



WITHOUT TRUTH, FREEDOM AND HUMILITY, CAN THERE BE UNITY?

**Report of OREF (ORganisation Ex-Focolare) to the
Synod on Synodality on abuses suffered in the
Focolare Movement**

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According to the Vademecum for the Synod on Synodality, **'The context [of the Synod on Synodality] is also marked by the suffering experienced by minors and vulnerable people in the Church "due to sexual abuse, abuse of power and abuse of conscience perpetrated by a significant number of clergy members and consecrated persons."'** The founding members of OREF* (all former internal, single and married members of the Focolare movement + with a membership of 5 to 20 years in that movement) feel a duty to share our personal experiences of abuse. We have heard the words of Pope Francis when he speaks of **'listening to God, to the point of hearing with Him the cry of the People'** and that the Synod is not so much for the 'powerful' in the Church but - like the gaze of Jesus - more for **'those who are on the margins or feel excluded'** and **'whom we may be tempted to see as unimportant and those who force us to consider new points of view that may change our way of thinking.'** We feel the need to respond through this Document to the words of the Vademecum: **'[all lay people] also have the possibility...to send their input directly to the General Secretariat, as indicated in Episcopalis communio (art. 6 on Consultation of the People of God).'**

* OREF (ORganization Ex-Focolare) is an international community that brings together members from various countries of Europe and America. It was formed after the publication in Italy of Ferruccio Pinotti's book, *La setta divina. Il Movimento dei Focolari fra misticismo, abusi e potere* [*The Divine Cult - Mysticism, abuse and power in the Focolare Movement*] (Piemme, Italy, 2021). OREF is made up of former internal members of the Focolare movement (many of whom contributed testimonies to *La setta divina*) with the aim of investigating and recording cases of abuse of all kinds within that movement. OREF aspires to offer those who have left Focolare or

those who, while still within it, are experiencing a situation of pain or crisis, a space for listening and sharing. It is hoped that, with the support of those who have lived the same experience and the necessary background information, it can help deal objectively with abuses of all kinds experienced in the Focolare movement - spiritual, sexual, psychological, financial or employment/pensions.

+ <https://www.focolare.org/chi-siamo/>

THESE ARE SOME OF THE ABUSES WE HAVE EXPERIENCED IN THE FOCOLARE MOVEMENT:

1. **Suicides by internal celibate members** hidden by other members from church and civil authorities, often with invented justifications, to protect the institution - a stark contrast to what Pope Francis told the leaders of the movement, '[you must] beware of becoming self-absorbed. This always leads to defending the institution at the expense of people, and can also lead to justifying or covering up forms of abuse.'

(<https://international.la-croix.com/news/religion/pope-francis-gently-takes-to-task-another-new-ecclesial-movement/13830>)

2. **Sexual abuse of minors**, hidden by the leaders of the movement for years and never reported to the civil authorities or church authorities, in order to protect the institution.
3. **Sexual abuse of vulnerable adults.**
4. **Arranged marriages** imposed on members and engineered by leaders and not by the choice of those involved.
5. **Personal relationships terminated by the leaders of the movement** because they were not 'approved' or did not fit in with the movement's plans.
6. **Domestic servitude of women** - menial jobs for 12 hours and longer per day as maids at movement centres without pay or time off.
7. **Separation from family members and friends** who refused to join the movement or disapproved of it.
8. **Extreme methods of proselytising young and vulnerable people** such as love-bombing or sometimes close to kidnapping.

9. **Thought control** through specific and deliberate techniques performed on groups and individuals without their knowledge or awareness.
10. **Disclosure of secret teachings in stages** so as not to frighten new proselytes. Particularly true of Chiara Lubich's 'visions', (sound and video tapes of Lubich's talks given in all the focolares are labelled with who must give permission before they are heard - e.g. permission of the local focolare leader or, for the more extreme ones, the national leader).
11. **Anti-intellectualism** summed up in Lubich's phrases 'put your books in the attic', 'cut off your head', and 'don't think', slogans repeated at every level of the movement.
12. **Lubich's insistence that members must 'annihilate' themselves**, 'destroy the self', be 'a void', 'lose their personalities'.
13. **Prohibition for consecrated members to have personal friends in the movement.**
14. **Conversations between internal members can only refer to the movement and thoughts of Chiara Lubich.**
15. **Movement leaders (celibate focolarini) directing the family life of married focolarini**, breaking the bond between husband and wife and interfering with their rights as parents.
16. **Strong pressure on all members of the movement to donate money** to the movement without any transparency.
17. **Use of experimental and dangerous methods to 'cure' homosexuality.**

JUST AS IN THE CASE OF SEXUAL ABUSE, WE CAN PERSONALLY WITNESS HOW ALL THESE TYPES OF ABUSE OF POWER HAVE LEFT US WITH DEEP MENTAL AND SPIRITUAL WOUNDS THAT HAVE LASTED FOR YEARS OR, IN SOME CASES, NEVER HEAL, AS WELL AS SERIOUS FINANCIAL PROBLEMS.

