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The Practice and Meaning of Communitarian Spirituality in the Focolare Movement

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LOYOLA UNIVERSITY CHICAGO

THE PRACTICE AND MEANING OF COMMUNITARIAN SPIRITUALITY IN
THE FOCOLARE MOVEMENT

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF THE GRADUATE SCHOOL
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY
PROGRAM IN SOCIOLOGY

BY

NORI HENK

CHICAGO, IL

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For my parents, Greg and Robyn Henk.

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to explore how individuals come to embrace the Focolare Movement (FM) spirituality as radical, making the spirituality meaningful and plausible for social change through a communitarian lifestyle that affects their everyday life. Within the sociological tradition of studying religion and social movements, this study addresses how religiously-motivated, non-elite individuals can be collectively recruited and mobilized into life-long agents of change. My study is based on seventy-five interviews and fieldwork at three sites in Chicago, New York and Los Angeles.

In the dissertation, I found that: 1. Members who experienced spiritual discontent as Catholic laymembers found agency and *real Christianity* in the FM; 2. Due to changes made in Vatican II, the FM reflected the innovative structure found in ecclesial movements to enact change from the ground up; 3. The communitarian model found in the FM both served the organizational interests to stabilize and carry out movement goals of unity, and the individual's interest in establishing a meaningful identity within the movement; 4. The ritualization of sharing experiences reflected the extensive involvement the movement took in their daily lives and explained for the strengthening and sustainability of the movement and; 5. Experiences of suffering were not just explained as moments to endure, but a point of transformation to enact and sustain social change. In conclusion, the FM is an example of how religious social movements are

responsive to social change, uniquely positioned to ideologically and organizationally carry out social change.

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

In 2007, three years into studying the Focolare Movement, I was invited to attend a book launch event. Chiara's book, *Chiara's Essential Writings*, had been newly translated into English. Guest panelists included the translator of the book (also a Catholic theologian), a professor of Catholic theology, a Baha'i representative, and an Eastern Orthodox priest. Before the panelists responded to the book, the Focolarini¹ showed a video of an interview with Chiara. In the video, Chiara shared how the movement began in 1943 in Trent, Italy. While she was explaining, a montage of pictures showed a young Chiara and the destruction of WWII followed by pictures of Chiara and her companions. Chiara explained how she and her companions faced a war-torn reality—"that all would crumble, except for God." They saw how God was their ideal for life, and a new light was given to them in the Bible such as, "Give and gifts will be given to you." (Luke 6:38) The key to this new way of living was to love God and bring about unity into the world. They began by working with the poor where they first encountered suffering analogized as Jesus' experience on the cross or Jesus forsaken. Jesus forsaken was the ultimate form of disunity, but through his resurrection, disunity was overcome. Just as Jesus suffered, they too must suffer; but ultimately, suffering would be overcome

¹ The most committed members to the Focolare Movement.

through the practice of love. The video concluded with where the movement is now; a worldwide movement that is attempting to bring unity through interreligious dialogue, economic practices (also known as the economy of sharing), and a communitarian lifestyle.

The panel discussion that followed expanded on key ideas of the movement such as radical love, putting the Bible into practice, living in community with one another, Jesus forsaken, and unity through interreligious dialogue (also known as universal brotherhood). During the Q and A time at the end of the event, a most interesting question was posed by the Greek Orthodox priest, “What is new about the Focolare spirituality?” The translator of the book answered, the Focolare “spirituality is new because of how it is practiced in the world, how it involves the entire church, and the focus on Jesus forsaken.”

Although the data I collected reflects, typifies, and expands upon the answer given by the translator of the book, I was not entirely convinced that the Focolare spirituality was new or radical. I initially and falsely interpreted the spirituality as a secretive one because I could never get a clear answer or definition as to what the spirituality of unity was. In actuality, the spirituality was just open-ended, grounded in the practice of unity, and subjectively understood. Still, I think that viewing the spirituality as innovative or not is missing the point; what is interesting about the Focolare Movement (FM) is that members believe that the spirituality is new and radical. Durkheim (2001: 26-7) understood the nature and function of religion as a full exploration into the “world of mystery, the unknowable, the incomprehensible,” an

observation he makes that specifically describes Christianity. The mystery for believers is that God breaks into the natural world in the form of a moral order. Similarly, the mystification dimension of religion can be transformed into a religious social movement as a motivation factor to explain how people attempt and believe in the impossible and how they understand their purpose in the movement as a truly extraordinary goal—bringing unity into the world.

This dissertation, therefore, is not a defense of the newness of the spirituality nor is it empirical proof that they are bringing unity into the world; rather, this is a study of how members of the FM come to believe that the spirituality is radical—radical enough to bring unity into the world. Specifically, FM members come to believe that the spirituality is new and radical through the vehicle of a religious and communitarian social movement. A religious social movement has its own particular mechanisms that expose a moral necessity for change that is different than a congregation, religious order, religious sect, or parachurch organization. As a communitarian social movement, the organization of the movement tends to focus on achieving unity in the everyday and through interpersonal relationships.

From the outset, members of the Focolare Movement, a Roman Catholic lay-based social movement, expressed their desire to build a united world. This purpose is evident from their courteous, respectful interactions at local meetings; the unassuming, egoless style that typifies their leadership; and their consciously concrete striving for spiritual holiness and perfection in their daily life. As I became better acquainted with the movement, I gained an appreciation for the movement's ability to develop a high degree

of coherency, calculation, and consistency and for the members' radical devotion to producing a united world through a communitarian lifestyle.

Purpose of Study and Research Questions

The purpose of this study is to explore how individuals come to embrace the FM spirituality as radical, making the spiritually meaningful and plausible for social change through a communitarian lifestyle that affects their everyday life. In particular, I am interested in addressing the following research questions: 1. If a member is defined as one who practices the spirituality of unity, then how and why does one join the Focolare Movement; 2. how is the laity empowered to frame, interpret, and deliver institutional change-oriented/ innovative projects (in this case the spirituality of unity) in the spirit of Vatican II while simultaneously affirming the Church's hierarchical structure; 3. how does the community model serve the interest of a religious social movement such as the FM, and how is the community responsive to the spiritual needs of religious individuals; 4. how and why is the spirituality of unity meaningful to its members in the course of their everyday lives; and 5. What is the FM spirituality response to theodicy, and how does this response relate to the movement goals of the FM? Important work has been done in two main literatures, social movement and sociology of religion, which will analytically frame these questions.

Literature Review: The Intersection between Religion and Social Movements

The worthiness of studying the FM lies in the rich interconnections between religion and social movements, which have yet to be adequately discussed in either the social movement or sociology of religion literature. What makes the FM such a

promising case for understanding a religious and communitarian movement approach to social change is its marriage of religious ideology and social movement features. Sparked by the Christian tradition of lay holiness, Focolare Movement followers are deeply motivated to practice the spirituality of unity. Moreover, what has solidified the movement for sixty-five years are both its movement organization mechanisms and the practice of religious idealism on an interpersonal and international level.

To better understand the FM, especially to explore how individuals come to believe that the FM is radical enough to become committed to its project of unity, it is imperative to make a clear and concise analytical connection between the sociology of religion and social movement literatures. My research design is tailored for studying a religious communitarian social movement that incorporates theories from both literatures, drawing on studies of structural constraints and opportunities with a focus on culture and NRMs, organizational developments found in typology-based theories of Religious Movement Organization (RMO), and incorporates experiential based research found in studies of religious meaning, movement agency and collective identity construction.

