

May They  
All Be One

FOCOLARE CLASSICS SERIES

# May They All Be One

Origins and Life  
of the Focolare Movement

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## Foreword

*May They All Be One* begins with “The Story of the Focolare” – the Movement’s humble origins. In wartime Trent, with everything crumbling around them, some young Catholic women looked at the ruins of their lives and their dreams and asked, “Is there anything that does not pass away?” And from within came the answer: “Yes . . . it is God. God endures forever.” In that moment, in those perilous times, they chose God as their “Ideal” and began, moment by moment, living the gospel.

Although they never set out to establish a movement, their commitment to live in this way led to their Ideal spreading throughout Italy, throughout Europe, and throughout the world. Non-believers were converted to God, religious orders were transformed, the laity recognized their call to holiness. And God did not stop there. The Ideal spread to other Christian Churches, and to the Orthodox Churches as well.

The first chapter concludes with a reference to the gospel passage in which Jesus offers his testament: “. . .that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you” (Jn 17:21). Chiara writes, “If it be his will, may he make us all instruments in bringing about the unity of his one Church.” In subsequent chapters, Chiara documents how the components of this Ideal reflect God’s boundless love.

Chapter 2, “The World Was Not So Dark Anymore,” uses the image of light to describe the effect of the Ideal after the intensity of their wartime experience: “Like the morning sun, God radiated his presence on a world that was rediscovering peace after the long nightmare of war.” They found that God, who is Love itself, was present all around them—in the Eucharist, in each and every neighbor, in the Church, in Jesus in their midst when they gathered in his name, in Scripture.

In chapter 3, “A Sunbeam for Everyone,” Chiara expands upon the image of light. Like the sun, God sheds his light on the world, touching each person with a ray of love meant just for them. Loving God is not a matter of feelings but of doing his will, and we know God’s will by discerning our particular ray, our “sunbeam.”

Following that ray leads us closer to God, and also closer to each other. By listening in each present moment to their inner “little voice,” those who live the Ideal discern their individual way to holiness, and together compose “the magnificent design of his [God’s] love in all its splendor.”

And that magnificent design was shaped by the Word of God. During the war, Chiara and her companions began by living the words of the gospel. “The New Commandment,” chapter 4, describes what living like that brought about. By radical dependence on God’s providence, by truly choosing the poor as the object of their love, their life blossomed into community. They entered a “time of special grace” in which they recognized the Trinity living in their small cell of the mystical body. The community grew into the “Mariapolis,” a city governed by a single law: love.

In chapter 5, “The Key to Unity,” Chiara reflects on where saints like Clare of Assisi, Bonaventure, or Catherine of Siena had found God who is Love—in Jesus’ passion. And Jesus suffered most, she explains, at the moment on Calvary when he cried out “My God, my God why have you forsaken me?” (Mt 27:46). If that is when he suffered most, then that is when he

loved most. Those who live the Ideal respond to that cry by searching out every “face” of Jesus Forsaken, to be found “within us and around us everywhere in the world, and whom we want to comfort and console.”

During the war, Chiara and her companions discovered that if “Jesus was the Truth, and if we wished to find the Truth we had to follow him, the Word Incarnate.” They found that Truth by living the gospel “verse by verse, word by word,” a practice known as “The Word of Life.” Chapter 6 shows the treasure uncovered by living the Word of Life. They found a more profound and accurate understanding of love and of the Church, and in their encounter with the Ideal, members of other religious families rediscovered how their own founders had incarnated one aspect of Jesus’ life, and so renewed and revitalized their own vocations.

In the final chapter, “Where Two or Three,” Chiara explains the “something new” in this way of love to which God had led them. Jesus promised that “Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them” (Mt. 18:20). Chiara writes, “The unity for which he prayed before he died can be fully realized only by Jesus present in the midst of those united in his name.”

*Foreword*

*May They All Be One* concludes with these words: “When we live the spirituality he has given us and put his will into practice, it seems that the exalted and unique Ideal that we chose amid the ruins of the war had come down from heaven to dwell among us: Jesus in our midst.”

Tom Masters

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## Some Focolare Terms

The following brief definitions may prove helpful to those readers who are not familiar with the Focolare.

### **Focolare**

An Italian word meaning “hearth” or “family fireside.” It was the name given to the initial group by others who felt the warmth of their love. Focolare refers to the Movement as a whole, also known as the Work of Mary.

### **Focolare household**

A small community of either men or women, whose first aim is to achieve among themselves the unity Jesus prayed for, through the practice of mutual love.