THE THREE MAJOR PROBLEMS OF THE FOCOLARE MOVEMENT THAT MUST BE ADDRESSED BY CHURCH AUTHORITIES:

1. ABUSE OF POWER

There are two Focolare movements: one is its public face, the vast and apparently secular, liberal, smiling organisation, whose main message is unity between religions and races, the importance of ecology, etc. - ideas that most observers would find attractive. The private face, kept strictly hidden from outsiders, is the rigid hierarchical structure that seeks wealth, status and power. The Focolare movement makes everyone 'vulnerable' because so much is kept secret - the rigid hierarchy, the strangeness of Lubich's core teachings, the true history of the movement and what will be required of new members.

- a) Chiara Lubich, life president of the Focolare Movement (1943-2008), built her organization on a cult of personality around herself and instructed her followers: **'Every Focolare soul must be an expression of me and nothing else. My word contains the words of all the members: I sum them all up... I, like Jesus, must say to them: "Whoever eats my flesh...". Only one soul must live: mine".'** (Letter from Chiara Lubich to members, 1950)

- b) From 1949, Lubich began calling the movement **'The Soul'** with her at the centre and the members around her creating a **'void'** i.e. having no thoughts, ideas or personality of their own to receive all her ideas and thoughts. During her lifetime, each new communication from Lubich was called 'the new reality'. From 1980 onwards, she gave weekly international conferences - **'the linkup'** - to all internal members of the movement around the world, to introduce this 'new reality'.

- c) Members must lose their personality and 'be clarified". According to Lubich, **'there is no unity if people still have a personality' and 'unity requires souls ready to lose their personality, their whole personality'**. The inner members must **'die to themselves', 'become nothing' and 'destroy their own selves'**.

- d) From the very beginning of the Movement in 1943, Lubich was supported by a group of young women from Trent who later became strict leaders,

supervising the spread of the movement throughout the world, in the Catholic Church, other Christian churches, other faiths and civil society.

- e) This original group of women, later joined by men, formed a rigid pyramidal hierarchy, strictly hidden from outsiders, which has been described by an ex-member from a former communist country as **'a Leninist structure'**.

- f) The meaning of 'Unity' in the Movement actually means absorption in Chiara Lubich and thus in the organisation. Former focolarina Renata Patti (author of *God, the Focolare and Me*, http://pn cds72.free.fr/319_2_focolari_patti.php) who spent 40 years in the movement explains how Lubich established this rigid control over members: **'Unity "in Chiara" is absorption... blind obedience to her and all those who represent her in the vertical structure of the Movement.'** A married former focolarina explains how this form of 'unity' works in practice: **'The concept of unity is to erase all [individual] ideas, aspirations, personal initiatives and binds you to continuous and constant approval from your superior.'** In one of her hidden writings, Lubich emphasises that unity means obeying to the point of **'planting cabbages upside down'** - that is, even obeying nonsense.

- g) The movement exercises **'thought control'** to slowly transform the reasoning of members - employing 'love-bombing', environment control, constant repetition, two ethical standards (strict within the movement but lax with outsiders), endless talks that can last for hours within large gatherings such as the Mariapolis summer camp lasting several days, and for novices in the 2-year courses at 'schools of formation' such as Loppiano and Montet.

- h) Pope Francis chided the leaders of the Focolare movement at a private audience in the Vatican on 6 February 2021 that the **'wise distinction between the external and internal forums that the experience and tradition of the Church teaches us is indispensable.'** [According to canon law those who carry out pastoral or spiritual care cannot also be those who exercise positions of leadership.] In the Focolare movement, however, for more than seventy

years, the leaders of the movement doubled as spiritual directors. One of the main instruments of spiritual direction in Focolare is the **'private conversation'** between the local leaders - or the leaders of the Centre in Rome - and the members. These **'conversations'** encompass both the member's practical activities - such as his profession and missionary activities - and his spiritual state - in other words, a form of imposed confession (contrary to canon law: **can. 530 of Codex 1917, which prohibits religious superiors from inducing their subjects to enforced manifestation of conscience**). This began - like everything in the Focolare - with Chiara Lubich's practice of having 'private conversations' with consecrated focolarini when she visited their region.

- i) One of the oldest practices of the movement, dating back at least 70 years, was known to focolarini (only the 'internal' members) as **'schemetti'** ('little forms'). This was a daily examination of conscience written on specially printed forms that covered in meticulous detail the spiritual, mental, physical and financial aspects of the life of each full-time member. The *'schemetti'* had to be handed in every fortnight to the local leader and ended up at the movement's centre in Rome, where they would be filed and stored permanently, allowing for scrupulous supervision of members' lives by the leadership. When the Vatican ended this practice in 2020, one movement leader commented on a zoom with internal members throughout the world, 'They don't understand us.' (Video in OREF archives.)

- j) The Focolare Movement resembles what scholars of cults call 'world-hating groups'. A fundamental teaching of the movement is the Old Testament phrase 'Everything is vanity of vanities' (Ecclesiastes 1:2), interpreted to mean 'Nothing in human life matters'. Nothing, that is, except the movement and the goals of Chiara Lubich. This nihilistic outlook is one of the causes of despair and depression for many full-time members. In the Focolare vocabulary, even the word 'human' has a negative meaning as opposed to 'supernatural' which means in line with the movement's rigidly imposed teachings.

