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MARY, MOTHER AND MODEL FOR FAMILY LIFE IN THE THOUGHT OF CHIARA LUBICH AND THE EXPERIENCE OF THE FOCOLARE MOVEMENT

Fr. Edward L. Looney, STB, MDiv

Flourishing in the Church prior to and following the Second Vatican Council were ecclesial movements such as Focolare, Communion and Liberation, and Schoenstatt. Founded by charismatic leaders, a particular characteristic of each is their unique expression of Marian devotion. Chiara Lubich, foundress of the Focolare Movement, recognized Mary as the Mother and Model of the movement, and encouraged members to become repetitions of Mary in the world. The writings of Lubich lend themselves to the discovery of a familial spirituality, applicable to members and non-members of the movement alike. Elements of the derived familial spirituality include: imitation of the Holy Family, focus, devotion, and support.

1. Introduction

In preparation for this presentation, I consulted the indices of *Marian Studies* from 1950 through 2012, with the aim of discovering whether or not the Work of Mary, more commonly known as Focolare, had been the subject of presentation within this annual meeting. I expected, if any, volume 54 from 2003 might, since the topic that year was “The Marian Dimension of

Spirituality in the 19th and 20th Centuries.” Alas, while other ecclesial movements such as Schoenstatt,¹ Communion and Liberation,² and the Legion of Mary³ were included, the Focolare Movement received no attention.⁴ Last year (2014) though, Dr. Mary McCaughey mentioned the Focolare Movement in her presentation, “The Marian Spirituality of *Lumen Gentium* and the Renewal of Marian Devotion”; however, the Movement was not the primary focus of her study.⁵

The potential exists for renewed interest in this ecclesial movement founded by Chiara Lubich (1920-2008), because in January of this year (2015), Bishop Raffaello Martinelli of the Frascati Diocese presided over Vespers and opened her cause for canonization. It is fitting, in this conference, for attention to be given to the thought of Chiara Lubich and the movement she founded, because the movement is Marian by its very nature, by its very name. In conjunction with this year’s theme of the family, Chiara spoke often at worldwide gatherings pertaining to the family, in which she developed and conveyed her idea of

¹ Jonathan Niehaus, “Aspects of Schoenstatt’s Marian Spirituality,” *Marian Studies* 54 (2003): 88-101.

² John Janaro, “The Blessed Virgin in the Ecclesial Movement Communion and Liberation,” *Marian Studies* 54 (2003): 117-128.

³ Lawrence Scrivani, “The Legion of Mary,” *Marian Studies* 54 (2003): 102-116.

⁴ While no article pertaining to the Focolare has appeared in the pages of *Marian Studies*, articles have appeared in other Mariological journals. See: Carlos Garcia Andrade, “Presencia de Maria en los Movimientos Eclesiales Contemporaneos,” *Ephemerides Mariologicae* 36 (1986): 275-309. José Damián Gaitán, “Maria en Chiara Lubich,” *Eph Mar* 59 (2009): 103-117.

⁵ This was done in the context of looking at movements of Marian renewal, including Focolare, Emmanuel Community, and Youth 2000.

the family, and, furthermore, the Focolare movement finds expression in the family life of its members.

The birth of the Focolare Movement occurred in the bomb shelters of Trent, Italy, in 1943. In those shelters young women gathered around their teacher, Chiara Lubich, as they broke open the scriptures and read the gospel. Chiara and the others wondered if an ideal existed which could not be destroyed. They slowly realized that God-Love was the only one who would never disappoint. The war shattered the hopes, dreams, and ideals of the young girls, but the scriptures provided the answers they sought. They took solace in doing the will of the Father and in the exhortation to love one another, including one's enemies. From these meditations on what would later be called the Word of Life, the spirituality of the budding movement came forth. It was to be a collective spirituality, focusing on loving Jesus in the midst and working towards fulfilling Jesus' prayer that all might be one. The movement spread quickly throughout Italy and the world, and has millions of adherents today, who follow the spirituality of unity.

