

Charity as a Paradigm for Inter-faith Dialogue

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Abstract

In this paper I wish to introduce the concept of *charity* in the Christian tradition, highlighting how it can be a precious aspect of relations between Christians and those of other religions.

Deus Caritas Est, the first *Encyclical Letter* published by Benedict XVI, draws lines of distinction between different meanings of charity and love in the Greek tradition, which has represented the initial main means of communication for Christian Scriptures. The examination of the concept *agape* represents the focal point of the first part of the article as this is the Greek term which Christians use to mean *charity*.

After clarifying terminologies and the scriptural rooting of *charity*, the article attempts an analysis of the suitability and sustainability of charity as a paradigm capable of encouraging favourable encounter between people of different religions. In this context, after an explanation of the charismatic dimension of the Catholic Church, the article speaks to the modern understanding of *charity* and *love*, from the perspective of the spirituality of communion which emerged from the experience of Chiara Lubich, a modern Christian charismatic leader. She died in 2008, after

founding the Focolare Movement which currently promotes the idea that dialogue among people of different faiths is not only possible, but can be made easier through *charity*.

The final comment underlines how, in the understanding of the new pope, Pope Francis, *charity* as *agape* eliminates proselytizing, which for centuries has caused a barrier between differing cultures and religions.

1. Introduction

In our modern society which is filled with apparently insurmountable problems, it is important to explore the topic of *charity*. In our present globalised world scenario, in fact we feel the need for constructive encounters among men and women of different cultures and religions. *Love* and *charity* may represent points of reference to ensure a culture which favours encounters. This would be crucial for paving the way towards a world where justice and peace can truly be a reality. Every religion can contribute to this in a precious way. In fact, there is no religion that does not teach that the Supreme Reality involves goodness and love, inviting men and women to reach perfection by treating other human beings with compassion and charity. This is the *Golden Rule* upon which all religious ethics are based.

What could the specific contribution of Christianity be?

2. Charity in the Christian perspective

Christianity is traditionally known as the *way of love*. Christian revelation is based on God's announcement of his love for every man and woman and, as a consequence, on his invitation to all human beings, which was expressed in the words of Jesus of Nazareth: "*And as you wish that men would do to you, do so to them*" (Lk 6:31) and "*So, whatever you wish that men would do to you, do so to them, for this is the law*

and the prophets". (Mt 7:12)⁶¹. Christians are called to love those who are next to them unconditionally in order to give witness to God's love for mankind. This means to perform acts of unconditional love towards other human beings. From the Scriptural view-point,⁶² the root of this can be found in the first letter of St. John: "*So we know and believe the love God has for us*" (1 Jn 4:16). This is a fundamental discovery for a Christian as "*God is love, and he who abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him*" (1 Jn 4:16). These words express with remarkable clarity the heart of the Christian faith: the Christian image of God and the resulting image of mankind and its destiny.⁶³

In order to avoid confusion when speaking of *charity* and of *love*, and misinterpretation, a basic clarification is needed. Both terms, in fact, are widely used in a variety of ways and carry multiple meanings.

Initially it is necessary to draw a clear distinction between different definitions of love, which are expressed by three Greek words: *eros*, *philia* and *agape*. The first one is the love between man and woman, which the Greek Old Testament uses only twice, while the New Testament never mentions it. New Testament writers prefer the term *agape*, a word which rarely occurs in Greek usage. The term *philia* – which expresses friendship love – is used with added depth of meaning in Saint John's Gospel in order to express the relationship between Jesus and his disciples.⁶⁴ This approach endows Christian love with certain characteristics which make it different from other types of love. The term *love*, which Christians often use interchangeably for *charity*, "*has become one of the most frequently used and misused words to which we attach*

⁶¹ Navarra Bible, The New Testament, Four Courts Press Dublin and Scepter Publishers, Princeton, NJ, Revised Standard 2001. The same translation has been used also for other New Testament quotations.

⁶² I will follow here some points offered by Pope Benedict XVI in his first encyclical letter, *Deus caritas est (God is Charity)*, which can also be useful as a main guide-lines to explain a few main characteristics of Christian charity.

