

REINVENTING PEACE

Speech by Maria Voce (Emmaus) at UNESCO, Paris, 15th November 2016

(Read by Catherine Belzung)

Your Excellencies the Ambassadors here present,
Honourable Madame Ann-Belinda Preis;
Your Excellency Archbishop Francesco Follo, Permanent Observer of the Holy See to UNESCO;
Dignitaries;
Friends gathered here at UNESCO and all those following this event through *Social-Media*

We are here today on the 20th anniversary of the conferral of the Prize for Peace Education on Chiara Lubich. It is of course a time for remembering, but above all an opportunity to review and make our own her approach to education for peace and therefore to peace building. It is surely not pure coincidence that we are gathered here to speak of peace only two days after commemorating the first anniversary of the terrible terrorist attacks in Paris. The painful and moving remembrance of those events urges us to work with greater determination and creativity to find new paths to peace.

Peace is certainly a gift of God but it is also the outcome of choices people make and therefore something each of us can contribute to daily in our own small way. This is because, as we read in the Preamble to the UNESCO Constitution of 1945, “since wars begin in the minds of human beings, it is in the minds of human beings that the defences of peace must be constructed”.

This is why it is important to thank you for all that UNESCO is doing on a daily basis for peace and in order to build – through education, knowledge and culture – a more fraternal and united world.

Every day we are presented with images of a world torn by conflicts of all kinds; we see walls being built, migrants and refugees fleeing from poverty and war; and contrasting forms of political self-interest fail to consider the human consequences of their actions.

In order to convey the starkness and seriousness of the situation in which we are living, Pope Francis has often used the term “piecemeal third world

war” to highlight the fragmentation and at the same time the globalisation of conflicts. A multiplication of wars, terrorist attacks, ethnic and religious persecutions, and abuses of power have characterised recent years more and more, causing great suffering in many parts of the world.

This type of violence is unconventional, ubiquitous and pervasive; it is hard to defeat with the tools used up to now. These conflicts can only be ended through collective commitment, not only on the part of the international community but by the community of all people in the world. No one can consider themselves excluded from this process. It must go through our streets, into our workplaces, our educational establishments, into sports centres and places of entertainment, communication and worship.

The response to the “piecemeal world war” is to build world peace “one piece at a time”, through small steps, and concrete gestures. Everyone has a role to play. Everyone is responsible.

Here, of course, international organisations are in the front line with their untiring efforts to promote peace. The ongoing dialogue within these organisations and the agreements reached through perseverance, including the work of this prestigious institution, must be recognised as important signs of a global aspiration to peace and unity.

However, many others are involved: communities and associations of all kinds; movements inspired by religious or lay values, which implicitly or explicitly bring a new logic. They break with the logic founded on power-seeking and unilateral interests, the desire for control and dominion and even the logic of violence. Instead they adopt a different approach, putting forward and practising radical change wherever they are, the only type of change that can address today’s challenges, whether local or global, the only change that can lay the foundations for peace today and in future.

This is the experience of the Movement I represent!

Our story began in the city of Trent during the air raids which the city continually suffered [during the Second World War]. It was the very time when everything was crumbling, when all that was held dear in terms of

possessions and ideals was either being destroyed or could not be attained. It was a time when nations fought one another to the point of endless killing, in a senseless and tragic war; when conflicts and tensions of all kinds emerged in society, whether personal, in the family, among classes or ideologies. In the midst of all this, in the heart of Chiara Lubich, a young woman from Trent, there took root and burst forth an Ideal that cannot pass away, that no bomb could destroy. This Ideal was something great and immense, which bit by bit revealed itself – not without difficulties and incomprehension – to be like balm, like an effective medicine to heal deep wounds and mend painful fractures.

Chiara Lubich and her first companions did not flee from the bombings and the bombed city. As they helped the poor and brought love to all, they became bearers of hope. All they did had a much greater impact than was visible at the time. Into the destructive cycle of war they injected a new flow of life that regenerated the social fabric and became a source of peace.

That work still bears fruit in peace today. One example is the dialogue which the Focolare has been fostering for many years within the Christian world.

Another example is the dialogue the Movement has developed with Jews, Buddhists, Muslims, Hindus and members of Traditional Religions; and also with people who do not have religious beliefs. This dialogue is founded on receptivity to people, on a deep understanding of their choices and ideas, appreciating all that is beautiful and positive, all that we might hold in common and that can create bonds among people and among religious groups.