The Focolare movement, rooted deeply in the Trinitarian mystery, has a Christological focus with its emphasis on the abandonment of Jesus on the cross, referred to as Jesus Forsaken. Focolare has a Marian dimension, because the Church approved the movement as the Work of Mary. Statute two of their Constitution describes the mission of the movement's members "to be a presence of Mary, almost a continuation of Mary on earth."⁶ Additionally, to complement Jesus Forsaken, the movement focuses on Mary Desolate, as she stood at the foot

⁶ As quoted in Chiara Lubich, *Mary the Transparency of God* (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2003), 18.

of the cross. Mary has been the subject of much reflection in the talks and writings of Chiara Lubich, as she proposed Mary to be the mother and model of the movement.

Those who comprise the Focolare are the *focolarini*, including unmarried lay men and women who consecrate their lives to God and live out the spirituality of unity. Also among its members are married men and women who allow the spirituality to express itself within their family life. Bishops, priests, and religious also are inspired by the spirituality. In this way, the Work of Mary forms a new family, and strives for the day when all the families of the world will be united.

Given the Marian and familial aspects of this movement, in this paper I will demonstrate how Mary is a Mother and Model for family life today. In so doing, I wish to propose four points of reference for a family spirituality: model, focus, devotion, and support, as exemplified through the writings of Chiara Lubich and the Focolare movement. To do this, I will first reflect on the role and impact of the Holy Family on the movement itself. Secondly, I will examine the Marian aspects of the movement's twelve-fold spirituality. Thirdly, I will analyze the role of devotion within the movement, especially the rosary, and the path of sanctity proposed by Chiara, called the *Via Mariae*. Finally, I will present the support the movement gives to family life.

II. The Holy Family

Before the foundation of the Focolare in 1943, Chiara Lubich already received inspiration about a new way of life during a retreat in 1939. The retreat, organized by her Catholic Action group and hosted in Loreto, Italy, provided Chiara the occasion to reflect on her vocation. Entering the so-called home of the Holy Family in Loreto, she became caught up in the mystery of all that occurred there—the annunciation and the life

of the Holy Family.⁷ During the retreat, Lubich did not visit the shrine only once, but every day, separating herself from her companions in order to do so. She described these times of prayer as overpowering because it was “like living with the family of Nazareth.”⁸ After returning to Castello d’Ossana, Chiara spoke with her spiritual director, and shared with him that at Loreto she found her way, not in the married life, but as she said, “to live a life totally given to God alone in the world.”⁹ When asked if this meant life in a convent, she answered in the negative. In describing the experience, she says, “The little house of Loreto had revealed to my heart something mysterious, and yet uncertain—a fourth way, of which the particulars were still unknown to me.”¹⁰ By a fourth way, Chiara meant a life of following the gospel, dedicating and consecrating her life to God. This ideal, for Lubich, did not at first seem possible in married life, and so individuals came together to form a new supernatural family where such a life was possible.¹¹ Who should they take for inspiration? The Holy Family. Jesus, Mary, and Joseph provided the perfect example of living lives

⁷ S. C. Lorit and N. Grimaldi, *Focolare after 30 Years* (Brooklyn, NY: New City Press, 1976), 10. This work is an interview conducted by the two authors with Chiara Lubich.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 10.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 11.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ At first, the consecrated members of the movement were single people. In 1948, Igino Giordani helped Chiara “discern God’s design for married men and women in Focolare households.” See: Thomas Masters, *Focolare: Living a Spirituality of Unity in the United States* (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2011), 64. Igino Giordani would become the first consecrated married *focolarini*.

dedicated to doing God's will and at the same time, living in the virginal state.¹²

The Holy Family, the model of family life, inspired and served as a model for the way of life lived out by the members of the Focolare in the initial years. For families to live out their faith life, it is important to have sound models. The Holy Family provides one example, in addition to other married couples who have been raised to the altars of the Church.¹³ Chiara Lubich believed the Holy Family could renew family life in the world today. Here are her words:

It seems to me that in order for the family to regain its true countenance, to return it to its true splendor, besides discourses, warnings, directives, expositions of experience, it needs to look to that luminous and universal example invented by eternal wisdom: the family of Nazareth. All families of the world, both of today and tomorrow, can look to that family as their role model. And not only families: each family member can draw inspiration there in understanding how to behave, what attitudes to assume, what relationships to pursue and what virtues to cultivate. Every husband and father on earth will always be able to find a source of light and encouragement and inspiration in Joseph. From him he will learn faithfulness in times of trial, heroic chastity, strength, respect and veneration. He can imitate his silent hard working nature, his dedication to protecting the mother of his child and his full participation in the concerns of the family. And every wife and mother will be able to look to Mary and discover in her what she should be, her equality with men and her true identity. ... She will understand how to go beyond the family circle in order to share her unique gifts for the good of many: the ability to give of herself, her interior life that gives her self-assurance, her typical religiosity and her innate need always to rise above and lift

¹² Lorit, *Focolare after 30 Years*, 19.

¹³ The parents of St. Thérèse of Lisieux, Louis and Zélie Martin are fine examples of married people who inspire the faithful.

up others with her radiant beauty, purity and candor. In the same way the children will be able to identify with Jesus, in particular in the life of the family with Mary and Joseph. ... Yes the Holy Family is the jewel of human social relationships that reflects the life of the Trinity.¹⁴

From this experience, we can see how the mystical prayer experience of Chiara Lubich in the home of Loreto remained with her throughout her entire life, for not only did it inspire Chiara in a fourth way of serving God, but the life of the Holy Family also became the model for the livelihood of the *focolarini/a*. Even more, the Holy Family serves as a model for all families, within and outside the movement. In striving to live a spirituality of unity within the Focolare Movement, or for those outside the movement, the Holy Family remains the example *par excellence* for all families to model and imitate.¹⁵

III. Spirituality of the Focolare

Those who live the Focolare spirituality commit themselves to living out their spirituality of unity. Over the years, several key foci of the spirituality emerged. These foci present ways for

¹⁴ Chiara Lubich, "Family and Love," in her *Essential Writings* (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2007), 182.

¹⁵ In another reflection on the Holy Family, Lubich again noted the need to imitate the Holy Family: "Moreover, to make the family a small cell of the Focolare or a small church, which means the same thing, implies imitating the family of Nazareth, that family which lived with Jesus in their midst in the most concrete and divine way. In order to compose this masterpiece, the members of the family of Nazareth loved one another in a supernatural way, which means out of love for God and not for themselves. Mary, who was the true mother of Jesus and true wife of Joseph, loved both of them not for herself, but for God. Joseph did not love Mary for himself. He loved her for God, and he loved the child Jesus for God, even though he was his foster father." See: Chiara Lubich, "Mutual Love is the Best Educator," in *The Love That Comes from God* (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 1993).

individuals to live out the spirituality individually and collectively within their family. Brendan Purcell enumerates them as follows: the choice of God-love, the will of God, the Word of Life, love of Jesus in each neighbor, mutual love, the Eucharist, unity, Jesus Forsaken, Mary Desolate, the Church, the Holy Spirit, and Jesus in their midst.¹⁶ The spirituality derived from the scriptures, becomes a basis for Focolare members to live their lives. Mary finds a place within this Christocentric and Trinitarian spirituality as a model of one who lived its tenets and inspires the members who do her work. Writing on the Marian influence of the spirituality, Lubich says, “In this spirituality [of unity], Mary gives precise and very important guidance to people of our times.”¹⁷

I wish to briefly show the Marian guidance for each of the twelve foci of spirituality; for some it is vast, while for others brief. In terms of choosing God, Mary lived her life totally dedicated to God¹⁸; He was the principal cause for her life. Lubich contends that Mary still presents God to people today, and that she “teaches us that we must respond to his love with our love. We must love God in return.”¹⁹ In living out

¹⁶ Brendan Purcell, “The Focolare Movement,” *The Australian Catholic Record* 89 (2012): 161-173.

¹⁷ Chiara Lubich, “Ecclesial Movements and Mariology,” *The Pastoral Review* 2 (2006): 3. This article by Chiara Lubich, “Ecclesial Movements and the Marian Profile of the Church,” also appears in the anthology edited by Michael A. Hayes, *New Religious Movements in the Catholic Church*, (New York: Burns and Oates, 2005), 164-173.

¹⁸ This is exemplified by the belief that Mary took a vow of virginity and perhaps even remained in the Temple as a young girl, praising the Lord, and, even more so, by her yes to the Angel Gabriel’s announcement.