⁶³ Cf. BENEDICT XVI, *Deus Caritas Est*, Encyclical Letter, 25th December 2005.

⁶⁴ BENEDICT XVI, *Deus Caritas Est*, n.3.

*quite different meanings. [...] we cannot simply ignore the meaning of the word in the different cultures and in present-day usage”.*⁶⁵

The tendency to avoid the word *eros*, together with the new vision of love expressed through the word *agape*, clearly points to something new and distinct about the Christian understanding of *love*.⁶⁶ The main distinction between *eros* and *agape* is the aspect of self-giving which is characteristic of *agape* but is missing in *eros*, which defines love more as a search for pleasure to the point of being inebriated. As already mentioned, Christian *love* is rooted in God, who, by His very nature and essence, is Love. This love manifests itself in His relationship with humanity. The Old Testament shows that the fulfilment of this aspect of God can be found in Jesus, whom Christianity considers God incarnated, an expression of love as ‘*agape*’. The reality of incarnation remains a fundamental aspect of Christianity and it is rooted in a mysterious but real process of self giving, which entails sacrifice, laying down one’s own life, self-denial and self-renunciation. All of these aspects manifest in Jesus of Nazareth, who, in the words of Pope Francis “*infuses in the soul of all men the sentiment of brotherhood. All brothers and sisters and all children of God, Abba, the way He called the Father. [...] Agape, the love of each of you towards all the others, from the closest to us to those who*

⁶⁵ BENEDICT XVI, *Deus Caritas Est*, n.2.

⁶⁶ When we speak of *eros*, an element which has great importance is the body. Benedict XVI underlines how much today we exalt the body and the meaning given to love is very much connected with the deceptive consequences of this exaltation. That is why there is a sharper and sharper contrast between *eros* and *agape*.⁶⁶ Summing up, we can say that *eros* can be used as a term which indicates ‘*worldly*’ love, while *agape*, refers to love grounded in and shaped by faith. It is worth noticing that the two notions are often defined also as ‘*ascending*’ love and ‘*descending*’ love. There are other similar classifications, such as the distinction between possessive love and oblativ love (*amor concupiscentiae* – *amor benevolentiae*), to which is sometimes also added love that seeks its own advantage. (Cfr. BENEDICT XVI, *Deus Caritas Est*, n.7).

*are the farthest from us, is the only way Jesus has indicated to us towards salvation and the Beatitudes”.*⁶⁷

Jesus of Nazareth witnessed to all of this through his self-giving dimension, which took him to the point of dying on the cross. Only by looking at the mystery of the cross can one understand what *agape* love is. Consequently, taking Jesus as a model, in the Christian perspective, *charity* or *love* can be lived as a *gift* to other men and women, who are our neighbours. This offers to us an anthropological perspective of humanity which must be fully grasped in order to understand the Christian perspective on charity.

The person next to me was created as a gift for me and I was created as a gift for the person next to me. On earth all stands in a relationship of love with all: each thing with each thing. We have to be Love, however, to discover the golden thread among all things that exist.⁶⁸

Another fundamental aspect of Christian love is its social dimension and the fact that it has to be put into practice. In other words, *love* and *charity* are not static notions, they lead to action. The Church and Christians cannot keep God’s love for themselves. They are called to share it with everyone. Therefore all the different expressions of this love become expressions of God’s love for the world. In fact, in being charitable towards the world, the Church and all Christians wish to be an expression of the love of God and to contribute to the transformation of the world into one of peace, justice, equality, etc.

After the very early days of the first community of believers, who were not called Christians, but ‘*those belonging to the Way*’ (cf. Acts 9:2), the community spread, and the exercise of concrete charity became established as an essential aspect of the faith, along with the

⁶⁷ PAPA FRANCESCO – E.SCALFARI, *Dialogo tra credenti e non credenti*, Einaudi - La Repubblica, Torino 2013, 56

⁶⁸ C. LUBICH, *Essential Writings*, “Thoughts, Nothing is small if it is done out of love,” New City Press, New York, 2007, p. 87

administration of the sacraments and the proclamation of the Word. These social acts of charity were concrete practices: love for widows, orphans, prisoners, and the sick, downtrodden and needy of every kind. All of these acts of *charity* were as essential to the Christian community as the ministry of the sacraments and preaching of the Gospel. This explains why one of the main expressions of Christianity has throughout the centuries continued to be the service of charity, which can be expressed through the provision of social services, schools, hospitals, and relief service for victims of natural calamities and wars.

