

# **CHIARA LUCE**

A life lived to the full



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New City Press  
Hyde Park, NY

Published in the United States by New City Press  
202 Comforter Blvd., Hyde Park, NY 12538  
[www.newcitypress.com](http://www.newcitypress.com)

First published in Italy as *Io ho tutto*  
by Città Nuova, Rome, Italy  
© Città Nuova, Rome 2004

First published in Great Britain by New City  
Unit 17  
Sovereign Park  
Coronation Road  
London NW10 7QP  
© New City, London 2007

Translated by Frank Johnson  
Cover design by Tomeu Mayans

British Cataloguing in Publication Data:  
A catalogue reference for this book is available from  
the British Library

ISBN 978 0 904287 98 1

Typeset in Great Britain by  
New City, London

Printed in the United States of America

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## CHAPTER 1

# BEGINNINGS

It's a fact that Pope John Paul II has created more saints than all the other popes in history put together. And it's a fact that after the Second Vatican Council, the concept of sanctity has widened, as can be seen from the large number of married people, fathers and mothers, who have been beatified. Nevertheless it still comes as something of a surprise to us that an apparently ordinary 18-year old girl was able, in just a short time, to arrive at heaven's door. Where did she find the strength to refuse the morphine offered to her by her doctors to relieve the pain of the advancing cancer? She said that she still wanted to be able "to offer something". Normally, the passing of a young person would be marked by some tears, a few lines in the local paper and comments like "poor girl, and so young too". But still, years after her death, Chiara Badano is not just remembered – she is taken as a model of sanctity by thousands of young people all over the world. So, the question is: "How could a girl reach such a depth of spiritual life in such a brief period of time?"

As I write this, I am looking at one of the last photographs of Chiara, taken as she lay, paralysed, on

her bed, in her home in Sassello. She is covered with a tartan blanket and is looking directly at the camera, her arm behind her head. Her head is covered by a thin covering of dark hair, not the latest style, but evidence of the chemotherapy she had been undergoing. And yet her face betrays nothing of a gravely ill person on the point of death, rather it is the face of a young girl who has come to maturity in a short period of time. She is smiling. It is a smile that so many had come to love. But above all it is those two big eyes which gave witness, and on which my gaze remained fixed. They are serene and sincere, and they express everything Chiara believed in and lived for. They are eyes which know that “medicine has laid down its arms”, but also that “love conquers everything”. With her, in the room, in that moment, were three friends from Genoa. They had been chatting with Chiara, living another of those moments of the Gospel “in action” which she so loved. “Moments of unity,” she called them. This is Chiara Badano, or rather, Chiara Luce.

### *Not icons, but models*

Every social group has its models in whom its hopes and aspirations are personified. The Gen Movement, the young people of the Focolare Movement, has, ever since the 1960s, been very close to its members as they got ready to “go to heaven”. There is Francesco Chiarati, for example, a young lad from Brescia in Italy, and Charles Moates, murdered in Chicago, whose story has been

made into a musical by Gen Rosso. Then there are the Gen girls from Pelotas in Brazil, who were killed in a road accident on their way to a Gen congress... Each generation has its stories of heroism and sanctity, which then become models for those coming after them. And yet these young people who have gone to the next life were not aloof or idealised; they have not become “icons”, to use the current terminology. They were just going on ahead of the others to another place, where they all eventually hope to meet up again.

The Church has always spoken about the “communion of saints”, a rather obscure expression perhaps, which is often thought of as something remote, something that exists only up in heaven. But among the Gen the communion of saints has always been something real, something that brings heaven and earth closer together.

This might give us a key into the interest in the life of Chiara Luce even before she left this earth. Just as with other friends who were ill, or perhaps more so, the Gen wanted to know the latest on her health which came to them on their informal network. They also prayed, and how! They saw in her someone for whom God had a special love.

Then, when she died, the news spread quickly, and some of her writings began to circulate. People still talk about the funeral as a “wedding feast”. In the years that followed, without any particular pattern, thanks to a collection of her writings, a biography and a video, and through her friends, the local bishop and the Gen, Chiara Luce’s life continues to inspire people.