¹⁹ Lubich, “Ecclesial Movements and Mariology,” *The Pastoral Review*, 5.

Christianity today, people often become perplexed by God's will for their life. Mary models for those in the movement as one who completely resigned herself to the will of God, which for Lubich means following the commands of Jesus, especially love of neighbor. Mary expresses her love of neighbor through her concern for Elizabeth at the Visitation and the wedding couple at Cana, where she entrusted their needs to the will of God and showed forth mutual love. For these three foci—choice of God, love of neighbor, and mutual love—the key is one's yes to God and the other. Members model their life following the yes voiced by Mary during the Annunciation event. Maria Voce, current president of the Focolare Movement, exhorted members to make 2015 a year of yeses.²⁰

Focolare members strive to live the Gospel, meaning they must nourish “themselves everyday with the Word of God.”²¹ Every month has a particular “Word of Life” which members intentionally strive to live. When reflecting on the words of Sacred Scripture, members become like Mary who, Luke records, treasured and pondered the words of Christ in her heart.²² The Irish theologian Fr. Thomas Norris, an adherent of the Focolare Movement, reflects at great length on Mary's

²⁰ Maria Voce, “May 2015 be the Year of our ‘Yes’,” Focolare Movement, December 23, 2014, <http://www.focolare.org/en/news/2014/12/23/english-may-2015-be-the-year-of-our-yes/> (accessed April 2015).

²¹ Purcell, “The Focolare Movement,” 165.

²² Thomas Norris, *Mary in the Mystery: The Woman in Whom Divinity and Humanity Rhyme* (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2012), 56: “The ‘first’ incarnation of the Word in Mary is followed by a ‘second,’ as Mary lives and ponders the Word who now dwells substantially within her.”

relationship to the Word.²³ He says that “Mary is clothed in the Word of God given to the patriarchs and the prophets.”²⁴ He also calls her “the ‘woman of the Word,’ who accompanies, as no other ever has, her Son in his Paschal Mystery before receiving a unique and maternal mediation.”²⁵ Finally, he says that “the Word of God is so much the source and the texture of Mary’s existence that it seems to mark and determine the very language and content of her speech. ... In one word, Mary is the woman wrapped in the Word.”²⁶ Mary became the Mother of the Word; she heard the Word incarnate speak words of life, and the Word encompassed who she was. In carrying out the Work of Mary, people must ponder the words contained within the Sacred Scriptures. They must ponder them as she did and allow the words to guide how they live their life. Mary provides the example as one who “live[d] the living words of the living God” and now “invites all others to do likewise.”²⁷

Two aspects of the spirituality which complement one another are Jesus Forsaken and Mary Desolate. Mary hears the cry of Jesus crucified and forsaken and thereby becomes the *desolata*. Jesus’ forsakenness speaks of his kenotic offering, of

²³ Fr. Thomas Norris served on the International Theological Commission. In Norris’s recent book on Mary, a reader attuned to the tenets of Focolare spirituality certainly will notice the influence of the movement within his Marian reflections.

²⁴ Norris, *Mary in the Mystery*, 23. This is a reference made by Chiara herself, and Marisa Cerini commented on it in “The Reality of Mary in Chiara Lubich: First Fundamental Intuitions and Mariological Perspectives,” *New Humanity Review* 3 (January 1998): 24.

²⁵ Norris, *Mary in the Mystery*, 54-55.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 59.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 60.

losing everything. For Mary this means losing Jesus; in that moment she is lost, without words, for she is alone without Jesus. Mary in her desolation becomes an example to others who experience suffering in the world. The *Desolata* becomes an inspiration to those who suffer.