By performing these practices of love on a social level, Christians are called to be builders of justice and peace. Christian faith should be recognized as a path to harmony among humans and within creation. History shows that it has not been this way at all times. In front of the religious leaders whom he had invited to Assisi in order to pray for peace, John Paul II prayed for forgiveness for the lack of witness offered by Christians.

Our prayer [...] should include repentance for our failures as Christians to carry out the mission of peace and reconciliation that we have received from Christ and which we have not yet fully accomplished. We pray for the conversion of our hearts and the renewal of our minds, that we may be true peacemakers, bearing a common witness to him whose kingdom is "a kingdom of truth and life, of holiness and grace, of justice, love and peace".⁶⁹

Again in Assisi, twenty five years later, Benedict XVI sincerely acknowledged this.

As a Christian I want to say at this point: yes, it is true, in the course of history, force has also been used in the name of the Christian faith. We acknowledge it with

⁶⁹ JOHN PAUL II, *Address to the Representatives of other Christian Churches and Ecclesial Communities*, Assisi, 27th October 1986.

great shame. But it is utterly clear that this was an abuse of the Christian faith, one that evidently contradicts its true nature.⁷⁰

A final constitutive aspect of *agape* is the fact that it can open the way to *mutuality* and *reciprocity*. This, too, finds its roots in the very nature of God as love. In his first letter John the evangelist states: “*Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. No man has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us*”. (1 Jn 4:11-12). The mutual dimension of *love*, therefore, offers the opportunity to share in the love of God. It is meaningful that Jesus of Nazareth, before dying, entrusted to his disciples a commandment which He dared to call *new* and *His own*. “*A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.*” (Jn 13:34-35). Jesus’ invitation and promise is factually confirmed in reports about the early Christian communities. Tertullian, one of the Fathers of the Church, confirmed it effectively.

But it is mainly the deeds of a love so noble that lead many to put a brand upon us. *See*, they say, *how they love one another*, for they themselves are animated by mutual hatred; how they are ready even to die for one another, for they themselves will sooner put to death. And they are wroth with us, too, because we call each other brethren; for no other reason, as I think, than because among themselves names of consanguinity are assumed in mere pretence of affection.⁷¹

⁷⁰ BENEDICT XVI, *Address to the Delegations taking part in the Meeting for Peace in Assisi*, Assisi, 27th October 2011.

⁷¹ TERTULLIAN, *Apology*, 37, 6-10.

(English translated text <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/anfo3.iv.iii.xxxix.html> 04.11.2013).

The reciprocity of love was certainly a distinguishing mark in the early community of the followers of Jesus and this confirms that it is a constitutive element of *charity* as perceived by Christians.

Look, therefore, at every brother by loving him and loving means to give. A gift call for a gift in return and you will be loved in return too. In fact, love is to love and to be loved in return.⁷²

3. Progressive understanding of CHARITY AS AGAPE

So far we have briefly summarised the main features of the Christian understanding of *charity* and *love* and tried to explain the common Christian interpretation of *agape*. We have tried to do so through referencing the Scriptures and the traditions and teachings of the Church, especially of the popes. In fact, in the Christian tradition religious truths have to be supported by these three elements: the Scriptures, Christian tradition, and the teaching of the *Magisterium*, which includes Councils' documents, Popes' pronouncements and letters, and Bishops' teachings. All of these find adequate preparation and development in theological reflection.

There is a final element which is part of the richness of Christian tradition, especially in the Catholic perception: it can be defined as the *charismatic* dimension of the Church. *Charismas* can be described as "*new windows opening up onto the Gospel message*".⁷³ Throughout the history of the Church many such windows have opened up. They are complementary to the magisterial dimension of Christian faith and life and are represented by different spiritual movements of renewal within the faith tradition, allowing a deeper understanding of certain aspects of the Scriptures. Typically they are initiated and inspired by

⁷² C.LUBICH, *L'amore reciproco*, (F.Gillet a cura di), Città Nuova Roma, 2013, 20-21.