This dialogue has been fruitful, and in countries where intercultural encounter and interreligious dialogue are difficult, it has led to the formation of communities which live the charism of unity in a brotherly fashion. They experience not only in mutual respect but the joyful and for many surprising discovery of the value of their own identity, in the untroubled awareness of cultural and religious difference.

What urged us and continually urges us to bet on peace and progress along the path of dialogue is the example of Jesus. We want to be ready to love our neighbour to the point of sacrificing ourselves, as He did when he died on the cross for the whole of humankind. In fact, commitment to peace requires suitable means to reach the goal. When Chiara Lubich spoke at the United Nations in 1997 she stated this clearly: “Dedicating one’s life to the cause of peace is a commitment not to be taken lightly! It calls for courage, knowing how to suffer. ... Certainly, if more people accepted suffering out of love, the suffering that love requires, it would become the most powerful means of giving humanity its highest dignity; a dignity which lies not in being a collection of peoples living side by side and frequently in conflict with one another, but rather in being one single people, enriched by one another’s diversity and safeguarding each one’s identity»¹.

Another strong point in Chiara Lubich’s message about peace, is fraternity. She spoke about it from the earliest days of her life and spiritual journey, but as time went by the concept of fraternity held an ever more significant place in her thought.

Fraternity was put forward by her in the most varied spheres of life and fields of knowledge as a real and genuine category. She saw it as a new paradigm, underpinning values and action that can direct our communities towards unity and peace.

When speaking to Italian politicians in Rome on the 14th of December 2,000, Chiara Lubich affirmed:

Fraternity ... re-builds the fabric of society and enables liberty and equality to acquire new meaning, with all their consequences in terms of political approaches and choices. Fraternity makes it possible to reconcile and value human experiences which would otherwise risk developing into insoluble conflicts... It strengthens awareness of the importance of

1 C. Lubich, Speech at the Symposium *Towards the unity of Nations and the unity of peoples* organised by WCRP at the United Nations Headquarters in New York in 1997.

international organizations and processes that seek to overcome barriers and achieve important steps towards the unity of the human family. »².

On this basis, Chiara Lubich's work for peace was in tune with the thought of key figures in the great religions, leaders in political and cultural life, and ordinary citizens, giving rise to a fruitful dialogue which is still relevant today. In a message written in 2003 we read:

Fraternity can give rise to projects and actions in the complex political, economic, cultural and social fabric of our world. Fraternity brings peoples out of their isolation and can offer the opportunity for development to those still excluded from it. It shows us how to resolve differences peacefully and relegates war to history books. Fraternity in action allows us to dream and even to hope for some kind of communion of goods between rich countries and poor countries, given that the scandalous economic inequality in today's world is one of the main causes of terrorism. The deep need for peace expressed by humanity today shows that living as brothers and sisters is not only a value, not only a method, but is a global paradigm for political development».³

Chiara Lubich's message of love and fraternity is profoundly connected with the constant search for unity. It is one message, but linked together in a virtuous circle: [what matters is] to live and put mutual love into practice; mutual love makes unity possible; unity gives rise to peace, true peace.

When she met young people from a Buddhist Movement, the Rissho Kosei Kai in Tokyo on the 24th November 1985, she answered a question put by one of them saying:

“Peace is an effect of unity.

When there is unity between God and us we have inner peace. When there is unity among brothers and sisters there is peace among them. When there is unity among peoples there is peace in the world.

² C. Lubich, *Essential Writings*, New City, London, 2007, p. 263.

³ Message to Prof. Benjamin Barber for the *Interdependence Day*, Philadelphia, 10th November 2003.

Chiara Lubich always emphasised that unity could be lived by everyone, yes, everyone, because unity, the cause of peace, is:

«Love which beats in the depths of every human heart. For the followers of Christ this might mean ... *agape* which is a sharing in the very love that lives in God: a love which is strong and can even love those who do not return our love, but who attack us, like enemies; love that can forgive... For those who follow other religious faiths it is a love that is benevolence; for those who do not have religious beliefs, it can mean philanthropy, solidarity, non-violence”.

Reinventing peace

On these foundations it is possible to rethink peace, indeed to reinvent it. Reinventing peace means first of all being fully committed to dialogue, taking dialogue seriously, not only as a method but as a value in itself. Dialogue is authentic if it is ongoing, promoting and building a culture of dialogue. Dialogue means having profound interest in the other person; it is made up of mutual knowledge and esteem; it requires sincere respect for diversity, valuing pluralism. Dialogue is a strategy, not a tactic; it is a vision for the long term and does not limit itself to immediate objectives. True dialogue builds up solid and lasting relationships; it invests in the future without losing sight of present concerns. Dialogue triggers structural processes of understanding and consensus, which are vital if we wish to pass from merely living alongside one another to mutual acknowledgement and the discovery of a shared identity.