- k) The concept of who 'understands' Chiara Lubich and the spirituality of the movement is very important - as if it were a kind of private revelation, like evangelicals and charismatics refer to baptism in the Spirit or Calvinists to Predestination. The leaders of the movement declare who has 'understood' Chiara; who has 'understood' her 'spirituality' (known as 'the Ideal'); who has 'understood' her essential doctrines, unique to the movement, such as 'unity', 'Jesus in the midst', 'Jesus forsaken'. Although these seem to be ideas taken from the New Testament, they must be 'understood' in a very particular way, as Chiara repeatedly redefined them in speeches and pamphlets. The Alpha and Omega, however, is 'understanding' Chiara. Pope Paul VI, for example, had been a faithful supporter of Lubich and the Focolare Movement since the early 1950s and had defended it against its enemies in the Vatican long before he became pope, but according to the movement's leaders, 'he did not understand Chiara'. John Paul II, according to the focolarini leaders, did 'understand' Chiara and was a 'popo', a focolare word, from the Italian Trentino dialect meaning child, and used to denote a person who 'understood' Chiara.
- l) Fear is cultivated in members about what will happen to them if they leave the movement. According to Lubich: 'Those who leave us do so because they did not want to die: they did not want to deny themselves and take up the cross. Or because they are psychologically unfit for the life of the movement. Or because they have been overwhelmed by temptations'.
- m) Books, newspapers, films and TV are censored for full-time members. Only very bland films with no intellectual substance can be seen - and certainly nothing with any kind of sex, even kisses. Lubich herself recommended 'Mary Poppins' as a suitable film for focolarini. A former woman member who was in a focolare in Pakistan for 15 years recalls that the movement's Centre used to circulate videos of films to focolares with even kisses cut out. Songs from the movement's music groups - such as Gen Rosso and Gen Verde - had to be sent to Lubich for approval.
- n) Monthly meetings, known as 'The Moment of Truth', are held between internal members at different levels'. These are occasions when members are forced to evaluate each other's behaviour both positively and negatively,

but usually with the emphasis on the negative, often resulting in savage attacks that may continue month after month. Responses are not allowed and it is up to the leader to draw conclusions on the opinions expressed.

- o) There is a very high level of mental illness and severe depression among the movement's insiders. One of the reasons for this is extremely long working hours: a normal 9-5 job and then meetings with members and adherents in the evenings and most weekends, with no leisure or recreation time. This is even worse for those who work inside the movement without pay and without contracts - for example as maids in the movement's centres, in the movement's factories in the 'towns', or as interpreters - working sometimes 10 or more hours a day, and for hours without a break, when the normal limit should be 20 or 30 minutes per session. In the 1990s, the movement opened its own psychiatric clinic in Frascati to treat members. The mental health of many key people in the movement is also problematic - especially Lubich herself who suffered long periods of mental illness - and co-founder Don Pasquale Foresi (known in the movement as 'Chiaretto' or 'little Chiara') who for many years took very little part in the running of the movement due to severe mental illness. These personal problems of leaders were reflected in the structure, behaviour and teachings of the movement - for example the great emphasis on suffering and the incessant 'trials' that are considered a necessity for the internal members.
- p) Because the movement hides the negative side of its history, it is difficult to know how many suicides of internal members have occurred. The most notable was that of Marisa Bau, a focolarina of twenty years' standing who lived in Montet, a small town of the movement in Switzerland, who hanged herself. Three other examples of suicide became known via leaks from internal members. Marisa Bau's was impossible to hide because the leaders of the movement thought she had been kidnapped and did a lot of publicity asking for help from the public. After a few week's, Bau's body was found hanging in a barn close to the movement's centre at Montet and was officially declared to be suicide. The other three suicides were covered up by the movement, even from the civil authorities as suicides.

- q) Pope Francis told the leaders of the movement on 6th February 2021, **'the Gospel is destined for everyone, but not as proselytism, no, it is destined for everyone, it is ferment of new humanity in every place and at every time.'** But the movement is dedicated solely to proselytism: the focolarino year is planned around proselytising events, culminating in the Mariapolis summer camps.
- r) There is a total lack of pastoral training of any kind ('pastoral' is a word that is not part of the Focolare jargon and is never used in the movement). This results in abuse of power by the imposition of blind obedience.
- s) Among the many causes of sexual abuse in the movement is the fact that the movement's local centres are equivocal: for outsiders, they appear to be secular houses with groups of male friends or female friends living together. This has been exploited by focolarini for the sexual abuse of young people and vulnerable adults. According to GCPS Consulting's recent independent report on the case of focolarino leader Jean Michel Merlin - who has been found guilty of more than thirty cases of child abuse in France - many cases of abuse in the movement, both sexual and power-based, - are linked to people considered 'charismatic' - a culture carefully cultivated in the movement, beginning with the 'charism' of Lubich. In our opinion, this 'charismatic' culture needs to be examined.
- t) Although outsiders to the movement have described it as a 'feminist' manifestation in the Church, because it was founded by a woman and her companions, this is far from the truth. In an interview, Lubich herself once commented, 'I have never seen myself as a woman.' What is true is that the women's branch is the most powerful and conservative section of the movement, but this is also because the internal female members of the movement are the most fundamentalist. One manifestation of this is the fact that women are treated even more harshly by female leaders than men by male leaders. It is significant that the majority of OREF members are women.