Another component of the spirituality consists of regular reception of the Eucharist. The members of the Focolare—lay, religious, and clergy—who have made a commitment to live in unity, ask Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament to make a pact of unity among them, in the way that he knows how, since he prayed for unity on the night before his passion and death. Reception of Holy Communion allows one to imitate Mary who lived in close relationship with the Eucharistic mystery. Most especially, Mary desires for humanity to acknowledge and accept Jesus' presence in the Eucharist.²⁸ Another element of the spirituality is unity.²⁹ Chiara hailed Mary as the Mother of Unity and the one who teaches the way of unity.³⁰ The unity reflected in the spirituality finds expression in the desire to remain united to the Church and the hierarchy. Members of Focolare also entrust themselves to the Holy Spirit. Mary enjoyed a powerful relationship with the

²⁸ Marie O'Byrne, *Model of Incarnate Love: Mary Desolate in the Experience and Thought of Chiara Lubich* (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2011), 68.

²⁹ Chiara reflected at lengths about unity as the principal movement of the spirituality—unity with Jesus and unity within the Church.

³⁰ Lubich, "The Charism of Unity and Politics," in *Essential Writings*, 231. In the Work of Mary, as they strive toward that unity Jesus desired, Lubich believed that Mary could play an instrumental role in dialogue.

Holy Spirit, first as spouse, but secondly (Lubich says), the Holy Spirit served as Mary's spiritual director.³¹

For Lubich, Mary has a unique relationship to the Church, which similarly extends to the Movement's members. Lubich took the words of Jesus from the cross quite seriously, when Jesus entrusted Mary to John and John to Mary. The evangelist John records "from that hour the disciple took her into his home" (Jn. 19:27). Lubich reflects that "the task of the Church and every Christian is to take Mary home, live with Mary and go to Christ with and through Mary. She is our spiritual mother, a mother who nourishes Christians with salvation that is born from her womb."³² In keeping with Vatican II Mariology, Lubich defines the relationship of Mary to the Church as a mother and also defines the responsibility of the Church and Christians as living with Mary.

The final point of the Focolare spirituality pertains to Jesus "in the midst," deriving from Jesus' promise that wherever two or three are gathered in His name, there He would be in the midst of them. Thus members believe they are capable of generating the spiritual presence of Christ in the world. Mary gave Christ to the world physically, and, now in imitation of Mary, the Focolare give Christ to the world in this spiritual way.³³ Lubich believes this spiritual generation of Christ pleases Mary, for she "cannot but greatly love this presence of Jesus among her children. She gave Jesus physically to the world and wants

³¹ "In the house of Nazareth, Mary lived 'between two fires': the Holy Spirit, 'the spiritual director' of her soul, and Jesus, the Word of God." See Lubich, "And the Focolare Was Born," in *Essential Writings*, 50.

³² Lubich, *Mary, the Transparency of God*, 44.

³³ Lubich, *Mary, the Transparency of God*, 57.

nothing more than to see him live spiritually among Christians today.”³⁴ Fostering love towards one’s neighbor allows those who imitate Mary to love Jesus in the other person.

The twelve points of the Focolare spirituality provide an outline for families who seek to live the spirituality. The twelve foci guide them in all that they do, ensuring that they make the choice of God, strive to do His will, live the Word of Life: loving Jesus in their neighbor, showing mutual love, being nourished by the Eucharist, fostering unity, imitating Jesus Forsaken and Mary Desolate, following the guidance of the Church, entrusting themselves to the Holy Spirit, and generating the presence of Christ in the world today. Each of these tenets has a Marian allusion contained within the writings of Lubich. Mary models how to live the spirituality, and members attempt to imitate her in their daily life. For families who strive to live the spirituality, the twelve points present wonderful guideposts for keeping the Lord and Mary’s way of life constantly on their mind. They provide a focus for how to live the Christian life together as a family.

IV. Marian Devotion and the *Via Mariae*

As summarized already, the spirituality of Focolare centers on living the Gospel, loving Jesus in the midst through mutual love, and fostering unity. No particular devotional practices characterize the movement (as, e.g., is the case for the Schoenstatt Movement). This does not mean Focolare members do not pray the rosary or engage in other Marian devotions, it simply means no devotion was specially promoted by the

³⁴ Lubich, “Ecclesial Movements and Mariology,” *The Pastoral Review*, 6.