Explaining Movement Emergence and Longevity: The Cultural Context and NRMs

In the same way that social movement research might consider the political context as a way of understanding the Civil Rights Movement, the Feminist Movement or the Gay Liberation Movement, I will fully examine the cultural context in which the FM emerged and has endured as a religious social movement. There are two important sub-literatures to merge: (a) new social movement theory that addresses cultural context and (b) studies of the difficulties that new religious movements incur due to cultural

constraints and opportunities. Social movement studies focus on structural conduciveness to explain for the success or failure of social movements with respect to emergence and longevity. A newer development in studying the influence of structural context involves the cultural environment. Although Blumer (1997) was the first to articulate the effect of cultural drifts in society and its relationship to social movements, new social movement theory has drawn attention to more specific functions of cultural context. Cultural shifts exacerbate the disconnect between one's experience and the normative order. According to Swidler (1986), during eras of instability, cultural structures provide systems of value-based protest grounded in available worldviews, ideas, images, and rituals. d'Anjou (1996: 41) argues, "At its core, a social movement is the challenge of dominant and often self-evident cultural and systemic arrangements in society...by or on behalf of groups and individuals who do not have a voice." Sustained struggle with the cultural order is a symbolic action. With respect to the FM, structural conduciveness is important to consider primarily because the FM offers a cultural alternative that is both challenged and influenced by mainstream culture. In their vision for a more perfect world, the FM explicitly acknowledges the cultural spaces that they have established as both a critical response to and a positive development from the diversity and complexity of the modern world.

The cultural context in which the FM emerged as a religious social movement in the United States in the late 1960s and early 1970s was addressed in studies of New Religious Movements (NRMs). NRM studies explain tension between certain religious groups and mainstream social institutions, which, in turn, notes the tenacity and

endurance of NRMs, given their great structural obstacles. Early studies of NRMs in the SM literature reflect similar themes of movement emergence and resilience. Wallis and Bruce (1986) suggest that movement emergence is dependent on the social context of despair, deprivation, and global anxiety (Hexham and Poewe, 1997), factors that directly impact the psychological well-being of individuals. Ellwood (1973: 10) echoes this by stating that NRMs usually emerge in times of “great social stress, frustration or transition.” According to Dawson (2005: 42), structural changes may lead to an increase in NRMs, such as “(1) changes in values, (2) changes in social structure, and (3) changes in the role and character of religious institutions.” Some of this research appears to contain an assumption that NRMs are reactionary in nature and, therefore, have a tendency to retreat from perceived structural threats and marginalization. In other words, NRMs act as a barometer of what society believes it needs but might be lacking (Barker and Warburg, 1998). Later studies have concluded conversely, arguing that periods of social unrest do not necessarily *cause* NRMs to emerge (Miller, 1991). Rather, NRMs emerge opportunistically when the cultural milieu is receptive to their presence (i.e. when religious freedom is granted by the state), leading to attitudes of religious inclusiveness, which is “a product of the normal cultural activity of people in a free society.” (Melton, 1995: 269) The FM is a valuable case study for showing how the complex dynamics of the larger cultural context have shaped the movement and how the FM is attempting to bring social change within the larger cultural context.

Religious Organization Typologies and RMO Theory

Religious communities possess what Patricia Wittberg calls a *deep structure*, a complex inter- and intra-dynamic of cultural influences that shape the group's self-organization and development of its vision of social transformation. Specifically, religious movement organizations are concerned with crafting a structure that produces their vision for social change, which entails a degree of sensitivity to the reception of their goals and values by mainstream social institutions. Moreover, the *movement* side of a religious movement requires organizational functionality, including recruitment and framing of the movement's activity and message. Uniting these theoretical perspectives can provide a more accurate picture of the organizational side of the Focolare Movement. I examine typological concerns raised in the sociology of religion with regard to organization and Religious Movement Organization (RMO) theory to explain the specific organizational points of interest for a religious social movement.

Typologies are heuristic tools for comparing religious communities, noting relative tensions between society, mainstream religion, and the religious group. The tension helps to explain the organization's recruitment, strategies, and goals. Robbins and Bromley (1993) explain that increased tension produces greater religious innovation. I will examine two specific typologies, this-worldly/other-worldly and communalism. This-worldly/other-worldly and reform/revitalization share a common typological feature, helping to explain the variance in the religious communities' differing goals of social change or transformation. Simply, this-worldly organizations tend to desire change in the here and now, whereas other-worldly organizations expect change to happen in the

hereafter (Wallis and Bruce, 1986). Moreover, this-worldly religious groups (such as reformist organizations) tend to be more moderate in their social change goals and are more likely to be co-opted into the larger social structure, while other-worldly religious groups (such as revitalization organizations) tend to be more radical in their attempts to change the world; thus, they frequently experience greater levels of antagonism from external forces (Bromley and Hadden, 1993). The FM clearly fits the category of a *this-worldly* orientation.

Communal typologies, on the other hand, explain the structural differences between religious groups vis-à-vis mainstream society. For example, Kanter (1972: 2) defines communes as:

A commune seeks self-determination, often making its own laws and refusing to obey some of those set by the larger society. It is identifiable as an entity, having both physical and social boundaries, for it has a physical location and a way of distinguishing between members and nonmembers. It intentionally implements a set of values, having been planned in order to bring about the attainment of certain ideals, and its operating decisions are made in terms of those values. Its primary end is an existence that matches the ideals... These ideals give rise to the key communal arrangement, the sharing of resources and finances.

As an example of a communitarian religious group, Zablocki (1971: 55-6) details how the Bruderhof live a communitarian ideal in their everyday life, “What is unusual about the Bruderhof is that its chief sacred object is not a mountain, or a stone, or a book, but the community itself. To keep the community free from contact with profane objects, from without and within, is thus one of the major goals of the Bruderhof.” For the FM, the key to bringing unity into the world is by practicing it in community with others who share the same vision.

RMO theory draws heavily from SMO theory, which makes it extremely useful

for studying the organizational side of a religious movement. RMO theory acknowledges the uniqueness of religion as a variable in meso-level analysis, and it seeks continuity between the organizational aspect of a religious movement and those of any other type of social movement. In doing so, it reveals that RMOs, like SMOs, depend on mobilization strategies and strategic framing to produce their moral vision.

RMO theory tends to emphasize recruitment (or mobilization) processes. To explain recruitment strategies, Mazur and Hammond (1997) extend Stark, Finke and Bainbridge's (1985) theory of religion to the meso-level by theorizing how RMOs respond to structural constraints imposed by mainstream society and by analyzing the relationship between RMOs using the analogy of market competition. The success and failure of RMO recruitment is based on the ability of the organization to justify a degree of social tension at the level of what members are willing to sacrifice and to increase its *market share* with enough robustness to maintain its members' interest. For example, Beckford (1975: 905) explains how the success of the Watchtower Movement's recruitment strategies was buoyed by its disciplinary strictness. The organizational structure is supported by a theocratic ideology, which shapes how the organization is administered with little room for a critical perspective on administrative tasks and no room for criticism of the groups' teachings or structures. This largely stems from the fact that "the Watch Tower ideology is founded on convictions that the organization is infallible, efficient and irreproachable." In contrast, Wallis (1981: 117) explains the decrease in membership of the Children of God movement due to the denominationalization process of the group:

The tendency (is) for religious sects to lose their initial evangelical enthusiasm and opposition to the prevailing social order...The process is normally seen to involve a decline in the requirement of some distinctive standard of merit, knowledge or worth as the criterion of membership, and the employment of largely 'formalized procedures of admission.'

It is precisely the dilemma of institutionalization and formalization that can lead to the decline in recruitment for charismatic-based groups.¹ For example, the Toronto Airport Christian Fellowship underwent routinization processes that effectively eroded the charismatic authority that kept the organization spontaneous and authentic in its experiences (Poloma, 1997).

Although RMO literature does not greatly detail its strategic framing, there is a comparable angle in the form of organizational ideology. For religious communities, ideology shapes moral positions, provides meaning to the community, and supplies a doctrinal rationale for the community's activities. Bromley (1997) describes one of the more radical forms of religious ideology: apocalypticism. Apocalypticism involves a dramatic reorganizing and restructuring process of preparation for a new world and the passing of the old:

Apocalypticism involves a peculiar kind of confrontation with the host society...Second, this analysis suggests that apocalypticism is not inherently 'pathological,' as many writers on the subject have implied...By contrast, if apocalypticism is viewed as a group-constructed line of action that creates structural liminality, these activities can be understood simply as radical forms of organization. Finally, apocalypticism is more likely to constitute a moment in a group's history rather than a stable, long-term form of organization. (43)

In addition to apocalypticism, the variables of charismatic leadership and imposed isolation can be precursors of religious violence (Dawson, 2005). According to Snow

¹ It is important to note that SMO literature at one time did emphasize bureaucratization and institutionalization but moved toward a fluid understanding of how the SMO relates to its internal and external environment (see p. 19)

(1987), the Nichiren Shoshu of America operates with an ideology that critically examines current social structures, diagnoses perceived problems with its religious vision, and effectively mobilizes its members towards implementing a divinely ordained mission that was allegedly prophesied to save humankind. Members who act on behalf of the mission are told they will be rewarded with benefits such as insider knowledge, world peace, happiness, and status enhancement.