- u) This explanation of the true structure of the movement shows that this is not about the culpability of a few individuals but about **systemic** abuse of power. Structural reform from the bottom up is necessary.

2. CONTEMPORARY GNOSTICISM

- a) The 'visions' of Chiara Lubich known in the movement as the 'Paradise of '49' (which occurred mainly in the summer of 1949 over a two-month period) are what Pope Francis has called Contemporary 'Gnosticism'.
- b) According to Pope Francis in his Apostolic Exhortation *Gaudete et Exultate*, (March 2018), '**Gnosticism is one of the worst ideologies, for while it unduly exalts knowledge or a particular experience, it considers its own view of reality to be perfection. In this way, perhaps without realising it, this ideology feeds on itself and becomes even more blind. Sometimes it becomes particularly deceptive when it disguises itself as disembodied spirituality. Indeed, Gnosticism 'by its very nature wants to tame mystery', both the mystery of God and his grace, and the mystery of the lives of others'**. It is illuminating to compare this statement with the way Chiara Lubich described the 'Paradise of '49' to the inner members of the Focolare Movement in 1963: '**We had the impression that God had opened the eyes of the soul to the kingdom of God that was in our midst and we saw Him who is in our midst, the Paradise that was in our midst, and in such a divine scenario, such an expression of the Trinity, we understood all those years ago [in 1949], what the role of this movement as a whole was and its role in each of us in the Church.'** Commenting on contemporary Gnosticism, Pope Francis says, '**Frequently there is a dangerous confusion: believing that because we know something or can explain it with a certain logic, we are already holy, perfect, better than the "ignorant masses" '**.
- c) The hierarchy of the Catholic Church is traditionally reticent about private revelations and belief in them can never be considered obligatory. The private revelations of Chiara Lubich, however, have supreme authority over the members of the movement. Belief in them, as in any aspect of the movement, is certainly not optional. These 'revelations' also extend to great

'doctrines' about the role of the movement itself in the Church. In her 1963 speech, Lubich clearly stated what this role was: **'We have understood that this Work is nothing other than a mystical presence of Mary in the Church.... Our task in the Church is the task that Mary would have today if she lived in the Church'**. Lubich even claimed the title 'The Vicar of Mary', the female counterpart of the Pope, 'the Vicar of Christ', and in one of her 'visions' she saw herself beside Our Lady as 'another little Mary'.

- d) Since Lubich's death, her visions have been promoted ever more strenuously by the Focolare Movement, in a flood of books, articles and videos, culminating in a recent (February 2021) affirmation by newly re-elected co-president Jesus Moran that Chiara Lubich's revelations are not private: **'It must be said that Chiara always thought and transmitted to us ... that this mystical experience [the 'Paradise of 1949'] is the essence of the mentality of anyone who wants to be a source of unity today in the Church and in society - and also of those who accept the charism of the Movement. Therefore Chiara's experience is not private or particular'**.

([http://www.settimananews.it/ministeri-carismi/focolari-dopo-assemblea-gen, Jesus era/](http://www.settimananews.it/ministeri-carismi/focolari-dopo-assemblea-gen,Jesus%20era/))

- e) There is an increasing emphasis on the 'charism of Chiara' and particularly the 'Paradise of '49' in the movement today. First the Abba School and then the Sophia University in Loppiano (officially approved by the Vatican) were founded specifically to develop Lubich's visions in every aspect of secular life and to spread them on an unlimited scale (See Problem 3: The Inundations, which shows how Lubich aimed that her illuminations of the 'Paradise of '49' would change every aspect of civil life to create a new world).
- f) At the same time - and despite Pope Francis' numerous warnings to lay movements about the dangers of constantly brandishing the term 'charism' in the faces of both the faithful and sceptics - the emphasis on the 'charism of unity' and the 'charism of Chiara' is stronger than ever in the Movement.

With reference to this approach, Pope Francis says in *Gaudete et Esultate*:

'When someone has answers for every question, he shows that he is on a road that is not good and it is possible that he is a false prophet, who uses religion to his own advantage, at the service of his own psychological and mental lucubrations. God...is always a surprise and it is not for us to determine in what historical circumstance we find him...He who wants everything clear and certain claims to dominate the transcendence of God.'

- g) It is unclear whether the 'Paradise' was ever approved by the Church. We know that Lubich was advised by members of the Catholic clergy in 1950 that if the written records of the 'Paradise' were not destroyed, the movement would never be approved. Officially it was claimed that they were destroyed, but Igino Giordani, the first married focolarino and so-called co-founder of the movement, hid a copy of 200 typewritten pages in a Roman bank. A microfilm copy was also placed in a luggage locker at Florence Santa Maria Novella station. During the flood in Florence in the 1960s, there was panic among the focolarini, but the microfilm was safely retrieved. After the official approval of the movement in the early sixties, little by little, over the years, the original written records of the 'Paradise' re-emerged and were amplified by Lubich's extensive recollections. Parts of the 'Paradise' have been published, but carefully excised of details that might be considered unorthodox (although none of it is considered unorthodox in the movement). Much is still kept secret because 'it will not be understood' outside the movement. OREF members believe that secret documents of the 'Paradise' should be examined by qualified independent theologians. Among other things, these visions of Lubich present a very literal vision of Heaven, Hell and the Church. The vision of Heaven and Hell is 'dualistic' in style, presenting both Hell and Heaven as aspects of God and Jesus, a mixture that brings to mind Manichaeian concepts.
- h) In his address to the leaders of the movement in February 2021, Pope Francis speaks of **'avoiding all self-referentiality, which is**

