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Trieste, 5<sup>th</sup> July 2013  
(at 4.30 p.m.)

Renata PATTI's testimony

I was born in Milan on 7 September 1957, but I've lived in Brussels since the end of 1980. My parents, who are still alive, brought me up with loving care and made sure that I wanted for nothing.

I first came into contact with the Focolare Movement when I was 10 years old, as I was living the life of the parish and attending school. I learnt of it thanks to the Word of Life, a sentence from the monthly Gospel that Chiara Lubich used to comment for all the members and followers of the Movement.

I soon "joined" the Gen, the New Generation, the young of the Movement and at 18 I joined the Focolare. The Focolari are small communities of men or women who take a vow of chastity, poverty and obedience and consecrate themselves to the *Opera di Maria* (Work of Mary) – better known as the Focolare Movement. They also include married people who pledge marital chastity, poverty and obedience to the Work of Mary.

At age 19 I left for Loppiano (Florence), the seat of the Mystici Corporis Institute, an International Formation Centre for future focolarini.

Together with about eighty other girls and women, I worked and studied for two years ad INTRA.

Both work and study were managed by internal focolarine or focolarini, or focolarini priests intimately connected and totally obedient to every dictate of the Founder and the headquarters of the Work, located in Rocca di Papa.

I couldn't have asked for a better way to soak up more and more of Chiara Lubich's Ideal.

I passionately embraced all the challenges that Chiara proposed. Fascinated by her strong leadership skills, I committed myself to spreading her Ideal, as I felt it my duty to share everything I had received.

Chiara used to tell us "that no soul should ever touch ours in vain ...".

So all of us, boys and young girls alike, firmly believed that we had embarked on a path leading to collective holiness, a new form of consecrated life in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. A vocation invented by the Virgin for the laity, the SOLE good and holy answer to the present and future of the Church and of mankind.

After leaving the Formation Centre, I was sent "by Chiara" to the Brussels Focolare. I believed it to be God's will.

As I told the news to my parents over the phone, they asked me to write to Chiara and ask her not to send me so far away from them. Since I was an only child, they felt as if I was abandoning them.

I don't know if this letter ever reached Chiara. The fact is that I never received any reply. Only a smile from the Head of the Centre: "Don't worry Renatina, Chiara understands ...". So I left for Brussels.

Being a foreigner, I had to get a job within three months: by law I wasn't allowed to stay longer in that country as a tourist.

One morning my Capo-Focolare tells me: "The Capo-Ramo (the Head of the Branch), one of Chiara's first companions, in charge of the Focolarine Centre worldwide, phoned and said that if you don't find a job immediately, you'll have to leave Belgium. So if you still haven't found anything by tonight, don't even show up at the Focolare: you'll only find a closed door."

I was 23 years old. It was my first time abroad. And I was left utterly ALONE!!

So much for the methods of a "refined" mutual love practised by those who, although well aware of the need to be perfectly fluent in both French and Dutch to get a job in Brussels, at least for a secretary like me, were asking for the moon.

If that night I was able to get back to the Focolare, it was because I had indeed found a job, let's say "by chance" or "providentially", thanks to a temporary employment agency who was looking for the language combination Italian/French.

I've lived for about two and a half years in northern Europe, and particularly in that Focolare where I didn't find what I always believed in, namely mutual love... quite the contrary: I was very often psychologically abused.

Let me give you an example. I had just arrived in Belgium by train, carrying two large, heavy suitcases. It was late at night when I was greeted at the station by two focolarine. The first introduced herself as the regional leader, or Capo-Zona (the highest authority) and introduced me to my new Capo-Focolare, then we all stepped into the car.

The first question of the Capo-Zona: "So, how old are you?" I answered: "23" and she said to my Capo-Focolare: "We can do what we want with her!" It's not as if I didn't notice that remark, but strangely enough, I thought it was perfectly normal.

What better to expect than to be shaped by your superiors?

Since I was a child I was brought up as part of that system, especially in the Loppiano Formation Centre. Add to this the fact that "coherence and integrity" are an essential part of my character... and that's it!!

Now it terrifies me to think that other young girls can be manipulated in this way, with their tacit consent because they are too naive or, worse, too convinced to be doing God's will.

For example, they expected me to deny my being Italian, claiming that "we are not in Italy, you must become a Belgian, or you'll never fit in with the Brussels community".