Integrating the dual axiologies of RMO and SMO theory (i.e. uniting together the organizational issues faced by religious social movements in particular with organizational features of social movements in general) is a necessary step in understanding the organization of the Focolare Movement. Whereas RMO theory links the theological principles of the group with social movement mechanisms, SMO theory casts the organizational picture more broadly, considering the larger structural realities, both religious and secular, that inform, constrain, and transform the organization's ability to enact social change. For the FM, this is particularly important, because the organizational position of the group is a legitimized lay-based movement housed in the Catholic hierarchy that emerged in the United States post-Vatican II. Another theoretical overlap that I noted is between religious experience, movement agency, and collective identity, which is necessitated by the hybrid structure of religious social movements.

Religious Meaning, Movement Agency and Collective Identity

The third dimension of my analytical framework bears heavily on religious experience and meaning-making processes found in religious social movements. For instance, the spiritual experience of the individual provides a construct of meaning for

everyday life, which, in combination with the established goals of the movement, provides individuals with a sense of agency and empowerment to make a difference in the world. The dual experience between religious and social movement activity also explains the development of collective identity, giving religious meaning to individual lives and to the change that members seek to achieve in the world. I will explore each of these three processes separately as they are discussed in the sociology of religion and social movement literatures.

Religion is important to people chiefly because it gives them a framework for interpreting their world, their experiences, and their relationship with the unknown. Members of religious movements are invested in meaning-making processes that give credence to their life and to their work in the movement. Luckmann (1967) stresses the structure of meaning, in particular, with regard to the social construction of the worldview. He is interested in how worldviews are constructed vis-à-vis social interaction, how the worldview becomes meaningful for the individual, and how the worldview becomes objectivated or reified for society. For Luckmann, the worldview is the basic social form of religion. The worldview not only gives individuals a moral compass for their actions and decision-making, but also on a group or organizational level, it provides the basis for social control and, ultimately, social order. This last stage is crucial for Luckmann because religious systems of meaning can and do assume a cosmological order. Greeley (1981) emphasizes the meaning of religion as the key component of the religious imagination. The religious imagination regards the meaning system as expressed in symbols. These symbols themselves are implicitly narrative-based

and give people's stories meaning and purpose. Essentially, these symbols are social in nature. The way individuals make meaning through their religious worlds is through their symbolic interaction with others, emphasizing to each other the importance of religion in their lives. Religion, for Greeley, is experiential, relational and communal. Studies on communal life exemplify these three dimensions of the religious imagination. Stone's (1978) study on new religious consciousness groups in the San Francisco Bay Area focused on how intense experiences with the sacred (e.g. *getting high on God*) were both personal and openly shared with others. Moreover, these experiences were in direct response to science either as a point of conflict or acceptance. Although the group deemphasized dogma and authoritative texts, they did not deemphasize the authority of the individual in his or her provision of a truth. Finally, religion gives meaning to everyday life. Wuthnow (1998: 138) argues that there is interplay between spirituality and secularity in everyday life:

Although many people live in a world that is almost totally secular, Americans generally regard themselves as newcomers to such a world...without necessarily wanting to live in that world, they nevertheless worry that something important has been lost. As a way of dealing with this concern, many people sacralize small aspects of everyday life, reading spiritual significance into them and do so in ways that gives these sacred moments greater meaning than they may realize. Despite the rational, scientific world in which people live (some might say because of this world), people are often startled by the miraculous and are likely to muse about its significance more than people who lived in societies where such experiences are commonplace.

Developing structures for religious meaning, I argue, is the vehicle that makes a religious movement successful and enduring for its members. Whether religious meaning occurs through the construction of a worldview, supplying purpose to one's life, or as an application in everyday life, it is the religious dimension that makes participation in a

religious movement compelling and important.

In religious social movements, the construction of religious meaning is deployed into action, which translates into movement participation. An important facet of this participation, figuring prominently within the new social movement theory literature, is the concept of agency. Agency occurs at the intersection of biography and social structure, pertaining especially to the responses of individuals and their contributions to the social structure. In social movement literature, agency refers to the *meaning side* of participation. Through the interactions that occur in the movement's activities, participants eventually realize that their sharing of everyday experience with fellow members constitutes a collective voice. The movement gives ordinary individuals an amplified connection with others while simultaneously generating a collective force of resistance for social change. Young (1997) calls this a *shift in consciousness*, referring especially to the way that members speak collectively of personal experiences—*my* experience of disenfranchisement or injustice now becomes the collective experience of the community. Reconstructing the personal into the political was in fact the rallying cry of the feminist movement. Realizing that the problem could be named and underscored by the experiences of many women gave participants a sense of purpose and a counter-hegemonic response to the political system.

It is imperative to note that the concept of agency includes the fact that individual action cannot be taken for granted, due to its interactional impact within a given movement, and not just as a reaction to the social system but as an agent of change in opposition to it (d'Anjou, 1996). Agency is particularly interesting as a factor in social

movements given the normative reality of strong forces discouraging action, the overall feeling of helplessness that many individuals feel in response to intractable social problems, and the day-to-day issues that remove people from larger systemic issues. As a point of strategy, “to increase a sense of agency, symbolic strategies should attempt to draw out the latent sense of agency that people already carry around with them.”

(Gamson, 1995: 106) Therefore, as an interpretive and socially constructed process, agency in yet another way overcomes the *free ridership* problem and notes the potential effect that individuals can have on the larger structure of their social context.

Another theoretical dimension of study concerning new social movement theory is that of collective identity. Again, this dimension is symbolically and socially constructed between the axes of movement activity and collective meaning-making. However, collective identity addresses the emergent issues of self as a confluence of movement activity in a movement, social networks, and the direct impact of culture, politics and ideology. For example, Lichterman (1996) articulates this process with respect to activists and their identities:

Activists, as a recent outpouring of scholarship attests, create meanings actively...They strategize ideological frames that will appeal to the public and outsmart organizations with competing agendas. They project identities that make dissenting views both more meaningful to their holders and more visible to the state. They enact rituals of solidarity and conversion that help people over the divide between bystander and participant and sustain them after the jump. In search of an elusive balance, successful social movements re-work pre-existing traditions and ideologies, enough to promote political and cultural change, but not so much that activists become disempoweringly marginal. (402)

Defining and constructing movement identity not only divides the *activist* from the *non-activist*, but also the protagonist from the antagonist. This enables a firm sense of the

group dynamics to emerge as a public face—a sense of *this is who we are and what we stand for*, which facilitates the *we-consciousness* that is internally necessary for the movement to become cohesive. (Hunt, Benford, and Snow, 1994)

This study on the FM highlights the much needed analytical work of studying both the movement *and* religious dimensions of a religious social movement. I will attend to three analytical dimensions throughout the dissertation: social structure, religious and movement modes of organization, and spiritual and agentic-based experience. I will expand my discussion of the literature in more specific ways in each chapter. The Focolare Movement should be a useful example of the value of this analytical approach and should be interpreted as a statement in favor of integrating the study of religious communities with social movement theory.

Methodology

I conducted sixty interviews with FM communities in Chicago, New York City and Los Angeles. I chose these sites because of their significance to the history of the Focolare Movement history in the United States. The FM first came to Hyde Park in 1964, and this continues to be where their national conventions are held. Members who express interest in deeper explorations of spirituality travel to Hyde Park for education and enrichment. The second oldest community in the United States, the Chicago group, continues to thrive with a substantial membership and has effectively engaged in inter-religious dialogue, including the American Muslim Society. I have spent the most time with the Chicago community. Finally, the Los Angeles community is one of the newest centers, has low levels of integration, and is the least organized community in the United

States. In 2008, this community was in the process of organizational reshuffling to replace its female leader who died of cancer. The benefit of comparing a newer, less-organized site with older, more organized sites is that it offers a historical-comparative angle into how the FM has developed and continues to evolve within an American context.