always a sin, it is a temptation to look in the mirror. No, this is bad. Only to comb your hair in the morning and nothing more! This avoidance of all self-referentiality, which never comes from the good spirit, is what we wish for the whole Church: to beware of the withdrawal into oneself, which always leads to defending the institution to the detriment of individuals, and which can also lead to justifying or covering up forms of abuse.' But contrary to this, the focolarini are so self-absorbed that they even have their own language - for example, Italian words with changed meanings, or completely invented words. The late Carmelite theologian Bruno Secondin, Professor of Spirituality at the Gregorian in Rome, who studied the focolarini, called this language an 'elaborated code' designed to create 'the movement's own universe'. For instance, according to Lubich, it is impossible to leave the movement, because those who think they have left it belong to 'Mary's sheepfold'. Even death does not set you free; according to Lubich, you go to the 'Heavenly Mariapolis'.

- i) An extraordinary example of how the person of Chiara Lubich became the main 'message' of the Movement can be found in the short documentary/travel film produced by the Focolare Movement and titled *A Pilgrimage to the Sources* (<https://vimeo.com/275668720>), which portrays a 'pilgrimage' of Hindu academics from India to the 'holy places' in and around Trent, northern Italy, linked to the 'Saint' (a term used in the documentary) - that is, Chiara Lubich. This is a truly innovative form of interreligious dialogue.

3. THE IMPORTANCE OF MONEY, MATERIAL GOODS AND POWER IN THE SECULAR WORLD

- a) Concepts of great importance among focolarini are 'providence' and 'the hundredfold' - which really means that everything is to be given to the

Focolare Movement (but not to individual members). Gifts to the movement of money and material goods (such as houses, and land, for example) are seen by the leaders of the movement as the 'hundredfold', the 'confirmation' of God's approval. If these gifts are not received, one is not 'living the gospel'. According to Chiara Lubich, the Movement launched a new economic system as an alternative to capitalism and communism. According to this system, all capital is held in common but administered by the Movement. It is known as 'God's Capital'. This vision of the focolarini is very similar to the 'prosperity gospel' of the televangelists of the 1980s-90s in the United States.

- b) There is a complete lack of transparency about how the avalanche of money coming into the movement's centre is used. In the 1970s there was a very energetic campaign called 'Operation Africa' to raise money for a hospital in a village in the Cameroons that the movement was building, but a recent testimony by a doctor reveals that every aspect of care is paid for by local patients down to the last detail in this hospital run by the focolarini.
- c) Chiara Lubich spoke of the 'culture of giving', but what we see in reality is the 'culture of taking'. Focolarini expect everything for free, but never give anything - even to married focolarini who are in financial difficulty. The evangelical word 'gratitude' is never used in the movement. Why have gratitude when it is the duty of others to give to the movement?
- d) From 1990 onwards, the movement has increasingly tried to establish itself in the secular world, always seeking to possess as much secular power as possible. It has founded many front organisations with secular names: Action for a United World, Together for Europe etc., like the Moonies do for example. The Economy of Communion and the Movement for Unity in Politics were means exploited to gain more power and influence.
- e) With many contacts in politics throughout Europe, but particularly in the East where the movement planted deep roots during the Iron Curtain era, Lubich received important secular awards such as UNESCO's Peace Prize in

Education and the Council of Europe's Human Rights Prize (even though the Focolare movement acts against many human rights recognised by the Council and the UN).

- f) After 1995, there was a huge effort by the movement's Centre to acquire as many secular honours as possible for Lubich. Focolare regions around the world were instructed that Lubich would only visit if there was an honorary award or doctorate to be received. Lubich received 22 honorary citizenships and 15 honorary doctorates in various parts of the world. The doctorates were in wide range of subjects such as theology, philosophy, psychology, art and education.
- g) In the 1990s, Lubich launched the concept of the **'Inundations'** to **'clarify'** (her word) every aspect of civil society with 'the light' of the 'Paradise of '49'. First there was the Economy of Communion and the Movement for Unity in Politics, but then organisations in the media, psychology, law, medicine, education, art etc. were quickly formed on an enormous scale. According to Lubich, quoting St Francis, 'First Assisi [spirituality], then Paris [study] and then Hollywood [the media and everything else]'. And indeed around the year 2000, there was a huge effort to establish contacts in Hollywood itself. Among many other events, in November 1999, during the sixth City of the Angels Film Festival, a Christian event held annually in Los Angeles, US Focolare organised an event at the Directors' Guild of America headquarters, during which they presented the Guild's president, Jack Shea, and his wife, screenwriter Patt Shea, with the Luminosa Award (given annually in the US by the Focolare movement). The event was clearly considered important not only by the movement but also by the Church hierarchy. Present were Cardinal Keeler of Baltimore and Msgr. Maniscalco of the Communications Office of the US National Conference of Catholic Bishops. Archbishop John Foley of the Pontifical Council for Social Communications arrived from Rome for the occasion. The only participants who seemed bewildered as to the precise significance of the event were the award recipients themselves, but the focolarini's ambitions were very clear. Commenting at a communications conference at the Focolare centre in Rome, Lubich revelled in the fact that, 'At this time when humanity seems to be wandering in the dark after the

collapse of ideologies and the obscuring of many values we have in our hands these powerful means of communication.’ According to Lubich, nothing in the movement was planned in advance, everything happened spontaneously but there is a speech of hers dating from 1955 where she already speaks of 'Assisi, Paris and Hollywood' - an idea that was clearly very close to her heart. One has to ask if any other person in history - religious or secular - has ever had a dream as grandiose as hers of the 'indundations'.

