

MAKING OURSELVES ONE

In the Thought and Spirituality of Chiara Lubich

Toufic Makhoul

I have become all things to all people. (1 Corinthians 9:22)

THE TOPIC THAT I WISH TO ADDRESS is dear to me, very close to my heart, not only because I have known the spirituality of the Focolare Movement¹ since I was a teenager, but also and mostly because I believe that the Holy Spirit inspired Chiara Lubich, the founder of the movement, to highlight and illuminate the meaning of these words of St Paul. She spoke of what she referred to as ‘the art of loving’, and one of the characteristics of love as she presents it is *making ourselves one*.

What, in essence, is making ourselves one? Is it a way of entering an environment without being noticed? Is it a covert, shy form of inculturation? Is it a way of looking, dressing and behaving like other people, especially when we find ourselves in a foreign country, in order to be accepted without ruffling too many feathers—that is, a simple accommodation? Is it a practice aiming at gaining new converts to the Roman Catholic faith or to a way of life?

Making ourselves one could be all of the above, and none of them at the same time. In fact, it is very easy to miss the whole point. Based on my own experience in the various places where I have lived or which I have visited because of my involvement with the Focolare Movement (most Middle Eastern countries and much of Western Europe as well as North America and China), making ourselves one is much more than all of the above. It is a conscious effort, in the first place, to try to understand how other people with whom we are

¹ For in-depth information on Chiara Lubich and the Focolare Movement, visit www.focolare.org.

dealing—be it on a professional, personal or apostolic level—view the world and their relationship with it. It is an attempt to understand other people's culture. Secondly, it is the effort to try to become one with those people by adopting—as much as we can—their cultural expressions (except for sins) in order to establish a healthy and respectful dialogue, while not forgetting or giving up our own values and principles as disciples of Christ.

This might not seem very different from inculturation of the kind already promoted by the Roman Catholic Church. But the motivations behind the effort to make ourselves one may be quite different. The main issue, I believe, is understanding that the goal is to create a deep relationship of unity with the person or group we encounter. We aim to feel what other people feel, to take part in the same activities, to understand what they experience, and to learn their language and their ways of doing things, so as to establish a dialogue of life. Once there is a relationship of trust, based on a love that has no strings attached, then a real, respectful dialogue can start. This dialogue comes from the sharing of life experiences, thoughts, actions and ideals, and is aimed at reaching unity with all sorts of people—everyday people whom you might meet on a bus, in the supermarket, on the street or at work. It is not an intellectual interchange confined to an élite.

However, making ourselves one does not mean behaving like a chameleon which changes its colours according to the environment in which it finds itself. Jesus was not shy about showing his true colours, and neither should his disciples be. Raymond E. Brown, in his famous *Introduction to the New Testament*, put it very well: 'There is a great difference between being all things to all in order to please all, and being all things to all in order to save as many as possible'.²

At this point, let us turn to the particular inspiration of Chiara Lubich. She writes:

When someone weeps, we must weep too. And if someone laughs, we too rejoice. Thus the cross is divided and borne by many shoulders, and joy is multiplied and shared by many hearts Making ourselves one with our neighbour is a way, the way *par excellence*, to *make ourselves one* with God. Because when we love in this way, the first two and most important commandments are

² Raymond E. Brown, *Introduction to the New Testament* (New York: Doubleday, 1997), 438.

fused into one ... [*Let us make*] *ourselves one* with our neighbour for love of Jesus, with the love of Jesus, so that our neighbour, sweetly wounded by the love of God in us, will want to *make himself or herself one* with us, in a mutual exchange of help, of ideals, of projects, of affections. Do this to the point of establishing between the two of [you] those essential elements so that the Lord can say, 'Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them' (Matthew 18:20).³

A Brief Trip into History

I am an admirer of the Christian missionaries who, centuries ago, left their countries and went to far-away lands, in times when there were no modern communications, conveniences or means of transport. I am thinking, among others, of the Jesuit Matteo Ricci, who endeavoured to inculturate the Chinese in the late sixteenth century—learning the language, dressing in the local way, and trying to understand the mores and customs of the Chinese society of his time, in order to bring to it, in an intelligent and adequate manner, the message of the gospel.

Such missionaries faced great hardship, to the point of being rejected and seeing the apparent total failure of their work. The Canadian martyrs, Jean de Brébeuf⁴ and companions, are another great example of what such missionary work entailed. Life is not easy, not even for the brightest disciples of Christ, but this does not mean that we can admit defeat.



Matteo Ricci

³ Chiara Lubich, *Spiritual Writings* (New York: New City Press), 265.

⁴ Between 1626 and 1649 Brébeuf and his companions lived with the Huron people near Lake Huron, Ontario, learning their customs and language. Among other things, he wrote an interesting list of instructions for Jesuit missionaries destined to work among the Hurons, in essence instructing them how to make themselves one with the Native Americans. See <http://www.wyandot.org/brebeuf.htm>.

An Experience

Making ourselves one aims at building relationship and working towards unity at all levels of society, starting from the grass roots.