Each interview lasted between 60 and 90 minutes. In my interviews, I used a narrative approach to obtain data on everyday experiences that shaped vocation, organizational background, and identity. I was particularly interested in the Focolarini's² first encounter with the Movement, and in charting how—through their training process—they joined the movement and found their place in a center. Moreover, in conversation with a selected set of zone leaders (Focolarini who preside over particular regions), I asked questions relating particularly to organizational structure. These interviews covered the planning and execution of events; the use of media and public relations; decision-making processes; and reflections on the future direction of the FM and/or its successes, failures, adaptations and compromises over the years.

I conducted twenty additional interviews with non-Focolare members. Since the Focolare has engaged in dialogue with other religious entities as well as with secular organizations, I also conducted four interviews with communities that have collaborated with the Focolare. To gather data on the response of families, I conducted interviews with six family members of four committed American Focolarini. Focolarini take the highest form of commitment to the movement by taking the vow of poverty, chastity, and

² Focolarini represent the most dedicated level of commitment by taking the vow of poverty, chastity and obedience, in addition to committing to the FM goal of unity.

obedience as well as the vow of unity and by living in sex-segregated communities with other Focolarini. Finally, I conducted ten interviews with ex-members of the group to collect data on tensions, contradictions, and conflicts within the FM. For non-Focolare members who work with the Focolare, I asked questions about their mutual activities, the impact of those activities on their community, and what they believed to be the future of the collaborative relationship. For family members of committed Focolare members, I asked questions about their initial reaction to the movement and how their impressions have evolved over time. Finally, for ex-members, I asked about their initial experience with the movement, how they decided to leave the FM, and how their impressions of the FM have changed since leaving.

I accessed the Movement's media archives in the Los Angeles and Hyde Park communities, which include collections of videos, books and periodicals. Media-related data is significant for obtaining information about macro-level social change projects and for understanding organizational strategies for recruiting and maintaining membership. Since I was unable to travel out of the United States or personally meet Chiara Lubich, the founder of the FM, the evidence gathered from media about Chiara's role in particular and the Movement's interactional activities in general allows for a *limited* perspective into how the Movement operates on an international scale and how its leader and founder communicates with its members. More importantly, these videos, journals, and books gave me access to the Movement's own interpretive lens. As an organization, the Movement shapes perceptions of its meaning through media that emphasizes what it wants others to find important about its activities and thereby constructing their purpose

after the fact. I also looked at outside media to gauge how the movement has impacted other groups. Sources included local newspapers and articles found in the official Roman Catholic press.

Finally, I used participant-observation for the events I attended. I observed mostly formal events such as the Mariapolis, updating events, and monthly meetings. I also had the opportunity to observe private instruction with committed Focolarini and informal interaction with members at the Mariapolis centers.

Outline of Study

I begin with the first major theme that emerged in the data: the difference that the FM has made to its members on an individual level. From the moment they were recruited, members found a sense of purpose that was developed through formative training and education. Members explored their sense of vocation and learned how to bring their spiritual awakening to bear on important social problems. Finally, joining the FM meant changing individual behavior, the fundamental transformation of which made a different world, a world for unity, possible. As expressed by members, this ideal of unity is not simply about imagining a different way to live, but about achieving social change through Movement participation.

The second major theme considers the potential impact of this change, specifically, how the Movement is living out its vision of a better world. Their goal is to achieve unity within the context of a multi-cultural and religiously diverse society, and bring this ideal into the secular arena in such fields as politics, economics, education, and the arts. As they see it, such unity would fulfill God's will for the world; and by

actively participating in this process, they are doing God's work.

I address the issue of organization with a specific focus on the communitarian ethos which undergirds the Movement's collective spiritual and practical life and its socially transformative project. The theme that continually runs throughout this data is the effort made by community members to live for each other, what they refer to as *acts of love*. For members, the concrete evidence of unity in the world is the changed relationships both within the community and also with individuals outside of the Movement. This spiritual quest for mutually reciprocating love is how members enact their beliefs and is highly noticeable in the Movement's organizational structure. In this chapter, I will look at the Mariapolis (the annual retreat) and community meetings where members experiment with the ideal of unity as the centralizing principle of a society.

In the next chapter, I focus on the theme of seamlessness or thoroughness in the Movement's spiritual tradition. Since the FM stresses the importance of consistency and perfection in enacting unity in every aspect of their collective life, this presents an interesting feature of religious movements, (i.e. the importance of shared experience such as work, education, and family-related experiences). Instead of encountering the sacred in non-rational ways, members conjoin reason and spirituality by sharing their daily attempts to bring unity into the world. I also argue that through sharing experiences, members grow in their commitment to the Movement, justifying the spirituality and motivating them to maintain their spiritual practice.

The final analytical chapter examines the role of suffering in the FM spirituality. As a spirituality, the FM helps members to make sense of difficult moments; and as a

social movement, suffering is transformed into social action. FM members report that experiences of suffering help them to understand God's love in their life and that suffering can have a positive effect—in this case of the FM, working toward unity in the world. Just as members share more mundane experiences, individuals also share about their hardships. This creates a sense of solidarity within the Movement, helping others to understand their own pain and inspiring them to think of their suffering as an opportunity for social change. Finally, I will close the study with a summary of my research findings as they pertain to the future of religious social movements and their implications for both the sociology of religion and the sociological study of social movements.

The appendix includes a historical and structural overview of the Movement and examines four major themes. The themes concur with my research questions. It is important to begin with the history of the Movement's emergence in Italy because it lays the groundwork for the Movement's international development and eventual expansion in the United States. Through data collection, I reconstructed the Movement's development in the United States from 1961-2008, thus rectifying what until now has been a severe neglect in the social history of the Movement. Choosing three important American sites led me to understand three different aspects of the Movement: (a) initial reactions and integration of the Movement into particular American religious communities; (b) structural difficulties and opportunities present from the beginning until the time of this writing, (especially around the issues of culture); (c) key figures and moments in the movement's history; and (d) the evolution of the Movement's organization over time. I will show how its historical background sets the context for its emergence, success,

and shortcomings in the United States.

CHAPTER TWO

A DIFFERENT WORLD: THE CONCEPTS OF PURPOSE AND AGENCY

How do people come to believe that the FM is a radical approach to social change in the world? Their first encounter with the Movement is a good place to begin to answer this overall research question. People's first exposure to the Movement is an important feature of most interviews and was a pronounced opening scene to their experience with the FM. Isabella's interview captured a typical response to the question, "How did you find out about the Movement?"

I kind of had everything. I was a good student. I had lots of friends. I had a full life. But I do remember this sense of like, you know, you go to a party with your friends. You have a great time. You come home late at night and it's all over. There's nothing left, there is this sense of emptiness. When I met these people, they just seemed so full of life, so full of everything... There was a purpose, there was meaning. And another thing that really struck me—in my country, people like 99 percent are Catholics, but you're born Catholic basically. You don't really live out your faith, and so you don't talk about it especially when you're a teenager or young adult. You don't go around and talk about anything about religion basically. There's nothing to say about it anyways. That's more of the attitude. So I went to this meeting and there were 16,000 young people, and the program was dance, songs, and artistic moments. What really struck me was the experience of the young people... I was just amazed that someone was really out there living the gospel. It really struck me.

Recruitment into and commitment to the FM is not overly complex, generally occurring through social networks within Catholic and/or familial circles. Joining the Movement is defined simply as one who is practicing unity, but it is the recounting of the experience of becoming part of the Movement and the extreme form of commitment to the FM

spirituality that are of primary interest in this chapter. I will explore how religious experience and meaning-making processes form the basis for agentic- or activist-based participation and commitment (Strauss, 1984; Csordas, 1997; Misztal, 1998); producing individuals empowered to engage in social action on an interpersonal and structural level. In future chapters, I will discuss more fully how individuals are empowered to make social change. For this chapter, I will raise the following questions: How is religious discontent mobilized into a religious form of social change? How do individuals move from introduction to the movement to a pre-commitment step into the movement? How do individuals come to fully accept the spirituality of unity as a form of religious calling? I will conclude this chapter with a discussion on the implications that the findings have on spiritual discontent, agency, and religious social movements.