⁷³ B. LEAHY, *Ecclesial Movement and Communities. Origins, Significance and Issues*, (Hyde Park, New York, New City Press, 2011, 13.

charismatic figures who are, often, later recognised as saints.⁷⁴ Among other recent charismatic figures in the Catholic tradition, there is a woman, Chiara Lubich, who is the foundress of a large Movement, called Focolare Movement⁷⁵. This movement is currently present and at work in many different continents. Its main objective is to contribute to the fulfilment of Jesus' prayer: "*That they may all be one*" (Jn 17:21). This invocation can also be considered to be an inspiration for building a united world, rediscovering the world as a universal human family. Lubich focused on *charity* as a way to build communities at different levels, both within and outside of Christianity. She met, and inspired people of different Christian Churches, followers of different religious traditions, including Islam, and even people who claim not to have any religious affiliation.

It is important to emphasize that all of these charismatic aspects of the Christian tradition do not contradict one another. Though from time to time tensions may arise out of human endeavours and reasons, the spiritual dimension that these charismatic aspects propose contributes to the great mosaic which in its many tiles reflects the real image of the Church.⁷⁶ Pope John Paul II had the chance to contextualise the

⁷⁴ A few example, very well known also outside Christianity, can be Francis of Assisi, who, along with the Franciscan movement, helped Christians to rediscover the dimension of poverty in the Gospel; Theresa of Avila, a great mystic woman, who focussed her attention and the one of her followers on the centrality of prayer as a privileged way to union with God and contemplation. In recent times, Mother Theresa of Calcutta gave a new meaning to the radical choice for the poor, recognising in them the figure of the suffering Jesus.

⁷⁵ Cf. <http://www.focolare.org>

⁷⁶ This is well summed up by a great witness of the charismatic aspect of Christianity: St Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1153). "I admire them all: I belong to one of them by observance, but to all of them by charity. We all need one another: the spiritual good which I do not own and possess, I receive from others [...] The Church is still on pilgrimage and is, in a certain sense, plural: she is a single plurality and a plural unity: All our diversities, which make manifest the richness of God's gifts, will continue to exist in the one house of the Father, which has many rooms. Now there is a division of graces, then there

phenomenon of a new rising of renewal movements within the Catholic Church. This phenomenon began before the Second Vatican Council with Lubich and the Focolare Movement and continued in the last decades of the past millennium. While drawing the attention to the fact that they do not claim or “*could claim, to add anything to the richness of the depositum fidei (deposit of faith)*”, John Paul II writes the following.

Nevertheless, [they] represent a powerful support, a moving and convincing reminder to live the Christian experience to the full, with intelligence and creativity. [...] In this light, the charismas recognised by the Church are ways of deepening one’s knowledge of Christ and giving himself more generously to Him, while at the same time rooting oneself more deeply in communion with the entire Christian people⁷⁷.

This perspective may help us to grasp a common characteristic of Christianity. Without changing or modifying the Scriptures, along-side an effort to study them in order to understand them better from a scientific and historical view-point, there exist also groups and movements of spirituality which are inspired by their founders who “[...] *attempt to live the Gospel anew, in its totality, and recognise the Church without hesitation as the ground of their life without which they could not exist*”.⁷⁸ It is within the context of the renewal which is taking place within Christianity that we

will be distinctions of glory. Unity, both here and there, consists in one and the same charity.” (BERNARD OF CLAIRVAUX, *Apologia to William of Saint Thierry*, 4.8, cited in John Paul II, Apostolic Exhortation, *Vita Consacrata*, n.52).

⁷⁷ POPE JOHN PAUL II, *Message to the World Congress of Ecclesial Movements*, Rome, May 27-29, 1998 in The Pontifical Council for the Laity, *Movements in the Church*, (Vatican City, 1999), 15-19, at 18.

⁷⁸ Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, “The Ecclesial Movement: a Theological Reflection on their Place in the Church” in The Pontifical Council for the Laity, *Movements in the Church*, (Vatican City, 1999), 46. This article was reproduced as “The Theological Locus of Ecclesial Movements” in *Communio*, 25 (Fall 1998): 480-504.

would like to further explore *charity* and *love* as a new paradigm for interfaith dialogue.