A friend of mine moved to Australia about 25 years ago with his young family, from the Middle East to Tasmania. Besides the enormous geographical distance, there were, unsurprisingly, considerable cultural differences in mentality and in how people related to one another. Since they had moved for the purposes of the Focolare Movement, in order to promote its spirituality and lifestyle in that far-away place, at the beginning my friends tried to relate to their new neighbours and acquaintances in the way they were used to, that is, by setting up meetings to talk about the gospel and its message, how to live it out and so on. While everything was being done in good faith, the results proved to be quite meagre as few were willing to participate in such meetings.

Time passed and my friends realised that something else needed to be done if they were to become involved in their new environment. And so one day, they came up with the idea of holding barbecues instead of formal meetings. The idea was to have a good time together and, with the help of food, drink and good cheer, the ice was broken and real relationships were born. Once the relationships were in place, a dialogue based on shared life experiences came about in a friendly, natural way. Making ourselves one, however, is not always as easy as it seems.

Some More Experiences

During my formation in the Focolare Movement, I spent two years living in a small town called Loppiano in Italy, located in the gentle, rolling hills of Tuscany, not too far from Florence. One of the most interesting facts about this little town is its internationality. I was one of a group of sixty young men who came from about thirty different countries. We were there to experience the building of unity as part of our formation.

It is not hard to illustrate the cultural differences between a southern Italian and a Dutchman, the gulf between an outspoken Argentinian and a reserved Chinese. Having lived with a Dutchman myself, I soon realised that we might as well have come from two different planets. I swept the floor in one direction and he swept it the

other way. The Argentinian would make endless existential speeches at dinnertime, while my reserved Chinese friend would just look at the salt and pepper shakers, without asking for them, hoping that someone would notice that he needed them.

How then would it be possible to build unity in such a diverse environment?

My experience tells me that this was possible only because the people there—sooner or later—realised that, in order to achieve their goal, they needed to start giving up some of their own ways of doing things, of expressing themselves and so on, in order for other people to express themselves in the way they wanted. In other words, all the effort was about making ourselves one with another person, who was usually quite different from us. There were many comical instances, but we ended up, the Dutchman and I, learning how to work together to keep our house clean, without crossing the paths of our brooms. The Chinese fellow slowly learned to ask for things, and to express his ideas without worrying too much about losing face, while the Argentinian made an effort to temper his oratory.

Making ourselves one is an experience of *kenosis*, of emptying oneself—at least for a few moments—in order to allow the other to become part of us,⁵ thus being enriched by the other. When I first arrived in Canada, many years ago, I, along with my Focolare friends, was very keen to organize meetings and activities the way we had learnt in Europe, with long spiritual or intellectual talks, sometimes with little clear connection to everyday life.

After a while, we began to realise that we were living in a North American society, which is more pragmatic than European ones. In order to try to *make ourselves one* with the Canadian environment, we had to shorten our talks, make them more to the point and illustrate them with more facts and stories of life experiences. We had to present our spirituality and way of life in a culturally relevant manner. The rationale behind this effort of making ourselves one was love, a love that is ready to give up ideas, and even life itself, for our friends (John 15:13).

Let me share an anecdote. A friend of mine, who was born and raised in a Mediterranean culture (let's call him Sammy), was (and still is) accustomed to the Mediterranean body language when it comes to

⁵ *Novo millennio ineunte*, n.43.

greeting friends—hugging and kissing both men and women. For him, any relationship that would not allow for such demonstrations of affection would just be cold and distant, a relationship of strangers.

It just so happened that my friend ended up in a North American city with a large Chinese population. Given the nature of his work, Sammy came in contact with many Chinese people and soon befriended them. However, given his lack of experience, he continued to use the body language with which he had grown up with his new friends, hugging and kissing them as he would his Mediterranean friends, only to end up finding himself in embarrassing situations.

Sammy was confused and did not know what to do. One day, talking about this with some of his friends, he understood that making himself one with his new Chinese friends required a step of ‘deculturation’; that is, he needed to put his own culture aside in order to enter the world of the person he was facing. He needed to give up his way of greeting people, in order to encounter them in the way they wanted, not in his own way. He realised that this was an experience of death to himself, quickly followed by resurrection and life.

This act of setting aside one’s culture can be extended to all aspects of everyday life, from establishing a respectful dialogue to understanding a people’s traditions and social mores, or their way of dressing, or of praying, so as to become as much as possible one of them and one with them. We should not forget that making ourselves one, if properly

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lived over a period of time, becomes a two-way experience, as both people or groups living this experience end up influencing each other, or, to put it better, shaping each other on a personal and cultural level. In making ourselves one a potential for love is put in motion, to be expressed by the two parties—a potential for love that finds its origin in the presence of the universal Logos. As St Justin wrote, ‘In all persons a seed of the Logos may be found, for the Logos-sower (*spermatikos logos*) sows in all’.⁶

Making ourselves one is an experience of dying to oneself out of love. A beautiful passage from John Paul II’s 1990 encyclical *Redemptoris missio* comes to my mind:

⁶ Quoted in Jacques Dupuis, *Christianity and the Religions: From Confrontation to Dialogue* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2001), 149.