**Part I: They Weren't Super Heroes: Transforming Discontent into
Attraction to the Focolare Spirituality**

In interviews, subjects identified four ways they were introduced to the Movement: through the local Catholic parish, parochial school or another Catholic organization; influence of members whose behavior elicited curiosity and discussion; by responding to an invitation to attend a Focolare event; or by being born into the movement (2nd generation members also known as Gen).¹ Each subject was asked at the beginning of the interview how he or she found out about the Movement. Most prefaced their answer with biographical information, followed by a long response. Thus, the question typically prompted an extended answer that included an introspective

¹ Usually the recruitment experience was a combination of two or three of these methods, but initially it was one of the four.

assessment of the individual's place in life when first encountering the Movement.²

While this may have simply been because subjects wanted to begin the interview with a full biographical portrait of themselves as individuals and their involvement in the Movement, it seems more likely that it was the result of a practice commonly observed at meetings, in which members are formally encouraged to share their first introduction to the Movement. This would elicit a narrative or biographical explanation of why and how the Movement was important to that individual.³ I will first explore how individuals first perceived the FM through the lens of religious discontent and then proceed to explain the organizational mechanisms of recruitment and mobilization into the movement.

Framing Religious Discontent: The Search for Meaning, Change, and Real Christianity

Individuals' answer to the question of first learning of the Movement as a personal journey is the individual's way of communicating just what was so significant about joining the Movement. Most often expressed were the subjects' spiritual search (for *something*.) and the realization that the Movement corresponded to what they were seeking. For example, Jackie, who was introduced to the movement at the Catholic school where she was teaching, described being in "search mode," saying she felt a deep need to find out more about the movement:

It just opened up my mind that...this is what it means to live the gospel in everyday life, it is really to love the person right next to you whether on the assembly line or in the school, and it just blew me away in the sense that I remember thinking that the room just opened up and that God was right there, and

² Their responses to how they joined the Movement were reinforced with detailed, specific examples. These examples were then compared with examples shared in other interviews to assure that these *kinds* of experiences were common to the recruitment process.

³ One interviewee, who did indeed provide a full answer, thought the interview was done after answering the first question.

heaven had come down into that room, that what they were talking was a religion that was so personal and so close to real life. And, I was just fascinated. So my friend got their address and after that night, I said let's go and visit them (the Focolarini), you know, so we went very soon after, maybe a week later we called.

In the case of a religious social movement, the perceived tension in their lives and advantages they find in seeking the Movement are theological or religious-based (rather than economic or political).

Brianna had a similar experience to as Jackie's. She first learned of the Movement through a classmate who had been a mutual participant in Cursillo, another Catholic social movement.⁴ She began:

Well I got to know the movement through a classmate in college. So, it was my last year and I had been looking for something for quite some time and I was all of 22, 23, and I was tired of looking for this thing, this something. I had gone to Cursillo and I thought that was very cool, but the Focolare spirituality was very attractive to me... It is another movement in the church... he (her classmate) lent me a book, which was *Questions and Answers with Chiara*, the one with the pink cover. And I was, actually I did a semester of graduate school, so I was up grading papers, I had *Questions and Answers*, so I was up grading papers, so I thought I would just read a little, so I opened in the middle and I read a little bit and then I closed it. And then I opened it and read a little more, and by the end of the night I had finished the whole book. And I said wow, this is something really big, you know, something bigger than me.

Moreover, contextualization underscored the role of agency for potential members, as some subjects expressed a desire to produce social change. They saw the Focolare as a potential vehicle for the social change they envisioned. Carmen, who discovered the Movement at the age of sixteen, explained her sensitivity to economic inequality, saying, "I wanted -- I really wanted to do something for the social divide in the Philippines as I come from the Philippines. And there is this big discrimination

⁴ Other religious movements and groups mentioned in the data included the Student Christian Movement and Taize.

between the rich and the poor, social discrimination. And since I was at a younger age I wanted to do something about it.” The Gen continually invited her to activities, which included going to poorer areas and providing the poor with clothes and food:

It’s my personality once I get involved—it takes me long to just observe, I try to be an observer at the background—but once I waited and it's worth it, then I really involve myself. Then with the Gen, to tell you the truth, we were always busy really serving the poor. So I remember every weekend we were out going to slum areas, squalor areas and we saw that God is love by putting it into practice. God is love. I discovered also his love for the others. With the other Gen, we used to really help every weekend that was really something.

More particularly, individuals responded favorably to the FM because of their dissatisfaction or nominal view of their Catholic identity and their desire to have a more committed and deeper spiritual experience. Rita juxtaposed her impression of the FM with her experience with her youth group and parish:

I saw a lot of hypocrisy because you go to church every Sunday, we sing, we do mass, and then after mass we go to discuss the Gospel and that was it. An hour after mass, we discuss the gospel and then we go off and do whatever we want. If there was anything that was asked of more of a commitment, like I don’t know to give up a Sunday afternoon to do something for poor or to give up a Saturday evening, nobody would do it. And that struck me...but then where is our Christian commitment? It is just limited to just two hours on Sunday? So, that to me when I saw those people, I saw coherence. The way you say you live. So that was something that really struck me.

At a formation weekend, when people went around and talked about how they were introduced to the movements, one particular woman mentioned how she wanted to go deeper into her Catholic faith; and upon meeting the FM, she was able to have a stronger faith. She mentioned that her Catholic faith was like a baby’s faith compared to what she has now. Brianna described her first impression with the Focolare as an introduction to “real Christianity.” Isabella provides an example of this *real Christianity*:

When I met these people, they just seemed so full of life—so full of everything. There was a purpose. There was a meaning... In my country, people like 99 percent are Catholics. But you're born Catholic basically. You don't really live out your faith. And so you don't talk about it. Especially when you're a teenager or young adult, you don't go around and talk about anything about religion basically... So I went to this meeting and there were 16,000 people, young people. And the program was dance, songs, artistic moments. What really struck me was the experience of the young people. They were on-stage and they had this discovery of God. I was just amazed. That someone was really out there living the gospel. It really struck me.

For many, the Focolare was an opportunity to practice their already identified Catholic faith in a new way, and this excited individuals to learn more.

Mobilization and Recruitment into the FM

Those born into the Movement (the Gen) tended to describe their path to membership as a natural experience. Their parents had overseen their upbringing in the Movement. Gen often cited positive experiences of growing up with other Gen. However, as I will discuss in greater detail in the subsequent section, one pattern that consistently emerged was a turning point at which each Gen had to decide for himself or herself whether to remain in the Movement. Two subjects who grew up in the Movement and later married explained their early experience in this way:

Our parents met the movement together. It was 1974, or '75. I'm not sure about the date, but more or less around the 70s. We were not born—we were born in '82. So they met the movement and as we grew up as children, we were like, you know, as children involved in a very easy way with like meetings just for children. It was like on Sunday or Saturday afternoon, we went together with other children. And just, you know, we played together and sometimes we learn...to love the others in a very easy way.

The Gen's earliest experience tends to be one of children born into and socialized by the Movement, familiarized at an early age with the spirituality of love and unity. Edie gives an example of this pattern:

They called them Gen—new generation so I was with the little ones, the smallest ones. So it was a very natural thing. We played games, but, you know, our games always had a spiritual—a spiritual spread to it. And then we had like catechism... and then we knew about Chiara's life and made skits and mimes and all sorts of things. It was—I just grew up in it.

