East and in Africa; there are wars and the threat of new conflicts; and other evils of our age. This is true. And yet, in spite of all these tensions, our world paradoxically seems to be moving towards unity and therefore towards peace. It is a sign of the times.

In the religious field, for example, we can see this drive towards unity in the establishment of the "World Conference of Religions for Peace." In the Christian world, it can be seen by the fact that the Holy Spirit is urging the different churches and ecclesial communities to unite after centuries of indifference and conflict. Unity is underlined by the World Council of Churches and the documents of the Second Vatican Council repeatedly return to this idea.

The world's drive towards unity is shown by ideologies which, in part, have collapsed, but which also aimed at resolving the problems of the world in a global manner.

In politics, for example, in Europe for example, unity is affirmed by the reality of countries seeking greater cohesion among them. The desire for unity can be seen in numerous international bodies and organizations.

Likewise, modern means of communication foster unity by bringing the whole world into communities and families.

Yes, the world is tending towards unity and the Focolare Movement and its spirituality should be viewed in this context. Its spirituality is not something to be lived by individuals in isolation but rather on a communitarian basis, together with others. It has a distinctly communitarian dimension and is rooted in particular phrases from the Gospel, which are connected with one another.

Those who share the spirituality of unity also share a profound understanding of the essence of God: God is Love, he is a Father. In fact, how can we imagine peace and unity in the world without seeing humankind as one family? And how can it be seen as such without the presence of one Father? Our spirituality invites us to open our hearts to God the Father who certainly does not abandon his children to their own destiny, but who accompanies, protects and helps them. He does not place heavy burdens on them but rather is the first to help them to carry those burdens.

To believe in his love is what this new spirituality requires, to believe that we are personally and immensely loved by God. He knows the depths of every person; he follows each one in particular, counting even the hairs on our heads. He does not leave the renewal of society solely to the initiatives of men and women, but is involved in it.

To believe in his love and to choose him as the Ideal of our lives, from among the countless possibilities offered by our existence, is equivalent to taking on intelligently the attitude everyone will adopt when they reach their final destiny: eternity.

Clearly, it is not enough to believe in God's love; it is not enough to have made this great choice of him as our Ideal. The presence and loving care of the Father of all calls each one to be a daughter or a son who loves the Father in return. Day by day they fulfil the Father's loving plan for their life, that is, they do his will.

We know that a father's first wish is for his children to treat each other as brothers and sisters, to care for and to love one another. They should know and practice what can be described as the art of loving.

He wants us to take the initiative in loving without waiting for other people to love us first. This art of loving means that we love each person as ourselves, because, as Gandhi said, "You and I are one. I cannot harm you without hurting myself."¹ It means knowing how to "make ourselves one" with others, to identify with their burdens, their thoughts, their sufferings and joys.

If love for others is lived together, it becomes mutual. And Christ, the Father's Son par excellence and Brother of all, left humankind the law of mutual love. He knew how necessary this law is for peace and unity in the world, in order to form one family.

Certainly, today, whoever sets out to move mountains of hatred and violence faces a huge and heavy task. But what is beyond the strength of millions of isolated and separate individuals becomes possible to those who have made reciprocal love, mutual understanding and unity the motivating force of their lives. And there is a reason behind this.

A further surprising and amazing element of this new spirituality, which is linked to mutual love and very precious indeed, is one that is also proclaimed by the Gospel. The Gospel says that if two or more people are united in genuine love, Christ himself, who is Peace, is present among them. And what greater guarantee than this can there be for those who want to be instruments of peace, in building the unity of the human family?

Reciprocal love and unity give much joy to whoever puts them into practice. But they require commitment, daily training and sacrifice. Here, for Christians, a word appears in its utter clarity and dramatic meaning; a word the world does not want to hear because it considers it foolishness, absurdity and nonsense. This word is the cross.

Nothing good, useful or fruitful can be accomplished in the world without accepting effort and suffering – in a word, without the cross. Being committed to bringing peace is not something to be taken lightly! It takes courage, knowing how to suffer. But certainly, if more people were able to accept suffering out of love, the suffering required by love, it would become the most powerful means to give humanity its highest dignity: the sense of being not so much a collection of peoples, alongside one another and often in conflict, but rather one single people, one family.

God the Father has not left us unaided on this arduous journey. We know the resources that the Church has always made available to Christians. And, we cannot forget Mary, who is loved and honoured, also in other religions; Mary, the Mother of Jesus and of every person on earth. From her we can draw inspiration, comfort and support. The task of a mother is always that of bringing the family together.

This spirituality of communion is not linked necessarily to the Focolare Movement: it is universal and, therefore, can be lived by anyone. In fact, through this spirituality fruitful dialogues have

¹ Quoted from WILHELM MÜHS, *Parole del cuore*, Milan, 1996, p. 82

opened up with people of various religions and cultures. They find that here emphasis is placed on values they too believe in; and together we set out towards the fullness of truth towards which all people are directed.

Today, through this spirituality, men and women in almost all nations of the world are slowly but surely seeking to be, wherever they are, seeds of a new people, of a more united world, a peaceful world in which there is greater solidarity especially towards those who are the poorest and the least.

May God who is Father of all, make these efforts of ours fruitful, along with the efforts of all those who are working toward the lofty goal of peace. As Pope John Paul II said to the United Nations on its fiftieth anniversary, "In the next century and the next millennium let us build a civilization worthy of the human person, a true culture of freedom and peace." "We can and must do so!" he continued. "And in doing so, we shall see that the tears of this century have prepared the ground for a new springtime of the human spirit."²

The prize that I am given today will also go towards the goal of peace and unity. It will be used to build a centre for interreligious dialogue in a small town of the Movement in Asia, in the Philippines, called "Peace".

(See: *New Humanity Review* (February 2006), no.12, pp.5-11.)

² L'Osservatore Romano, Weekly Edition in English, n.41, Oct. 11, 1995.