On one occasion when I had been more direct than usual – I don't remember exactly what I did – the Capo-Focolare gathered the four of us in the hall and announced that I was to go through the hour of truth, that is the "fraternal correction" given by the early Christians. In the Focolare the term "purgatory" is essentially used when you tell the other what you think is not in line with his or her "duty to be Jesus", while "paradise" is employed on those occasions when you want to tell them something positive which had an edifying effect on you.

I had learnt that "he who does not experience the chill of pain cannot experience the fire of love" and that "love must be shown, while sorrow must be concealed". Each of them told me something – I can't remember the details – but I do remember their tones of voice, which I perceived as aggressive towards me, especially on the part of my Capo-Focolare, who spoke loudly, almost contemptuously. For my part, I continued to grin

and bear it. Then I was ordered to stand on a chair in front of them and I was laughed at because I had obeyed without hesitation.

And then: “Now get down and look at yourself in the mirror. Don’t you see how silly you are?” I didn’t even have the courage to react.

They surely wanted to teach me something, but why not use positive friendly methods to tell me how best to fit in and learn more about a culture so different from my own?

Such abuses of authority were made in the name of God’s will and by means of the so-called “tools of the spirituality of unity”. No longer able to stand the fast pace of life and work in a climate of complete incomprehension, I eventually broke down.

Through force of circumstance I went back home, where I stayed for about a year to recover.

Then I returned to Brussels as an internal focolarina. No longer living in the community, I had found a flat near the Focolare, because I wanted to live at my own pace.

I thank God that my body was unable to stand that pace, as I am now aware this was an advantage. It allowed me to step back a little while still being totally committed.

I tried to subscribe with all my heart, my mind and my strength to this spirituality of Chiara Lubich, which can be summed up in the concepts of Unity and Jesus Forsaken as two sides of the same coin, as she herself explains.

Unity as in Jesus’ prayer “that they may all be one”. Unfortunately, that is not experienced as “communion”, but rather as “absorption” and effacement of your personality for the sake of the authority, of the group where you have to blend in at all levels. This is what I have observed; it is my opinion, shared by others who also went through similar experiences.

The fact that Jesus Forsaken, with His cry of abandonment on the cross, must be “always, immediately, joyfully” loved – as Chiara Lubich asked us to do – is certainly a spiritual exercise, but leads to obey blindly to the leaders, who know how to obtain a passive submission that very often totally stifles the breath of the Spirit in the individual consciousness.

Now I have to admit that – in my opinion – this spirituality was trapped in the rigid and closed structures of a Movement drifting slowly but surely into a sect.

After 31 years of Focolare (including Loppiano), I can testify to the many episodes of moral abuse perpetrated in the name of the spirituality of the Unity, for which “you must efface your personality, your whole personality”, and of Jesus Forsaken, whose love demands “blind obedience”.

In 2007 I experienced something very painful together with about 30 other people who left the Movement in Belgium and Luxembourg.

The Focolare of the Centro Zona was suddenly deserted, as the four focolarine living there left overnight.

I followed the story for one more year from the inside of the Movement, unable to do anything to improve things, outraged by many incidents and words.

I realised that the relationships were crumbling away: people once united by fraternal love suddenly turned into bitter enemies as the others left the Work.

As people and groups of people were being senselessly manipulated and big lies came to my ear, I felt in all conscience that I could no longer accept what I thought of as unchristian, so I wrote to Chiara Lubich.

No reply and no change. I wonder if she actually read the letter. Did I send a copy of it to the co-founder, Don Pasquale Foresi?

I left myself the Focolare sending a letter of resignation on 13 April 2008, after the death of Chiara Lubich a month earlier, on 14 March of the same year.

I longed for Truth, Freedom... I enrolled on a philosophy course at the Brussels Institute of Theological Studies (I.E.T.), run by the Jesuits.

Those studies opened up new perspectives. I found an open environment where “intelligence and heart” go hand in hand and where the knowledge acquired helps the students to develop a critical mind... quite a challenge for me, especially after the rigid training I received in the Focolare.

At the end of 2011, I handed my notes to Father Jean-Marie Hennaux SJ – a theologian, moralist, Mariologist and professor at the I.E.T. where I was studying – asking him to read them and tell me his opinion before asking to see Cardinal Carlo Maria Martini in Gallarate<sup>1</sup>.

In these pages (written in French) I trace the main events of my life leading up my decision to leave the Focolare in 2008. I won't go into personal details about myself, as these are the object of a biographical novel being written at the moment.

In 2007-2008 I wrote to my Centre and to various other Centres, approaching a few focolarini, both male and female, with whom Chiara Lubich was personally acquainted, but then I realised that since they were part of these structures, they could not be expected to have a “clear sight”.