Others first learned of the Movement through family or workplace connections or school, parish or other community events. For Peter, his introduction seemed like the combination of a fortunate accident and the fulfillment of a deep longing:

Well, I was introduced to the movement somewhat by accident back in 1974, so that is about 30 years ago, yeah, 30 years ago. I was in Ireland at the time, studying at the university. And I was going through a bit of an identity crisis. I felt...I was studying theoretical physics and mathematics. My area was mathematical sciences. And at that time I was a practicing Catholic, I went to mass most days on campus, to the Irish Catholic Center. And I felt God might be calling me to something, but I didn't know what, so I was bit confused, searching, wasn't happy, didn't know what I wanted. And in the process, a young woman who probably saw it, who was from Spain, who knew me, was a bit anxious to see me in such a spiritual uneasiness and questioning everything, suggested that I meet a priest who was from the philosophy department.

A good percentage of the interview subjects, especially those who met the Movement at a pre-college age, first learned about the Movement through a family connection (for instance, the friend of sibling) who invited them to a Mariapolis or Gen meeting.

Finally, interview subjects often stated that their attraction to the Movement was first kindled through witnessing a member's behavior. What stood out to the subjects' earliest memories with the Movement were members' acts of kindness and, ironically, their ordinariness. For example, Crysta describes a young woman she often saw on her bus ride to college, "I was always curious about her because she tended to be happier than all the people. We just started studying together sometimes. And I realize when we did things together, she was hundred percent there for me. So I was always thinking well

she must have something.” After curiously observing the young woman’s behavior for six months, they eventually became close friends and she responded to an invitation to attend a Word of Life meeting.⁵ Afterwards, she felt changed, “I remember going back home that afternoon from the city. It was interesting for me. It had never happened before. I felt the sun over everything, I saw the presence of God in everything...And everything seemed brighter...I think God was closer, really closer. And I got home I remember right away that I have to do something to put the spirituality into practice.”

The behavior of members clearly communicated that members love one another. These acts of love were often as simple as giving up a place in line, or as extensively planned as building dialogical bridges with non-Christians. This practice of loving one another achieves the community’s goal of unity, attracts new members, and inspires them to act in the same way. I will give concrete examples of acts of love later as part of the discussion on how potential members begin to live the Movement’s spirituality.

Besides the general care that members extend to others, subjects noted with apparently genuine humility that Focolarini were not extraordinary individuals. Cristiano’s first impression of the Focolarini was that “they’re not super heroes. They were just people like me. We felt they were flawed...it’s not like they were perfect. They were very humbled when trying to share their experiences. So it was that I remember—I remember them as people who really cared for each other.” Peter stated that what he found appealing was that the leaders dressed “normally,” not in the traditional garb of priests or nuns. He recalled that the first Focolarino he encountered was a man who

⁵ At Word of Life meetings the group contemplates a biblical text, chosen by Chiara, to put into practice for the following month.

dressed in a leather jacket and rode a motorcycle. Jackie remembered feeling pleasantly surprised that the Focolarini she met drove a convertible. This approach to dress was reaffirmed in a talk on community given by Patricia in 2004:

We often say that we would like to dress and take care of our houses the way Jesus or Mary would, if they lived now, in this society. The characteristic should be simplicity and have a sense of welcoming, so that everyone will feel comfortable in our homes, with the way we dress. We should dress according to the fashion, but always with modesty and with the sense that each one of us is different, and will therefore dress according to their own personality. What's important is that we reflect the beauty of God, the love of God.

Although their behavior communicated a deep sense of spirituality, their presentation of self did not contribute to a feeling of superiority over others. For potential recruits, witnessing the behavior of Focolare members was often instrumental in developing a positive impression of and attraction to the Movement.

The initial stage of affiliation underscores the importance of organizational recruitment strategies, the biographical experiences of potential members, and of ongoing emotional and social engagement with current members of the Movement. Once the first introduction had occurred, members experienced a re-alignment of their priorities, relationships, and goals, with the outcome being that the spiritual principle of unity was seen as something both possible and worth achieving. Ann stated this interrelationship succinctly:

Because I didn't want them (the Focolarini) to know, but they realized it. So all I did was I said ok, what do I do now? And one of them, the Italian woman, said to me well...there is a place where Jesus said, "I will manifest myself to those who love me," so do what you understand. And I understood that if I wanted to love, if I wanted to change the world, which I wanted to do, and I had nothing against Jesus, because I thought he was fine, it was the Christian that I didn't want to talk to, I had to live, I had to love, I had to seek God. And that was going to make a difference. I wanted to make a difference in the world that is what I had to do. So

I thought, hmm, I'll try it.

After taking the initial step of being exposed to the Movement, individuals then had the opportunity to consider membership into the FM and going deeper into the spirituality of unity.

Part II: *Going Deeper* into the Spirituality of Unity: The Pre-Stage to Commitment to the Focolare Movement

An important acknowledgement in the social movement literature is that individuals considering membership in New Religious Movements (NRMs) usually do not make hasty decisions to join. Rather, becoming a full-fledged member is a gradual, drawn-out process, marked along the way by opportunities for reflection and reconsideration as to whether the movement is really for them. In the case of the FM, there were several markers that gave transitioning members greater certainty about the Movement and, ultimately, led them to affirm their complete commitment to the Movement. Some of these *transitioning behaviors* included putting the Movement's spirituality into practice, relating themselves to its founder, and undergoing education and formation with respect to the Movement's spiritual principles.

Testing the Spirituality: Putting the Spirituality of Unity into Practice

As reported by interview subjects, one of the more exciting aspects of this transitional period was seeing if the spirituality *really worked* as a possibility for experiencing unity in everyday life. Subjects expressed feelings of delight at going home after their first FM event and putting into practice what they had learned. Cristiano explained his first act of love as follows:

I mean I really first I came back from Mariapolis at home, I tried to put into practice what I had learned...so since I was home most of my brothers were running out, I decided to help (my mom) in the kitchen, but I didn't have a clue about cooking so I ask her, I ask the question, learn to do few things...simple acts of love for her...It was a big discovery.

Transitioning members thus described an increased sensitivity to the needs of others and a greater willingness to sacrifice for the sake of achieving unity. Carla gave a specific example of reaching out to someone in need:

I remember one experience because we lived the Word of Life every month and I was coming back from my job. I was very tired, but I saw a woman walking, no. She was with two bags full of grocery. She was with an arm—a broken arm. And in that moment, I realized that she was Jesus. And so I went to her and I offer her to help her to arrive home. And for me it was like a—having that relationship with Jesus through her.

Clara, described coming back from her first Mariapolis “completely changed. I was another person.” When asked to give an example of this change, she responded with a similar narrative as Cristiano and Edie (i.e. she began to help more with domestic responsibilities, and willingly offered assistance to family members, such as bringing her brother water in the middle of the night): “I remember the joy I felt in my heart was being able to do something for Jesus and my brother. It was so beautiful. And that’s my first act of love I recall. It’s just very little. I felt it changed my life.” Subjects described a process by which they became gradually more capable of providing care and support to others, which was equated with greater levels of purpose and happiness.

Most of these *early* experiences of putting the movement’s spirituality into practice revolved around the performance of domestic chores by choice or improving relationships with family, but some members described practicing the spirituality in other contexts. For example, Ann, a white woman involved in the Civil Rights Movement,

made an effort to befriend an African American woman, an employee in her school's cafeteria whom she had observed being unkind to students. As she put it, the Movement's spirituality personalized her political commitments, pushing her to do more than march for Civil Rights, and to reach out to someone who was hard to love:

Well, after I did it, I sat back down to have a cup of coffee and I see a white coat next to me and hear a voice, "Can I eat with you?" So, I knew, I felt that in the moment that revolutionary power of the Gospel. Later I went, a few weeks later I went to a party after a civil rights thing that I was in and she was there, and she came and sat with me. For me that was an important and strong experience.

Subjects also described differences in how the Movement's spirituality influenced their work. For example, a social worker started to see her work with families differently,

I think that it had an impact in me that I saw the person in front of me in a different way. As a child of God as I was a child of God, that, you know, he had in mind something for me and he loved me immensely, but he also loved this person or this family and how did he want to love them. And how did he see them as individuals and as a family. How did he want them to grow to become that person that he had in mind when he created them. I think it helped me to go beyond the immediate circumstance. To look beyond it and say how can I help this person rise above it and use the circumstances to get to the next level of control of environment.