APPENDIX - TESTIMONIES

Suicides of internal members covered up: ‘I was shocked. They [the focolarini] ordered me to tell everyone that he had slipped. No one must know that it had been suicide. Immediately afterwards, I started to suffer from depression.’ *Testimony of a married former focolarino who saw a consecrated focolarino jump off a terrace.*

Sexual abuse of minors also covered up for decades: ‘Between the ages of fourteen and sixteen, I was repeatedly victimised [sexually assaulted] by Jean-Michel Merlin [Focolare leader], until my brothers and I managed to get away from him. I couldn't ask for help, because Merlin knew how to behave. Everything had been thought out in such a way that we could not react. He had taken care in advance to gain the trust and sympathy of our family...[Even after learning of the abuse] the focolarini instructed Merlin to visit the Movement's pilot cities around the world. I am convinced that in those eighteen years travelling around the world as an envoy of the Movement, Merlin struck again. He has made new victims. One has already come forward after the scandal emerged in France, but there are many more.’ *Testimony of Christophe Renaudin, one of the more than 30 victims of Jean-Michel Merlin, a focolarino leader in positions of responsibility in the Movement's structure in France and also at the Movement's Centre in Rome.*

Sexual abuse of vulnerable adults: ‘He was a full-time focolarino. I don't know what happened - he jilted me for no good reason. He insisted that the Focolare was the reason. Is there someone inside who is doing the brainwashing? Do they really have a vow of chastity? The emotions of isolation are so difficult for me. And so painful you cannot imagine.’ *Testimony of a young man who had a long sexual relationship for years with*

a much older male Focolare movement leader, which was broken off without warning. The young man was not aware of the structure of the Movement and the member's vow of chastity, despite years of contact with Focolare.

Arranged marriages: 'I was born 1958 and was part of the Focolare Movement from 1976 to 1996 first as Gen 2 and then as a volunteer (lay branch of the movement). During that time I lost not only my family but also my old friends. I no longer had time for them, commitments for the movement had to take precedence. I had regular conversations with [my Focolare leader], almost every week, about my life as a Gen. He always raised the question of my 'sexual purity' because that was the measure of a 'good Gen'. Over time, I developed a kind of double life: when I had a relationship or friendship with a girl, I didn't talk to him about it.

A girl I loved very much was asked to go to Loppiano to become a focolarina, but she returned after a year, physically and mentally ill. We were not able to resume or resolve our relationship. Then my Focolare leader put me under pressure to start a friendship with another girl from the movement and although I was not ready and not at all convinced, I started a relationship with that girl.

The consequence of this relationship was a marriage and two children and after a few years a divorce.

In 1996 I fell ill with depression and left the Focolare Movement. This illness lasted several years. The cause was my lack of identity, I had been unable to develop an independent personality and to have a mature and adult outlook on life.

Today I am married for the second time and I am happy with my wife. I did not renounce my faith in God when I left the Focolare Movement.' *Testimony of William P. -Ireland*

Dividing relationships: '[The focolarine] manipulated me by saying that [the relationship with my fiancé] was not 'God's Will' for me. It was real torture to write a break-up letter to my fiancé with the content dictated by a focolarina! I cried while she dictated 'God's Will'. What a torturer! After buying an express stamp for the letter, she sent me to talk to 'Jesus within' in

the College chapel [in Loppiano]. Does this woman realise the psychological abuse she committed against me in the name of God?' *Testimony of a gen from Brazil.*

Domestic Slavery: 'All the aspects of the movement that I did not agree with began to appear serious and contrary to my convictions, and caused me great upset and suffering. It was a very hard experience because the reality of community life I experienced in the movement was totally different from the kind of community life I felt called to. I worked in a movement centre with cleaning, cooking and catering duties. I thought that by working I would at least be able to support myself for my basic living needs, instead my family was asked to contribute to my maintenance with a monthly fee. We worked long hours a day, without contracts, social security and accident insurance.' *Testimony of a former focolarina.*

Separation of families: 'Having realised how vulnerable [my daughter] was because she was suffering from depression, these women from the Focolare began harassing her on the phone every night for a year in our flat in Paris, making appointments to meet... We had never experienced such doggedness, nor such procedures for recruiting young people... It was at this point that we discovered the whole work of manipulation... dragging her along, telling her that God had plans for her, that she had to do God's will, not her own, etc. etc. We can testify that this was a violation of conscience and psychological pressure, certainly not the call of God but rather the call of a cult... They continued this rhythm of mental manipulation until [Marie] lost her new job and her physical health (weight loss, memory loss, etc.). These people took advantage of her emotional turmoil and vulnerability.... This movement has destroyed our family. It is a tragedy for us.' *Testimony of the parents of a young French woman recruited as a focolarina while in a state of severe depression - from handwritten letters in the OREF archives*