movement.³⁵ That was the case until 2002, when John Paul II declared the Year of the Rosary and added the Luminous Mysteries. Chiara Lubich, along with 600 members of the Movement, attended the General Audience on October 16, 2002, when John Paul II signed *Rosarium Virginis Mariae*.³⁶ In a meeting with Lubich following the audience, John Paul II gave Chiara a letter in which he entrusted the devotion of the rosary to the Focolarini. This gesture of John Paul's touched Lubich; she understood it as "a sign of trust in [the] Movement."³⁷ The Movement strived to implement John Paul's wish. Members put forth ideas on how to promote the rosary which peaked in April of 2003 with a Marian Congress hosted at Castel Gandolfo.³⁸ The Congress, in Lubich's words, provided "reflections on the

³⁵ During an address on February 11, 1988, Chiara Lubich encouraged members to improve their prayer with the "essential prayers." These included the choice of Jesus Forsaken upon waking, the morning offering, an examination of conscience, celebration of the Eucharist, prayer before meals, frequent visits to the Blessed Sacrament, the recitation of the rosary, and daily meditation. Referring to the rosary, Lubich stated, "It is the prayer that links us to Mary, all dedicated to her. We must live this moment well as our daily appointment with our Mother, Queen of the Work of Mary." See Chiara Lubich, "What Is Essential in Our Prayers," in *Journey to Heaven: Spiritual Thoughts to Live*, trans. Julian Stead (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 1992), 78-81.

³⁶ "Mary and the Rosary in Spotlight at Congress" Zenit News, April 29, 2003. Available online at: <http://www.zenit.org/en/articles/mary-and-the-rosary-in-spotlight-at-congress> (accessed April 2015).

³⁷ Lubich, "Mary in the Focolare Movement," in *Essential Writings*, 38.

³⁸ The theme for the Congress was "Contemplate Christ through the Eyes of Mary." One of the fruits of the Congress was a book of rosary meditations in the light of the Focolare spirituality. See Brendan Leahy and Fergus McGlynn, *Contemplating Jesus through the Eyes of Mary: Living the Rosary in the Light of the Focolare Spirituality* (Dublin: Veritas, 2003).

apostolic letter ... and on the new Mysteries of Light with testimonies given by families, politicians, consecrated men and women, priests, and young people.”³⁹ In addition, the Congress featured two round-table discussions: one about the rosary in the many ecclesial movements and the other related to ecumenical considerations on *Rosarium Virginis Mariae*.

In the address Lubich delivered at the Marian Congress, she reflected on the role of Mary in the Focolare Movement⁴⁰ and exhorted members to become “beads of a living rosary! Living words! Other little Marys!”⁴¹ This vision for the movement to be other Marys was not new, but a part of their history and experience. Many years earlier, Chiara reflected on a particular question while in the presence of the Blessed Sacrament: “Why did you wish to remain on earth, on every point of the earth, in the most sweet Eucharist, and you have not found, you who are God, also a way to bring and to leave here Mary, the mother of all of us who journey.”⁴² In her heart, she sensed the response of Jesus from the tabernacle: “I have not left her because I want to see her again in you. ... [A]ll of you will open your arms and hearts as mothers of humanity, which, as in times past, thirsts for God and for his mother. It is you who now must soothe pains, close wounds, dry tears. Sing her litanies and strive to mirror

³⁹ “Mary and the Rosary in Spotlight at Congress,” Zenit News (see n. 36 above).

⁴⁰ Lubich, in this address, attempts to understand the Pope’s entrustment of promoting the rosary. She strives to demonstrate the rosary’s connection and significance to the life of the movement.

⁴¹ Lubich, “Mary in the Focolare Movement,” in *Essential Writings*, 39.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 43.

yourself in them.”⁴³ For Chiara and the Movement, the rosary became a means for them to be the repetitions of Mary in the world, an occasion for them to reflect on Mary’s life and glean inspiration from her as they strive to do her “work” through the movement.