Through the performance of these *acts of love* transition members became increasingly convinced that the spirituality of unity was both authentic and personally meaningful. Living this spirituality revealed to them a radical dimension of their interpersonal relationships, which increased their desire to learn more about the Movement.

Connecting to Chiara's Story

In addition to changes in behavior, transitioning members also connected with the founder's biography as a way of negotiating their participation in the movement. Chiara's early experiences were often used as a mirror by transitioning members to conceptualize

God's will for their life. In recalling their early experiences, subjects often included a recollection of Chiara's biographical experience of leaving everything behind (including family), particularly when telling stories about the sacrifice which frequently accompanied new membership. Greg described this important connection to me:

G: There is a story when she left her parents after the bombing in the war...

N: I don't know.

G: You don't know that one? (Trent) had been bombarded and they had to flee the city because it was unsafe. And so they figured they would all flee together, but Chiara had her first friends in Trent...So she had actually taken a kind of a promise with the priest not to abandon this because this was the beginning of the movement. And so she had to tell—so practically while the war was going on and the whole family having lost everything, she had to tell them I'm not coming with you. I'm going to go back to the city—abandoning them essentially. You can imagine how she felt and all night she cried and then came her experience. She came back to the city and as she did, a woman came towards her who was almost out of her mind from shock and pain because four of her family members had been killed by the bombs. So this woman kind of frantically shouted, "Four of mine are dead! Four of mine are dead!" So Chiara embraced her and tried to console her and realizing that moment that in the pain of this woman, she had to put aside her own pain of having just left her family and to embrace which symbolically meant she had to embrace the pain of humanity and leave her own behind. In a smaller scale, for me it was the exact chemistry. Leaving my own pain behind and embrace the suffering of the mind, suffering of this. Since I had asked God to give me a sign, that seemed to be the answer because it was a parallel kind of thing and that meant to me that God was telling me you're on the right—you're on the right track. So I did go ahead.

In other words, the story of Chiara's calling and subsequent sacrifice became a template for the story of the transitioning member, and learning to tell and adapt their story became a marker of competence for individuals who were choosing whether to deepen their involvement and participation in the Movement.

In my own experience of documenting the Movement, Chiara's life was always detailed at events, either verbally or through media; and I was often encouraged to read her books. For transitioning members, hearing Chiara's story solidified their

understanding of what the Movement was about and led them to see how their personal story could be leading them on the same path that she had followed. What was being experienced was the Movement's spirituality on a personal level, filtered through its connection with Chiara and the overall Movement's purpose of achieving unity.

Going Deeper: An Organized Approach to Learning about the Spirituality

These early, formative experiences were the impetus for transitioning members to claim a committed position in the movement. The phrase that most subjects used to describe this process was *going deeper* into the spirituality. This happened either at small meetings at the local center, with one or more Focolarini present, or by attending a *preschool*, held at permanent *little cities* such as Luminosa. In both places, transitioning members engaged with the points of the spirituality (also known as the seven colors or aspects of the spirituality).

In my documentation of this process, I met with Lia for about an hour. Our discussion began with the first point, *God is love*. During this one-on-one pre-formation, Lia emphasized the connection between *acts of love* and the belief that God is love. She used examples from her own life and from Chiara's to elucidate this idea. The very idea that God is love was received by Chiara as a revelation, and it appears historically significant because the time cities were being bombed and philosophical nihilism was the popular mode of thought. The message was clear that God's love is not simply for the benefit of individuals, but for everyone. Had the discussion continued, we would have covered all seven aspects of the spirituality. For transitioning members, these types of interactions with Focolarini were important if they could not afford to go to a little city or

there was not a little city nearby. Many subjects mentioned their frequent attendance at the local center, usually to assist with everyday domestic tasks such as sewing, preparing meals, or cleaning. Rose explains this *going deeper* experience:

I was invited to go and help out. I happened to help in the garden and it was really simple, helping in the garden and I helped with the sewing. I knew a little bit how to sew on the sewing machine. It was straight sewing. It wasn't nothing fancy about it. I helped prepare lunch. Whatever it was, I had to help in the house. I had heard about Jesus in the midst, but it was a new experience...and to me that was—that was one of the significant experiences of those early times—Jesus in the midst, to be able to experience it. Not just hear about it, hear about the experiences about others, but to actually experience it.

Subjects also communicated that *going deeper* was not a solitary experience, and their learning about the spirituality was enhanced by interacting with others. Martha described her experiences of going to the local center to learn more about the spirituality with other Gen: “It would help us to come together maybe once a week and talk about it and said, you know, I tried this. I tried to live the word of the gospel. It was difficult for me, but we encouraged one another, you know, to help each other. And usually it was an opportunity to be formed in this spirituality.” They were able to *go deeper* by living its principles together, and came to realize the significance of unity by sharing it with others. Marietta explained the collective experience of *going deeper* as follows: “It was like helping each other to go ahead, you know. Sometimes when you—I don't have the strength or, you know, looking at the other and so full of life, it was like a push also for me to start again and to go ahead and to run again or vice versa. It was really to help each other to really live for unity and for a united world.” Learning the spirituality and attempting to live its principles was a key element in familiarizing transitioning members with the movement and with its impact on others.

Educational modules in the so-called *Preschools* varied in length between one week and two years depending on the stage that individuals had reached in the commitment process. The shorter preschool modules were designed to offer basic introductions to the spirituality, while the longer modules helped more advanced participants discern their vocation as a Focolarini, Volunteer, Gen, etc. Moreover, these modules were not focused simply on learning the points of spirituality intellectually, but also living them in a strong and immersive way. The experience of this was often described by subjects as intense, and as having provided them with a fuller understanding of membership in the community. Edie went to a preschool as a Gen:

I was asked to do an experience in the Focolare for the summer. I came in 1988 just to spend time with the other Gen in the Gen house. But for me it was very important because you live with Jesus in the midst. We did everything together. We work here in the Mariapolis center. So when I realize that I was—it was my vocation to come and say my total yes to God and to be—to give my life for the Focolare.

Similarly, Angela described her first day at a two year preschool to determine her vocation as a Focolarina:

I came to the Focolare for the preschool...after dinner, someone called, it was someone from Ginette's (one of Chiara's first companions) house. One of her secretaries and she was sending a cake to celebrate my arrival. Oh, my God. Who am I? And one of Chiara's first Focolarini who was like, you know, so for me it was just—it's my assurance point because sometimes it's hard...that it really was the will of God for me...(Ginette) has seen so many Focolarina and if she thinks that that's the will of God for me, I better trust her. She knows better than I do. So it was just strong for me when that cake came to celebrate my arrival. This little act of love, but you know it stays with you.

At this point in the process (*going deeper* and receiving pre-formation training), transitioning members were on the cusp of full membership. This was a more complex and involved relationship than engaging in simple acts of love, and it was marked by

more formal signs of commitment. Rita best explains this stage as both a precursor to becoming a Focolarina and a definitive step toward fully accepting the spirituality as one's own: "It was a process of commitment, certainly. A process of knowing and understanding more about the life of the ideal and to forgive and to start again and all the points and to be more committed. To be more committed. When you're asked directly, you do it. You just—you do. You do it because it's the right thing to do." Going deeper is the process that precedes making the commitment to the Movement. The following section will explore gaining membership into the Movement from a religious, logistical, and vocational perspective.

Part III: Going Ahead and Saying Your Yes: Making a Commitment to a Vocation in the Focolare Movement

Once the transition to membership has been completed and validated by a formal commitment, an intensive process of vocational discernment is begun. As with other lay movements in the Catholic Church, Focolarini take vows of poverty, chastity and obedience in addition to the vow of unity. This process tests the new member's dedication and helps that individual to understand his or her role within the Movement. Moreover, because the FM is lay-based, the degree to which members can contribute to the organization varies significantly and provides a flexible structuring of roles. Over time, these roles have been institutionalized and each has its own formalized process of discernment. Most of my subjects had completed formal training to become a Focolarini, married Focolarini, Volunteer, Religious Focolarini, or Gen. In interviews, subjects tended to reflect on and center their life through their vocation. Their acceptance of and

commitment to their vocation was not the result of an immediate or spontaneous decision; rather, it was one that included important events and turning points, timeliness, and a long process of careful reflection both individually and collectively. This was frequently narrated as a three-stage journey of initial sacrifice and discernment, development of the calling, and an ultimate decision to accept and live out the vocation.