It is only by taking a step back that you can actually understand what Olivier Le Gendre's “Cardinal” explains, wisely and unhesitatingly, in the best-selling book “Confession d'un Cardinal (A Cardinal's confession)”, translated in Italian with the title “Orgoglio e pregiudizio in Vaticano (Pride and Prejudice in the Vatican)”, published by PIEMME:

“... Some of these movements make a lot of demands on their members: obedience, helpfulness, exclusivity, a hefty financial contribution, great respect for both founders and leaders.

Faced with such demands, there are two possible reactions. The first is to wonder at the generosity that inspires these Christians: they want to live a committed faith and they spare no effort to do so.

The second raises the question of whether those demands might be exaggerated, whether they only benefit the leaders of the movements, whether they are too urgent, whether they are imposed by means of abnormal and excessive psychological pressure.”

(end of quotation)

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<sup>1</sup> I met Cardinal Martini twice – on 7 January 2012 and on 11 March 2012 – always at 5pm in Gallarate. Written records of our talks have been handed to the Jesuits in Brussels, to Don Damiano Modena (his Assistant) and sent by DHL to Pope Francis on 19 March 2013, the day he settled in Saint Martha's House – Vatican City.

On page 258 he writes:

“Four major movements have been accused of sectarianism: the Focolare Movement, the Neocatechumenal Way, Opus Dei, the Legion of Christ. It is dangerous to pass over such allegations in silence. It would be more appropriate to investigate and come to clear conclusions.” (end of quotation)

Pages 254-276 focus on sectarian drifts, with comments by the Author.

I have witnessed that in the Focolare Movement, and I'm not the only one who has.

In a private meeting on 11 March 2012, Cardinal Martini simply told me: “The Pope should know about this, but you will never get to the Pope, because all Movements are represented in the Vatican Secretariat as well as “in the Pope’s family”.”

This is the reason why I dared to write directly to Pope Francis to inform him soon after his election.

I do rely on the wisdom of the Jesuits, who, by analysing the numerous cases, will be able to inform the Pope about what is happening.

It is my belief that Cardinals and Bishops – with all due respect – are not always able to see clearly, because the information they receive is biased and distorted, in an attempt to portray whatever concerns the Movements as the indisputable emanation of the Second Vatican Council.

But let's get back to my own experience.

At the end of December 2011, I was told of the disappearance on 20 December 2011 of an internal focolarina, Marisa Baù. Her family and true friends were in agony as they looked for her high and low in vain.

On 30 January 2012, she was found hanged in a barn in the Canton of Fribourg, in Switzerland.

The findings of the investigation pointed to one direction: SUICIDE.

She committed suicide one kilometre from the Centre of Montet, where she had lived for 15 years, working full time for the Focolare Movement.

At the time I was reading the book “Il divino e il divano (The divine and the divan)”, just published in Italian by PIEMME and written by Macha Chmakoff, a psychologist and psychoanalyst who studied theology. She explains in detail what she calls “the pitfalls of faith”.

Marisa Baù's suicide by hanging at 48 was a terrible shock for me and also for Cardinal Martini when I informed him.

But I believe that this shock was not quite as strong and terrible for the Centre of the Movement, whose “leaders” are still being “programmed” according to dictates that, in my opinion, are not evangelical.

Five years after the death of Chiara Lubich (14 March 2008 - 2013), the focolarini are sure to ask the Catholic Church to begin her beatification process, which also means asking the Catholic Church to sanctify all her “Works”.

Now I would like to draw your attention to what I’ve read in the letter of resignation sent to the Centre of the Work of Mary/Focolare Movement by a former focolarina who held a position of responsibility.

I can echo these words without the slightest hesitation:

“...The fact that the Centre is drifting into a form of absolutism often upsets many people who are more “aware” or more attentive to the voice of God in them, and eventually leads to “*fear*”:

*fear* of voicing your thoughts, thus being condemned to “silence”;

*fear* of being “sent” who knows where or being “punished” – as they say – for “daring to speak”;

*fear* of taking risks and suffering the consequences of your actions;

*fear* of opening yourself and communicating, because everything is reduced to the immobility of a concept;

*fear* of being considered “different” from the others;

*fear* of others who might want to report to the high circles the questions that you have in relation to the Work;

*fear* of not being “forgiven” by your superiors, by the others;

*fear* of having to suffer for years the condemning silence of your elder brother;

*fear* of not being up to scratch or not being able to perform the so-called “God’s will”, feeling that the time is not yet ripe or that you don’t have the necessary strength to carry it out as the Centre demands... as a consequence of all this you have no choice but to submit and “conform” yourself to a specific set of rules or behaviour.