### **focolarina/o** (Plural: focolarine/i)

A member of a focolare household.

## **Mariapolis**

Literally, City of Mary. This is the name given to the annual summer gathering of persons of all vocations, ages, and social classes whose sole purpose is to live the experience of reciprocal love. Permanent Mariapolises are little towns whose purpose is the same as the summer Mariapolises.

## **Ideal**

The word Ideal is used in the Focolare, primarily to mean God, chosen as the one aim in life. Secondly, it stands for the Focolare spirituality and the way it is lived in daily life.

## Chapter 1

# The Story of the Focolare

In a public audience in St. Peter's, on July 10, 1968, Pope Paul VI referred to the Focolare as a "flourishing tree, luxuriant and most fruitful."

Just as every tree begins with a small seed, so the Focolare had the humblest of origins.

Back in 1943, in the northern Italian city of Trent, there were just a few of us. We were young girls, practically children you might say, since the youngest was only fifteen. As everyone knows, young girls are readily drawn to give their hearts to an ideal. For example, I remember that my ideal in life was to study philosophy, whereas one of my friends dreamt of starting a family, and another of furnishing an elegant, stylish home.

But it was wartime. Bombs were falling, destroying parts of our city and claiming their victims. In the midst of the bombardments the Lord seemed to be telling us something, young

though we were: that our dreams would be shattered just like everything else around us. For example, I could not continue my philosophy studies in other cities because of the barricades, my friend could not fulfill her dream because her fiancé never returned; and the others, too, saw everything perish: homes, schools, works of art—all the things they held dear. The lesson the Lord was teaching us could be summed up in one sentence: All is “vanity of vanities” (Ecc. 1:2); everything passes away.

Confronted with such a spectacle, we looked around at all the ruins and asked ourselves: “Is there anything that does not pass away? Any reality that no bombs can destroy?” And as though someone had enlightened us from within, we answered: “Yes, there is such a reality: it is God. God endures forever.”

So, driven by a supernatural force, we decided to make God the “Ideal” of our lives.

Even though we were so young, we could have lost our lives at any moment, because the shelters we had to use did not provide any real protection from the bombs. So we were constantly faced with the possibility of being called to appear before God. This ever-present thought

increased our desire to find the fastest way to have God truly at the center of our lives.

When we went to the shelters (up to eleven times a day), we always took a copy of the gospels with us. Once when we opened it we found the words: 'Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord', will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only one who does the will of my Father in heaven" (Mt. 7:21) and "They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me" (Jn. 14:21). Then we understood. If we wanted to have God for our "Ideal" we had to do his will, because loving God is not so much a matter of feelings as it is an act of the will. And so we sought to do his will as it was manifested to us by circumstances, by the duties of our state in life, by those in authority over us, and by the inspirations of the moment. We knew that only the present moment was in our possession, since the past was already gone and the future, even the very next moment, might find us already in the next life.

Never straying from God's will was a way of telling him concretely that we loved him.

In the days that followed, we asked ourselves: "Is there anything Jesus wants us to do that is especially pleasing to him, so that if we

had to appear before him immediately, he would be pleased with us?"

Again the gospel gave us the answer: "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another" (Jn. 13:34). So we began to look at one another in a new way and decided to make our small group a concrete expression of the commandment that Jesus had referred to as "his own."

We knew that Jesus had loved us to the point of dying for us; therefore, we had to be ready to die for one another. This led us to a kind of inner conversion, because we became determined to base our lives, whatever direction they might take, on constant mutual love.

So in the morning, before going to Mass or receiving communion, we would ask ourselves: "Are we ready to die for one another?" For the gospel says: "So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift" (Mt. 5:23-24).

Love had come before all else: before going to school, before going to work, before going to sleep at night.

Of course, the Lord did not always ask us to die for one another, which would have been the fullest measure of love. But he did ask us for smaller things. For example, if one of our friends was suffering, we all suffered with her and the burden was lightened. If another was happy, we rejoiced with her and the joy was multiplied. I remember that one of us had two coats while another had none, so naturally, the one with the extra coat gave it to the one who had none. If I had a good idea that helped me love the Lord more, I shared it, and my companions did the same with me.

Love led us to put everything in common: our material possessions and spiritual possessions.

We continually practiced loving one another as Jesus loved us.

What was the result?

First of all, we experienced within us the fruits of the Spirit that St. Paul speaks of: fullness of light, joy and peace.<sup>1</sup> Then, since we tried to have constant mutual love, and “Where charity

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1. Galatians 5:22.