... love has been and remains the driving force of mission, and is also the sole criterion for judging what is to be done or not done, changed or not changed. It is the principle that must direct every action, and the end to which that action must be directed. When we act with a view to charity, or are inspired by charity, nothing is unseemly and everything is good.⁷

Making Ourselves One in Interreligious Dialogue

We can apply this way of relating to others to interreligious as well as interpersonal dialogue. Let us quote Chiara Lubich again:

It has been written: 'To know the religion of another ... involves getting inside the skin of the other ... seeing the world in some sense as the other sees it ... getting inside the other's sense of being a Hindu, Muslim, Jew, Buddhist, or whatever'. This is not something simple. It demands that we empty ourselves completely, that we put aside from our minds our ideas, from our hearts our affections, from our wills everything we would want to do, in order to identify with the other person.⁸

As such, the purpose of interreligious dialogue, of this effort to make ourselves one, is not to convert people to the Christian faith, or to bring them within the fold of a Catholic movement, but to work towards universal brotherhood while witnessing to the message of the gospel.

Potential Limits and Dangers

As we all know, any inspiration, however holy it may be, can go wrong if it is not properly lived. There is one temptation that I saw emerging from time to time as I travelled in the Middle East, Europe, North America and Asia. It consists of trying to use this technique of making oneself one in a superficial and interested manner, in order to win over new members and converts. However, relationships built for this reason usually do not last. We are continuously learning. The Holy Spirit is at work in every person, whether we want it or not.

Another danger I saw is that the continuous effort of making oneself one, of emptying oneself over and over again in a foreign environment, can be very taxing and exhausting, even to the point of causing burn-

⁷ *Redemptoris missio*, n. 60.

⁸ Lubich, *Spiritual Writings*, 372.

out. This can happen if the effort is not continuously counterbalanced by due attention to one's own spiritual life, community life and physical health. It is vital to strike the right balance in one's own life.

At the same time, we need to be aware that not every person is capable of the task of giving witness in a foreign land, as the encyclical *Redemptoris missio* explained it:

This will demand of them not only maturity in their vocation, but also an uncommon readiness to detach themselves from their own homeland, culture and family, and a special ability to adapt to other cultures, with understanding and respect for them.⁹

But we can all try to make ourselves one in our own country, in our workplace, with family members, friends, colleagues and so on. If we live in a multi-ethnic and multicultural city, the chances of meeting people from various cultures and religions are very strong. This is one more way to work towards building unity and universal brotherhood, in a world made ever smaller by modern travel and by the modern media.

Making ourselves one is not a way of living which is reserved to missionaries and consecrated people, or to the learned: it is available to every single person. It could also be a very powerful evangelization tool, a tool that needs to be used with the heart, as *Redemptio missio* puts so well:

The missionary is urged on by zeal for souls, a zeal inspired by Christ's own charity, which takes the form of concern, tenderness, compassion, openness, availability and interest in people's problems. Jesus' love is very deep: he who 'knew what was in man' (John 2:25) loved everyone by offering them redemption and suffered when it was rejected The missionary is a person of charity. In order to proclaim to all his brothers and sisters that they are loved by God and are capable of loving, he must show love towards all, giving his life for his neighbour. The missionary is the 'universal brother', bearing in himself the Church's spirit, her openness to and interest in all peoples and individuals, especially the least and poorest of his brethren. As such, he overcomes barriers and divisions of race, caste or ideology. He is a sign of God's love in the world—a love without exclusion or partiality.¹⁰

⁹ *Redemptoris missio*, n. 67.

¹⁰ *Redemptoris missio*, n. 89.



Chiara Lubich

The Long View

Let us imagine what it would be like if Christians were able to live in this way, making ourselves one, among the different Christian Churches and with our brothers and sisters of different religions or other convictions. Our world would be quite a different place.

I shall conclude with some of Chiara Lubich's thoughts:

[We must try] to make ourselves one ... until ... the presence of Jesus is guaranteed, so that we walk through life, always, as a little Church on the move—Church whether we are at home, at school, in a garage or in Parliament, talking, like the disciples of Emmaus, with that Third among us, who gives divine value to all our actions *Making ourselves one*: it is the attitude that guided the apostle Paul, who wrote that he made himself a Jew with the Jews, a Greek with the Greeks, all things to all (1 Corinthians 9:19–22). It is very important that we follow his example so that we can establish a sincere, friendly dialogue with everyone. Yes, dialogue, a word especially suited to our times. Dialogue means that people meet together and even though they have different ideas, they speak

with serenity and sincere love towards the other person in an effort to find some kind of agreement that can clarify misunderstandings, calm disputes, resolve conflicts, and even at times eliminate hatred. This dialogue, especially among the faithful of different religions, today is more indispensable than ever if we want to avoid the great evils threatening our societies.¹¹

Toufic Makhoul was born in Egypt and grew up in Lebanon, where he completed his education, including an MBA. He then spent two-and-a-half years in Italy, at a formation centre of the Focolare Movement, before moving to Canada, where he undertook postgraduate study. He has been involved with the Focolare Movement since he was nineteen years old, and lives in a lay Focolare community.

¹¹ Lubich, *Spiritual Writings*, 340.