Unfortunately, this fuels doubts about your brothers, mistrust, intense loneliness... hardly a family!

What about the simple life of Christ in and among us?

What about the fact that “we have believed in Love”?

The urge to save the Work of God grows stronger and stronger, to the detriment of the individual, who is sometimes reduced to a nameless puppet that you can just move from one place to another with little consideration for essential aspects, such as his/her health!

...What’s the use of having such a “great” Work if this means losing our “souls”? If this means losing touch with the most important things: being there for the people, among the people, with the people, giving them the “greatest” thing in the world today: God!”

(end of quotation)

Without wanting to discredit anyone, not even Chiara Lubich, whose true holiness only God knows, I would like to draw attention to what happens in these small communities. The rules they obey are known as “the score written in heaven” (see Giulia Folonari’s book published by Città Nuova), that Chiara Lubich played on earth. However, I believe that they actually prevent people from developing harmoniously in all aspects of human existence. This is my personal experience, echoed by others in face-to-face conversations as well as in writing.

As Cardinal Martini writes in his last book “Il Vescovo (The Bishop)”, published by Rosenberg & Sellier , at point “9. Contacts with the religious”:

... after referring to the document of the Congregation for Religious dealing with the complex and difficult issue of the “mutual relations between bishops and religious”, he makes a couple of remarks on the whole issue.

He writes: “Firstly, I would say that the problem lies mainly in the relations with male orders and congregations, who have the men and the means to carry out pastoral programmes which could turn out to be in contrast or in competition with the bishop’s.

The same applies to the movements, the only difference being that religious are often more obedient, while the movements are less likely to establish special relations with the bishop.

The movements, which I’m going to mention only in passing, are mostly false names given to groups ruled by a very demanding and almost despotic authority.

It would take too long here to cover a subject which developed greatly in the eighties and nineties, but the bishop will certainly need to have an idea of how these groups work in order to be able to include them in the pastoral programme of the diocese.”.

(end of quotation)

When I talked very openly about the Focolare with Cardinal Martini, he understood very well what was at stake and said: “I didn’t know the Focolare Movement was so strict, a bit like Opus Dei.”

...and I replied: “Your Eminence, all this is too well hidden to be widely known, and we, the focolarini, were taught to always smile and conceal our pain. No focolarina would ever dream of telling her bishop that there is something wrong in the Focolare. Chiara always wanted to make a good impression with the hierarchy.”

Cardinal Martini told me that he meant to write to the Pope about the movements. Not alone, though, but together with other bishops with whom he would discuss the topic in Switzerland in April 2012. I was told he did go to Switzerland, but was unable to do anything about it, because of more urgent ecclesiastical matters and poor health.

Now I have a Hope: that the Church, thanks to Pope Francis’ testimony in words and actions, will have the necessary STRENGTH to step in and help to clarify the situation.

It was Cardinal Martini’s fervent wish, as well as many others’.

This is my purpose:

1. To inform the Pope in case he doesn’t know about it.
2. To circulate a short text written in collaboration with other former members on “Regulations of the focolarine section: their application in the daily life of the Focolare”.
3. With my contribution to this conference I hope to raise awareness among bishops and other clergy, present or not, so that they will open to dialogue and collaborate on an external audit (I put emphasis on the word EXTERNAL). It would be useless to call in expert theologians, philosophers, or bishops and cardinals who – with all due respect for each of them – although certainly competent, are first

and foremost supporters, adherents or even internal members of the Focolare Movement and thus “moulded in the melting pot of Focolare unity”.

The Work of Mary/Focolare movement is in dire need of an external audit, concerning not only its structures, but also the origins of the spirituality of unity and of Jesus Forsaken, deeply rooted in the insights of Chiara Lubich during “Paradise 1949”. There are Chiara’s works, articles written by her close collaborators and now also a book by internal members: “The Pact of 1949 in the experience of Chiara Lubich”, published by Città Nuova.

The Church has not yet read or studied them in their entirety, nor delved into all the original texts concerning that period, called mystical. It is quite possible that we are all going to discover their theological beauty, but first they need to stand up to the scrutiny of “non-compliant” experts, without forgetting to listen to the witness accounts of former members.

We will then be able to gain better understanding of whether the structures created as a consequence of that experience are truly inspired and can actually help both men and women, focolarini and focolarine, to grow and develop their personalities through a positive educational model, inspired by freedom.

Thank you very much for your attention!