Reinventing peace means engaging in projects that are not conditioned by short term or partial interests. It means engaging in courageous and effective projects which have the common good and the shared goods of the entire human family as their guiding star.

Reinventing peace means breaking down the walls of indifference and acting responsibly to reduce inequality through practical projects, specific policies and ethical choices which go towards achieving genuine social

justice. It means breaking with the logic of increasing and unlimited profit; it means stopping the increase in military spending and the international arms trade; it means re-thinking the economic policies of states and of international financial and commercial institutions.

Reinventing peace means promoting a culture of legality at every level to counteract corruption and tax evasion and the illegal use of public goods, through positive action.

Reinventing peace means caring for creation and fostering respect for our shared home within us and around us.

Reinventing peace means loving our enemies. To love our enemy is something new, brought by the life of Jesus. In the gospel message we are even asked to go further and delete the category of enemy, following the example of God who makes his sun rise and sends rain on the good and on the evil (cf. Mt 5, 45) and who asks something that might be considered inconceivable: “Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you”. (Lk 6: 27).

To love our enemies means progressive and balanced global disarmament, not so as to fall into anarchy and chaos, but in order to invent ways and means of resolving conflicts that are more in harmony with the dignity of people and nations; and so move on to the practice of shared disarmed security founded on full awareness of a shared destiny.

Reinventing peace means forgiveness. Forgiveness is not the opposite of international justice but makes it possible for relationships to start again on a different footing.

Pope John Paul II spoke strongly about forgiveness as the pathway to peace on the 1st January 2002:

“Society too is absolutely in need of forgiveness. Families, groups, societies, States and the international community itself need forgiveness in order to

renew ties that have been sundered, go beyond sterile situations of mutual condemnation and overcome the temptation to discriminate against others without appeal. The ability to forgive lies at the very basis of the idea of a future society marked by justice and solidarity. By contrast, the failure to forgive, especially when it serves to prolong conflict, is extremely costly in terms of human development. ... Forgiveness is not a proposal that can be immediately understood or easily accepted; in many ways it is a paradoxical message. Forgiveness in fact always involves an apparent short-term loss for a real long-term gain. ... Forgiveness may seem like weakness, but it demands great spiritual strength and moral courage, both in granting it and in accepting it. It may seem in some way to diminish us, but in fact it leads us to a fuller and richer humanity, more radiant with the splendour of the Creator.”

Reinventing peace means engaging fully in reconciliation, learning this difficult art from historic experiences in which it has already been achieved and which have laid the foundations for political rebirth after painful conflicts, as occurred in the commissions for truth, justice and reconciliation in South Africa, Chile, Argentina, El Salvador, Guatemala, Panama, Peru, Ghana, Sierra Leone, Liberia, East Timor and Tunisia.

To end, **Reinventing peace** is truly possible insofar as we change minds and hearts. This is why work is needed in terms of education and culture. We need to invest in knowledge and learning, as this Institution does, especially in view of the new generations, forming young people and adults who will consider war as an unthinkable and unworkable option. We must create places where people can have a true experience of peace, where people of different cultures, experiences, ages and backgrounds can meet one another; places where every type of identity becomes a source of mutual enrichment and where universal fraternity becomes tangible.

A good number of these places have been built by the Focolare Movement. These centres, already established in different parts of the world, are like little beacons appointing out path on which we can be transformed, renewed and enabled to be open to the world and, at the same time,

attentive to the needs, sufferings, wishes, aspirations, and also the joys of others.⁴

Lastly, **reinventing peace** means loving other countries as our own, loving other peoples, ethnicities and cultures as our own.

For Chiara Lubich peace has global, indeed universal dimensions. It starts with individuals and extends to the utmost ends of the earth, encompassing the whole of humankind with its various cultures and identities, its structures, its multiple institutions and many different social, political and economic models. Peace is not a promise; it is a commitment and a choice. It is up to us to make peace flourish on the face of the earth.

The invitation to all of us here and those following this event all over the world, is to be armed with peace, to be bearers of peace, witnesses in every place that peace can be reinvented!

⁴ I refer to the *Little* towns of the Focolare Movement which exist in different parts of the world, (Cf <http://www.focolare.org/all-opera/cittadelle/>).