Proselytising methods resembling kidnapping: 'When I was summoned to an interview with the Focolare zone leader, I told her that I was there [staying in a Focolare 'town' in South America] for a short two-week holiday

and had no intention of doing a two-year stint. I had previously said the same thing to one of her co-workers. In both cases, they gave me the same answer: 'Here one does not do what one wants, one does God's Will.' They forced me to stay.' *Testimony of Diana who, at the age of 18, was forced to become a consecrated focolarina despite her protests (even her parents backed the movement) and only left Focolare seven years later when she was 25.*

Thought control through specific techniques: 'In the so-called 'Focolare life' everything was designed to condition everyone - some as young as three years old - to become part of the Movement. The tendency to impose the figure of Chiara and her charisma as absolutes had serious repercussions. [...] She considered people who strayed from the Movement to be 'dead'.'
Testimony of a former focolarina from Uruguay

Step-by-step revelations of secret teachings: 'I spent a year at the pre-school with other girls who, like me, were preparing for the choice of consecrated life [in the movement]. We talked about the 'Paradise of '49, but we knew that we could not yet know its contents, because they were reserved only for the so-called internal Focolare members. We were told that the structure should never be presented to the outside world, because it could only be understood from the inside. So we knew that during events like the Mariapolis or meetings to introduce Focolare to new people, we couldn't talk about certain concepts that were only known by insiders.' *Testimony of a former focolarina.*

The insistence on 'destroying the self': 'I must confess that for a long time I was attracted to the total self-denial required of members because I thought it was a mystical path: I thought it was a path of purification that would allow me to 'enter into God', becoming one with Him. But the truth is that without our passions, our dreams, our desires, our ideas, we are no longer ourselves. In my case, it was something that left its mark by conditioning me even after I left the Movement. Not knowing how to say no, I fell into an unhealthy emotional relationship, in which I was conditioned to complete

sacrifice, since I was applying the wrong relational dynamics learnt within the Focolare.' *Testimony of a former Gen [young member of Focolare]*.

Prohibition to have friends in the movement and to see families of

origin: 'Living in these conditions for years and years, even my closest friends distanced themselves, because I had changed. Ditto for my family [...] When I lived in Belgium - my family lives in Luxembourg - the distance already limited my visits to once a year, at Christmas. But even when they moved me to Luxembourg, I could still visit them only rarely. I would only have been allowed to see them more often if they too had been members of the movement.' *Testimony of a former focolarina.*

Movement leaders governing the lives of married focolarini: 'As married people, we saw that there was a huge difference between the men's and women's groups [...] the differences were so great that it seemed like two different movements in the Church. It was always difficult to reconcile this. My husband and I went to the separate men's Focolare and women's Focolare at the same time and on the way home in the car, we shared our experiences and what we had heard, as normal couples do. But the leader of the women's group vehemently told me to NEVER share 'reserved' things with him. If I had shared these things with him I could have made him experience an internal struggle that could have caused his 'spiritual death'. I don't know what world they live in, but as married people we share everything.' *Testimony of a former married focolarina from the United States*

Pressure to give money to the movement: 'Each of us would pay a monthly fee to the Castelli Romani headquarters. From there it would be redistributed to the movement's centres in disadvantaged areas. When it became necessary to renovate and retrofit the headquarters where the Mariapolis International Centre in Castel Gandolfo was to be built, the leadership resorted to help from the base. At that time they asked us to contribute financially to that work, which was obviously divine. I paid a thousand liras every month for what was called a 'brick for Chiara'.'

Testimony of a former Gen

Use of experimental methods to 'cure' homosexuality: 'I knew someone in the movement with whom they used a 'sleeping cure' for his homosexuality. They sent him to Loppiano as they did with many 'with problems'. He had to take sleeping pills before going to bed at night, get up in the morning, and after breakfast take more sleeping pills to sleep all day. This continued for months. It did not cure anything, but caused many more psychological problems that lasted for years. To me, on the other hand, when I said I was gay they offered an arranged marriage, conversion therapy and chemical castration. It was then I made a firm decision to leave the movement as I could see it would destroy me. Nevertheless, its influence affected my life for many years to come.' *Testimony of a former focolarino*

Confusion of the internal forum with the external forum: In May 2000, US immigration granted asylum to Carlos Ramirez [name changed]. Ramirez is gay and one of the main reasons for the US government's decision was that he had suffered persecution for his sexual orientation while training as a full-time member of the Focolare movement at its centre in Loppiano, near Florence, Italy.