The life of Mary was always a part of the Focolare spirituality. In 1988, with the bishop friends of the Movement, Lubich reflected on the *Via Mariae* or the Way of Mary contained within the Gospels.⁴⁴ Not surprisingly, her reflection contained many of the rosary mysteries. Over and over again in her writings, Chiara emphasized how Mary served as a model for the Christian faithful. Lubich firmly believed that not only did God reveal to her the spirituality of unity, but “was also showing us a model we could imitate to reach it. This model was Mary.”⁴⁵ The Way of Mary consists of the Annunciation, Visitation, Birth of Jesus, Presentation, Flight into Egypt, Loss of Jesus in the Temple, the Intimate Life of Nazareth, Jesus’ Entry into Public Life, the Desolation (at the Cross), Pentecost (Mary in the Cenacle), and the Assumption into Heaven.⁴⁶ Each one of these events in Mary’s life serves as a model for the spirituality of unity. The Annunciation and Mary’s yes provides a foundation for those in the movement to always say yes to

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Interestingly, when I visited the Focolare Center in Belgium, the chapel did not contain the Stations of the Cross; instead the Way of Mary adorned its walls.

⁴⁵ Lubich, *Mary the Transparency of God*, 51.

⁴⁶ Lubich gives treatment to the Way of Mary in multiple places: *Mary, The Transparency of God*, 49-68 and “Mary in the Focolare Movement,” in *Essential Writings*, 44-47. Marie O’Byrne outlines the *Via Mariae* a little differently, and includes the Wedding Feast of Cana. See: O’Byrne, *Model of Incarnate Love*, 40-49.

God's will in their life. The Visitation acknowledges the mutual love shared between Mary and Elizabeth. The Birth of Christ bespeaks the necessity of generating Christ in the world and in our hearts by loving the other person, who is Christ in our midst. The Presentation predicts the desolation of Mary and the forsakenness of Jesus. The Flight into Egypt reminds adherents of the spirituality that "the ideal of life that [the *focolarini*] offer to the world is also in opposition to it, because it is Jesus."⁴⁷ The Loss of Jesus in the Temple signals the progress of the soul, and how, after living the spirituality for so long, temptations once at bay may arise within the soul again. The lesson to be learned is humility and the necessity of Christ. The Intimate Life of Nazareth is the time in which one remains with Jesus in unity. Jesus' Public Ministry inaugurates his mission and Mary follows, allowing the words of Jesus to speak to the depths of her heart. The Desolation of Mary at the foot of the Cross mirrors the sorrows and sufferings that all people face. Mary in the Cenacle testifies to her unity in prayer with the disciples. Lastly, the Assumption of Mary provides hope; for if Mary truly is the model for the spirituality, and those who live it become little Mary's in the world, they too will share the vision of heavenly glory.

John Paul II's entrustment of the rosary devotion to the Focolare movement enhances their experience of the *Via Mariae* which Chiara Lubich encouraged as a path to perfection and sanctity. The *Via Mariae* speaks of the soul's movement through life and, also, the movement of a family, from the announcement of birth to the many other events that a family experiences throughout life. As Lubich notes, "[Mary's] life sheds so much

⁴⁷ Lubich, *Mary, the Transparency of God*, 59.

light on our own.”⁴⁸ The life of Mary is a model of sanctity for all people: consecrated, ordained, married, or single. Within the movement, devotions, particularly the rosary and the *Via Mariae*, afford the *focolarini* the opportunity to meditate on the mysteries of Jesus and Mary’s life, so that they can be repeated in their lives in the world today. Both the rosary and *Via Mariae* provide an anchor for family spirituality.

V. Familial Support in the Focolare

In the initial years, the Focolare consisted of women who consecrated themselves to God and to live the Gospels every day in a concrete way. The movement expanded to include men and eventually families. Within the movement, the family sector became known as the New Family Movement, founded in 1967 with the aim of living the spirituality of unity within a familial context and to advance their cause to other families throughout the world.⁴⁹ Through the family movement, the consecrated single *focolorini/a* and the married families could mutually enrich one another in the attempt to live the Gospel. Chiara Lubich often spoke about what people saw in those who live the spirituality, that is, people from the outside. The joyful witness of the *focolorinini/a*, whether married or single, exuded a notable joy which comes from living the Gospel.⁵⁰ In a time when the family was under attack, people in the world who live

⁴⁸ Lubich, *Mary the Transparency of God*, 68.

⁴⁹ Lorit, *Focolare after 30 Years*, 127.