Chiara Lubich's discovery of *charity* and *love* as central aspects of Christian faith led, throughout the years, to the awareness that this is where the root of a *spirituality of communion* lies.⁷⁹ *Love*, from the perspective of God who is love, God as a Father, remains the core of the spirituality of communion and opens the door to interfaith dialogue, while offering a methodology for a successful way of dialoguing. In the past forty years this Movement has become a powerful vehicle promoting inter-faith and intercultural dialogue, creating fruitful experiences of rich exchange between groups of all major world. ⁸⁰

If someone were to ask me why the Focolare Movement's interreligious dialogue has had such a rapid and fruitful evolution, we would have to respond that the decisive and characteristic element is love, love poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit. Love which finds a spontaneous and immediate echo in the other religions and cultures. This is true because all the major religions have in common the so-called Golden Rule

⁷⁹ A vast literature is available to deepen the figure and the role of Chiara Lubich. We can suggest J.GALAGHER, *A Woman's Work: Chiara Lubich: A Biography of the Focolare Movement and Its Founder*, London, New City Press, 1997; C.LUBICH, *Essential Writings: Spirituality Dialogue Culture*, London and New York, *New City*, 2007; C.LUBICH, *The art of Loving*, New York, New City Press, 2010.

⁸⁰ In order to know more in details see R.Catalano, *Spiritualità di comunione e dialogo interreligioso. L'esperienza di Chiara Lubich e del Movimento dei Focolari*, Città Nuova, Roma, 2010, R.Catalano, 'Christian-Muslim Dialogue. The Experience of Chiara Lubich and the Focolare Movement' Part I, *Encounter*, 385 (May 2013) and 'Christian-Muslim Dialogue. The Experience of Chiara Lubich and the Focolare Movement' Part II, *Encounter*, 386 (June 2013) and P.Coda, *Il nulla e il Logos*, Città Nuova Roma, 2003.

which, for us, says: "*Do unto others as you would have them do unto you*" (Lk. 6:31). This is present in all religions⁸¹.

Upon the discovery that the *Golden Rule* is present in all religions, Lubich proposed to people of different religious and cultural backgrounds that it be used as a method of dialogue. Several implications can be drawn from the concept of *charity*. Most evident is the concept of *fraternity* as an element of daily living and, at the same time, as a reference paradigm with implications in different fields.⁸² It is in this perspective that a discovery which is simultaneously a proclamation, a commitment and a program of life emerges. It can be summarized in a brief formula: *all human beings are candidates for unity*.

We must always fix our gaze on the one Father of many children. Then look at all persons as children of our one Father. With our thoughts and the affections of our heart we must always go beyond every limit imposed by a merely human life and tend constantly, and because of an acquired habit, to universal brotherhood in one Father: God.⁸³

Universal brotherhood and *unity*: these are the specific goals of the dialogues of Chiara Lubich and the Focolare. Obviously, the first members of this new Movement had nothing to do with people of other faiths in the early years of their work. But the idea that every person, being a child of the same Father and, therefore, our brother or sister, is *a candidate to unity*, would be very meaningful when encountering Muslims, Hindus, Jews, and Buddhists.

⁸¹ C.LUBICH, *Interreligious Dialogue in the Focolare Movement. Points of a spirituality open to other religions*. Aachen, 13th November 1998. (unpublished manuscript)

⁸² This includes also contexts outside the spiritual realm. For instance, there are groups of academics involved in studying the significance and the impact of the paradigm of fraternity in human domains (philosophy, education, politics, economics, sociology etc.).

⁸³ C.Lubich, *L'arte di amare*, Città Nuova, Roma 2005, 29.

From this dialogical spirituality a *methodology of dialogue* has emerged, rooted in the *commandment of love* for Christians, and in the *Golden Rule* for followers of other faiths. We can indicate four points using a method which Lubich liked to define as the *art of loving*. In order to dialogue it is necessary to *address our love towards everyone*, making no distinction between the different people we encounter daily. This implies that we must consider the potential of everyone to be loved by us and to participate in the building of unity. This is an attitude rooted in the discovery that God is Father, and, as a consequence, that we are all brothers and sisters. It calls for a commitment to constantly disregard man-made distinctions of nationality, race, gender, and even of religious faith. For Jesus said: “*Truly I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of my brethren, you did it to me*” (Mt. 25:40).