Having joined the Focolare Movement in his Central American country at the age of fifteen, Ramirez had dedicated himself tirelessly to serving the movement. When it came to choosing a university course, for example, the decision was made in the Focolare's Rome headquarters, based on what would be best for the needs of the movement. After completing his degree, he was sent to the formation centre in Loppiano, Italy. When Ramirez mentioned to his superior that he was homosexual (even though he was living a celibate life as an internal focolarino) something he had known since childhood, 'that day my life changed forever and nothing would ever be the same again,' Ramirez recalls. 'I was convinced that the movement would understand and that being gay was not the main thing in my life. But I was wrong... Even after all those years of working with them, I was treated as a criminal, as "a natural sinner, an aberration of God's love".' He was immediately sent to Rome where, without prior notice or support, he was subjected to an interrogation by a commission of five internal Focolare leaders, a kind of kangaroo court, who bombarded him with such questions

as: "Did you touch the other members? Did you touch yourself? Do you have fantasies? What are they? Do any of your [sexual fantasies] involve Jesus?" [From the affidavit of "Carlos Ramirez" submitted as part of his asylum request - file held by OREF archive]. After this consultation, Ramirez was sent back to Loppiano where he was kept under close surveillance by his superiors, who controlled who he spoke to, his friends, his study group. He was told to go to bed after everyone else in his single-sex community 'to avoid temptation' and to get up before the others so he could shower alone. In bed, he had to sleep with his arms outside the covers, even in winter, so as not to be tempted to 'touch himself'. Ramirez was encouraged to do more exercise to ward off temptation, but in long trousers, not shorts. He was forced to do one hour of penance a day, praying for his 'conversion'.

Although Ramirez had previously worked with the children visiting Loppiano, he was now removed from this task and sent to the kitchens. Although it was initially planned that he would spend the summer holidays with a group of other young people at the seaside, at the last moment his superior told him that he would have to go 'to the mountains' alone because 'at the beach people wore swimming costumes and I would be exposed to the devil'.

Ramirez was summoned for a final consultation in Rome, where the commission that had interrogated him issued its conclusions: he was indeed homosexual and therefore unfit to become a full-time member of the movement. He would be sent home within two or three days. Through a phone call to friends in his country, Ramirez learnt that his family and his Focolare colleagues had already been informed of his reasons for returning [i.e. being gay]. He learned that he would be excluded from the movement's activities and would face rejection by his family because of his homosexuality. Anxious that Ramirez's hasty departure could be too much of a 'trauma' for his classmates - his feelings were not taken into account - his superiors in Loppiano concocted an elaborate lie that he was returning home because his mother was seriously ill. To this subterfuge was added a little sermon on the duties of a Christian towards his parents. Ramirez was forced to go along with the deception even when, seeing the young man's distress, his unsuspecting classmates promised their prayers for his mother's recovery and reassured him that she would soon be well and he could return to complete his course. At the airport, he was given a one-way ticket and \$100 in cash. When he realised that the plane would land in the United

States, Ramirez decided to get off there and take refuge with friends. Three years later, after rebuilding his life from scratch in the United States (he is now a university professor in the US), Ramirez was granted asylum based on the treatment he received from the Focolare Movement. His case is one of many. *From the testimony of a focolarino taken from his Petition for Asylum to the US Government in the OREF archivers.*

Little real interest in the poor and marginalised: "While I was doing the Focolare course at Loppiano, I went with the Gen Rosso music band to Florence because one of them was graduating in singing at the conservatory. Seeing some poor people on the street, I asked one of the leaders what we could do as a movement for such people. 'When the whole world is Focolare, the problem of poverty will be solved,' he replied." *Testimony of a focolarino*

Born into a Focolare family: "I was in the Gen movement all my life as my father was a married focolarino. In my teenage years, I began to have questions about the movement. Their answer to all my questions was: I shouldn't think; the doubts were a very special gift from God to me; it was 'Jesus Forsaken' and I just had to keep loving my neighbour...At the age of 17, even though my mind couldn't leave the movement, my body did, and then I had a breakdown that lasted two years [...] Later I was traumatised when six members of the movement who had not visited my dad [an ex-married focolarino] for years, appeared at the hospital to watch him die. They tried to wake him from a semi-coma, which I found repulsive, almost perverse." *Testimony of a former Gen*

The trauma of those leaving the Focolare movement: "I can understand how the Jews in Germany felt during Hitler's reign and their attempt to hide from the enemy. Sometimes I feel that I am going against the vocation God has called me to and that I am lost because this is the way I was programmed to think in the movement. It is frightening. We were told not to think, to 'cut off our heads'. To go against this programming we have to think

and but our minds have become very rusty. I often wonder if I will ever get over this." *Testimony of a married ex-focolarina from the United States.*

Refusal to listen to criticism: "Your book had a great influence on the Focolare movement in Germany in the circle of our friends and relatives, but there was no open dialogue on the issues you presented. Being deaf to criticism can do harm and even be dangerous. A direct confrontation and dialogue would be better and help us to solve the problems." *From a letter to Gordon Urquhart, author of Im Namen des Papstes (Droemer, Germany, 1996) by a focolarino priest, a member of Focolare for 30 years.*

CONCLUSION

We present our testimonies to the Synod on Synodality, and our desire to heal the abuses that we have suffered and the abuses that others have suffered, bearing in mind what Pope Francis told a group of theologians:

'The questions of our people, their suffering, their struggles, their dreams, their trials and their worries, all possess an interpretational value that we cannot ignore if we want to take the principle of incarnation seriously. Their wondering helps us to wonder, their questions question us.'

*Video Message to Participants in an International Theological Congress held at the Pontifical Catholic University of Argentina (1-3 September 2015); also quoted in Apostolic Exhortation **Gaudete et Exsultate**, March 2018*

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