⁵⁰ In 1987, Lubich reflected: “A few days ago someone asked us if joy and a smile are one of our rules. No, but people have always observed joy to be a distinguishing mark of our movement’s members. Simply because their life is love.” See: Lubich, “Love and Joy,” in *Journey to Heaven*, 68.

the spirituality, in effect, could spark change in the world and attract others to live the Gospel by their joyful witness.

The New Family Movement also provided an opportunity for families to share the joys and trials of life, and encourage one another in their efforts to choose God and follow his will of loving neighbors and fostering unity. In 1981, 1993 and 2005, a worldwide celebration called Family Fest convened in Italy and encouraged families in their resolve to live the spirituality. Most especially, Chiara Lubich placed an emphasis on mutual love and how the family can be a beacon of hope to the world. In addition to the New Family Movement, the Focolare have Youth branches called Gen 3 and Gen 4, which focus on fostering the spirituality among children and youth of families.

Another way the Focolare supports those who live the spirituality is through the annual Mariapolis gathering.⁵¹ As the name suggests, the movement gathers for a number of days to form a City of Mary, where all present live the Gospel and all the tenets of the spirituality. The aim is quite simple: “to live with total love for one another just as Mary, the prototype of Christians, did for Jesus.”⁵² In some places the Mariapolis is only a temporary city, but in others a permanent Mariapolis exists. People from all walks of life attend the Mariapolis, and, through the spirituality of unity, it could be said they form one family of believers. Members of the movement consider the annual gathering a highlight, for it renews their conviction in choosing God and striving to do His will. “For many, living in

⁵¹ These gatherings began in 1949 on the Dolomite Mountains. In 1951, the gathering became a city, and in 1955 the city was named Mariapolis. See: Chiara Lubich, *That All Men Be One* (New York: New City Press, 1969), 57-64.

⁵² Lorit, *Focolare after 30 Years*, 156.

the Mariapolis means a deep inner conversion, a decisive experience for changing or renewing their living habits, a rediscovery of Christianity, and a clear cut choice of God.”⁵³ After the Mariapolis, members form small Christian communities that gather monthly to discuss the Word of Life and support one another in their walk with God.

One of the problems in proposing a spirituality to families is there typically tends to be no support or follow-up. Families need to know that there are others who are like them who are striving toward holiness and experience similar joys and sorrows. The Christian life is not possible to be done alone; all people, especially families, need to receive support. The Work of Mary provides that support through various movements, and, in an overtly Marian way, by forming cities of Mary, where people live as Mary in the world.

VI. Conclusion

The translation of the Italian word *focolare* into English means “hearth,” defined as a place in front of a fire or as a symbol of a person’s home. It was in the home of the Holy Family of Nazareth that a fire was ignited in the heart of Chiara Lubich, a fire which proposed to the Church a communitarian spirituality of unity. The fire which warmed Chiara Lubich had a particularly Marian character to it, one in which she was to become another Mary in the world. Lubich and her followers take Mary to be their Mother and the Model of the spirituality that people of various vocational paths live. For the family, the thought and experience of Chiara Lubich propose a fourfold approach to a familial spirituality: model, focus, devotion, and support; these characteristics find expression through the Holy

⁵³ Ibid

Family, the twelve point spirituality, the rosary and *Via Mariae*, the Mariapolis, and various movements.

“Throughout the world the Focolare—the Work of Mary—does one thing. It builds a ‘home’ where the entire human family can gather. Focolare communities aim to be places where everyone can experience God’s unconditional love and welcome.”⁵⁴ The spirituality of unity is the work of Mary, for she desires the unity of all believers, and she is the model of the life proposed by Chiara Lubich. The house of Chiara Lubich, inspired by the home of Loreto, has enough rooms for everyone who wishes to live the Gospel and treasure the Word of Life in their heart.

Author Biography

Rev. Edward L. Looney, a priest for the Diocese of Green Bay, graduated from the University of St. Mary of the Lake (Mundelein Seminary) in 2015, where he earned an STB and MDiv. Looney has worked towards the STL and will resume studies at the discretion of his bishop. He has published extensively on the 1859 Mariophany commemorated at the Shrine of Our Lady of Good Help (Champion, WI). Other research interests include the sermons of the Cistercian monastics and Marian devotionalism.

⁵⁴ Masters, *Focolare: Living a Spirituality*, 203.