This way of loving requires us to love everyone: the pleasant or unpleasant; beautiful or ugly; fellow-citizen or foreigner; belonging to my culture or to another, to my religion or to another, friend or enemy. In fact, the Gospel asks us to be perfect, in the image of the heavenly Father who “makes his sun rise on the bad and the good, and causes rain to fall on the just and the unjust” (Mt 5: 45). This love towards everyone is very fruitful. It is the experience of many that it would be enough to live this one quality of evangelical love in order to bring about around us a total change in society.⁸⁴

A second element is that *love always takes the initiative*. The ‘other’, not ‘I’, is the priority.

Another characteristic of this way of loving is perhaps the most demanding of all. It tests the authenticity and purity of our love, therefore, its real capacity to generate

⁸⁴ C.LUBICH, *What is the future of a multicultural, multiethnic and multireligious society?*, London, 19th June 2004.

brotherhood and peace. It is to be first in loving, that is, not to wait for the other person to take the first step; to be the first to move, to take the initiative. This way of loving lays us open to risks, but if we want to love in the image of God and to develop this capacity to love, which God has put in our hearts, we must do as He did. He did not wait for us to love Him. Rather, He showed us always and in thousands of ways that He loves us first, whatever our response might be.⁸⁵

Far from being an irenic approach, the art of loving requires – and this is the third element - *a concrete commitment* to serving whoever is besides us. This means that to *love* is far from being sentimental. It is not a matter of feelings but rather of deeds and of good practices.

To love means to serve. Jesus gave us the example [...] He washed the apostles' feet. This means that we too could wash our brethren's feet. [...] This is Christianity: to serve, to serve everyone, to see in everyone our own master. [...] to strive to achieve the evangelical primacy, only by putting ourselves at everyone's service. Serving ... Here we have an idea which can revolutionise the world.⁸⁶

The fourth aspect of the *art of loving* consists of trying to *be one* with the neighbour. This means empathy, feeling what the other feels, living it with him. It requires the effort of trying to enter into his mentality, respecting his personality and trying to understand his values and principles. As the Christian theologian F. Whaling effectively writes, "*to know the other's religion implies entering into his or her skin, to see the world as the other sees it, penetrate into what it means for the other to be a Buddhist, a*

⁸⁵ C.LUBICH, 'Brotherhood and Peace in the Various Religions', *Encounter with a group of Muslims in Spain*, Mariapolis Centre Luminosa, Madrid, 7th December 2002.

⁸⁶ C.LUBICH, *L'arte di amare*, Città Nuova Roma, 2005, 37.

*Muslim, etc.*⁸⁷. Christians can find a scriptural basis for this attitude in the experience of St. Paul: “*To the weak I became weak that I might win the weak; I have become all things to all men [...]*” (1 Cor. 9:22).

Of all these points, *being one* with others – or if we wish, *living the other* – is the most crucial requirement in the process of building relationships of dialogue. It is not a tactic or merely an external way of doing things. Lubich often explains this point confirming its importance.

It demands a complete emptying of ourselves: setting aside our thoughts, our feelings, our intentions, our plans so as to understand the other. And those who have experience in dialogue say that we have to enter into the skin of the other and see the world as it would be seen by a Jew, seen by a Buddhist, seen by a Muslim. Making ourselves one requires poverty in spirit, to be spiritually poor so as to be rich with love.⁸⁸

This attitude of silence and of emptying ourselves leads us to, first, opening ourselves up and then, to listening. It is only at this point that it is possible to share our own religious experience and characteristics of our own faith with the attitude which both the late popes, Paul VI and John Paul II, have defined as *respectful proclamation*. This means not imposing, but offering one’s opinions with love and respect and without the slightest hint of proselytizing. Proselytism, in fact, represents an attitude which, for centuries, has constituted a great obstacle in positive encounter between differing religions and cultures. Pope Francis recently confirmed that real *charity*, which we have defined here as the *art of loving*, could create a constructive common path towards the Truth and Eternal Good.

⁸⁷ F.WHALING, *Christian Theology and World Religions: a Global Approach*, London 1986, 130-131

⁸⁸ C.LUBICH, *Interreligious Dialogue in the Focolare Movement. Points of a spirituality open to other religions*. Aachen, 13th November 1998. (unpublished manuscript)

Proselytism is downright nonsense; it doesn't make any sense. We need to learn to understand each other, listen to one another, and increase our knowledge about the world around us. It often happens that after one meeting I want to have another one because new ideas emerge and new needs are discovered. This is what is important: to know one another, to listen to one another, broaden the range of thought. The world is full of streets that converge and diverge; the important thing is that they lead to the Good [...].

Charity is, therefore, a powerful and precious common value that paves the way towards constructive dialogue among followers of different religious traditions. In the words of Pope Francis: “*Do you know what agape is?*”. [...] “*It is love for others, as our Lord preached. It is not proselytism, it is love. Love for one's neighbour, the leaven which serves the common good*”.⁸⁹

Conclusion

In today's globalised world, the encounter among people of different cultures and religions offers a great opportunity for dialogue, allowing exploration of the richness that each tradition carries and can offer to the others.

We are called, first of all, to live *a dialogue of life*, which Benedict XVI meaningfully termed ‘*a dialogue of being together*’. This form of dialogue does not involve «*discussing the great themes of faith*»⁹⁰. Rather it is a dialogue that revolves around «*the concrete problems of coexistence and shared responsibility for society, for the state, for humanity*»⁹¹. The attitude required

⁸⁹ La luce che abbiamo nell'anima, *Intervista con Papa Francesco di Eugenio Scalfari*, *L'Osservatore Romano*, ed. quotidiana, Anno CLIII, n. 225, Merc. 02/10/2013 o PAPA FRANCESCO – E.SCALFARI, *Dialogo tra credenti e non credenti*, Einaudi - La Repubblica, Torino 2013, 55-56.

⁹⁰ BENEDICT XVI, *Address to the Roman Curia*, 21st December 2012

⁹¹ *Ibidem*.

by this kind of dialogue is the engagement «*to learn to accept the other in his otherness and the otherness of his thinking*»⁹². Moreover, when dialoguing with those who believe differently from us on the topics of peace and justice, we enter another form of dialogue, which encompasses not only conversation and action but also the «*ethical struggle for the truth and for the human being*». We pass, therefore, from «*what began as a purely practical dialogue [...] [to] a quest for the right way to live as a human being*». This ethical form of dialogue has certain conditions. «*Listening to the other*» is absolutely required. When we both have this attitude, we can obtain purification and enrichment and we take «*common steps towards the one truth*»⁹³.

The elements required in the experience and exercise of dialogue – acceptance of the other, listening, allowing ourselves to be purified in order to be enriched – can also be experienced by putting charity into action. The role that active charity can play in the process of encounter among people of different faiths and cultures can be defined as a road map for interfaith dialogue. This leads to deep and far reaching effects, which Pope Benedict XVI underlies, when he affirms that dialogue must help us draw closer to the truth. «*Both sides in this piece-by-piece approach to truth are therefore on the path that leads forward and towards greater commonality, brought about by the oneness of the truth*»⁹⁴. Whatever the current concept of God and Truth are they must be tested and confronted by encounter with those who believe differently from us and from our own community. *Charity* can play a vital role in this challenging experience.

On the other hand, it is again *charity* which will ensure that we avoid the danger of falling into the trap of religious and cultural relativism. What charity helps to accomplish is the constructive learning of how to respect differences, the nurturing of our desire to explore alterity and the allowing of oneself to be transformed by God. Love and charity are not,

⁹² *Ibidem.*

⁹³ *Ibidem.*

⁹⁴ *Ibidem*

therefore, the result of an interfaith process but a sort of a social miracle, the one of mutual acknowledgment of each other, which always precedes the exploration of differences as well as of commonalities.⁹⁵

⁹⁵ See W.G. JEANROND, *Theologia dell'amore*, Queriniana, Brescia 2012, 242. (original title, *Theology of Love*, 2012 Blackwell Publishing Ltd)