Sacrifice and Discernment

The first stage, accepting a vocation of unity, is often characterized by sacrifice. Edie described this experience of full commitment using the analogy of having one's head cut off:

I always been attracted by this idea of giving all of myself to God, you know. Yeah, it's like, you know, it couldn't be...it couldn't be, you know a half and half of this thing...It's giving of stuff, giving everything. And I remember this one time in Italy when I was there, I was reading an experience of the first companions of Chiara and he had to cut his head off, cut his head off. Figuratively of course, meaning like give up—even to give up his way of thinking because sometimes our human way of thinking makes us...it's a road block to building unity, you know. Sometimes you have to let go of your...the way you think, even the reasoning faculty, whatever. And I thought that's...really radical. I wanted to do that...I made that commitment. Okay. Let's go. Whenever something comes up that I don't understand, I'm going to cut my head and not think about it and say yes to unity.

Sheila described initially enjoying her time with the Focolarini but feeling at first unwilling to give up so much to join as a Focolarina herself. She described her resistance to pursuing this way of life as a feeling of reluctance, hesitation, and fear. However, she was encouraged to continue her discernment by attending a Gen meeting where vocation was being discussed:

So I went to this meeting, and I went there, you know how we are with the Gen and with the youth, they call us the Gen, the youth. But when we were all there, they called us Popi, which is like anytime you refer to the Focolarini, and for me

this was scary to be called that name. Like oh my gosh, this is not my way, but then we were asked who among us are scared? And I raised my hand, and I noticed that I was the only one who raised her hand. And so, one of the Focolarini came to me and said, you know Sheila it is ok to be scared, but what is important is that you say your yes to God, and if in the end it is not a yes, maybe it is not your way, you won't regret it because those are years spent for God, but in the end if it was supposed to be a yes, then you would regret not having those words for God. So, even if you say yes now, and say no later on, those are years spent always for God so they are never a waste of time.

These comforting words helped aid her decision to eventually become a Focolarina.

For many subjects, the ultimate sacrifice was that of celibacy. Many subjects stated that when they were children, they had dreamed of someday being married. This was experienced as a particular difficulty by subjects who had been in relationships while simultaneously pursuing vows of celibacy as fully committed members. One subject, Melanie, stated her belief that both the life of a married woman and that of a Focolarina were vocations. However, she came to realize that being a Focolarina could bring the same kind of happiness and fulfillment as marriage:

I said, "Wow, that Focolarina is not married. She didn't get married when she was young. She's so happy." All of a sudden it opened up. Wow, you can be happy if you don't get married. I wonder why she's so happy. She doesn't have a family. Oh, but she has a family. She has us. It's like a whole—I remember like almost stayed up the night thinking of this. It didn't even dawn on me that I want—it was like it started clicking that there is a different vocation. And the next day, I asked at one point, "I wanted to ask you, you are not married, right?" She said, "I am." "Where's your husband?" "I married Jesus." I remember when she said that. It sounded so beautiful. Oh, my gosh, and she was like so simple about it. I've given my life to him and he's always with me. And I said, "How did you know?" And she said, "He let me know."

Many subjects expressed their commitment through the analogy of marriage, down to the very idea of fidelity to one's spouse. Marietta described her decision to join the movement as one of falling in love:

In a sense it's like when you fall in love, it's not that you know one, two, three, and four. You fall in love and you get married and you go with that person. But for me to fall in love with God—fall in love with God and then obviously to take all the steps to go—obviously to Loppiano because Loppiano, it's a school of formation. You need to learn also how to be in community, what it means, all the teachings of the church in terms of moral, social doctrine. It's a preparation to takeoff in a sense. It was really like--yeah. I would say really when you fall in love, you take all the steps you need to take without even thinking because they're part of this passion that you have.

Peter had thought that a particular woman in his life was someone he might eventually marry. However, in the process of vocational training, his feelings began to change:

I felt very much a brother-sister relationship between us. That was also another thing that struck me that this was really the first time I felt like this brother-sister relationship with this person. And that eventually helped me, this experience, to make also a deeper choice for God because it was one of the very time that I said, wow, if it were to be my vocation in life to marry, I really felt that this could be the woman I wanted to marry. By really giving that up and saying no, I really want to pursue in this road I felt God calls me to, it became much more deeper this relationship with God because for some reason that I could give this up for you, God.

The step towards total commitment to the Movement required sacrifice to serve the group as well as to serve God. The most profound sacrifice for many members, particularly the Focolarini, was sacrificing marriage to fulfill their vow of chastity.

Developing the Calling: The Logistical and Sacred Dimension

The choice to make a full commitment to the Movement was often cited by subjects as a point of logistics. For example, Justin, who had been involved in the Movement since high school, carefully considered his options before making a decision. His education, in fact, became an important factor in his relationship with the movement. At one point, he tried to balance his academic and spiritual goals by living in a Gen house while going to school. He discussed the tension that resulted:

I think at a certain point, I mean, there was this moment of vocation that I really thought this was it, and it was almost at the same time that I was also confirmed that yes, that is ok. And I was still studying, so at a certain point was the idea that let's try to live one year in the same house. The Focolare Community was there, try to live in the Focolare house and try to see how things go, and it worked out.

His provisional approach provided him with the needed perspective to make a solid and a well-informed decision

In Peter's case, he chose the Focolare lifestyle when other possibilities did not materialize. He explains his confirmation:

There was a lot of things going on in my life, still looking for a vocation, my exams didn't quite work out the way I wanted them to, there was girl I was interested in that wasn't working out, many things I just needed to talk (pause) more than anything I felt that maybe I had a vocation to religious life and I also wanted to work for unity. I don't know why, but I had a sense in me that unity was a value.

Through a process of elimination, the Focolare Movement appeared to be the optimal and most "valuable" commitment to make. Despite the seeming banality of this logic, however, Peter also connects himself to his vocation through a spiritual experience; he had a supernatural experience that pushed him toward a spiritual calling:

I was in class one day in the middle of a lecture and I just felt inside of me as if someone had said, "Peter who are you?" And with the question I also felt myself, I saw myself as just in front of God as this very lonely person who knew nothing about himself...I just had a sense that it came from God. I mean I couldn't prove that to you, but I just had a sense that it came from God, this Peter who are you? And in that sense, I also had a sense that he had called me to something, to give my life for him. And I felt called to unity.

In a place of isolation and with strongly negative feelings towards other options, Peter chose to follow what he considered to be a sacred plan. His calling filled an existential need that had been missing. Thus, choosing a vocation gave him the spiritual fulfillment, giving him a purpose and a practical plan when other possibilities were not working out.

Ann shared Justin's thoughtful deliberation of what it meant to be part of the Focolare Movement, emphasizing that it was not an overnight change. She did not have the religious experience that Peter had nor did she take as long to decide to be a part of the Movement. She did, however, resist for some time what she internally felt to be her religious calling. In fact, she resisted becoming a fully committed member until she knew that this was not something to be resisted. She explained how she came to her final decision to accept the spirituality as her own:

My thought was that today I experienced a light, and I am not going to change my life, I wouldn't even know how to do it, but I will not forget this day...So all I did was I said ok, what do I do now? And one of them, the Italian women, said to me well, this is the perfect answer for you, she said, 'There is a place that Jesus said I will manifest to those who love me, so do what you understood.' And I understood that if I wanted to love, if I wanted to change the world, which I wanted to do...I had to live, I had to love, I had to seek God. And that was going to make a difference; I wanted to make a difference in the world that is what I had to do.

Ann's initial hesitance was ultimately rewarded when she realized that her own interpretation of the Movement could allow her to achieve her religious calling. The Movement gave her the freedom to do what she wanted, which was to make a difference in the world.

Solidifying the Calling: Saying Yes to the Movement

The final stage in committing to the Movement begins with a sacred experience, a kind of conversion that leads the individual to understand that the spirituality of unity is for him or her. It is followed by a collective confirmation with other members of the movement. Accepting this religious way of life is perceived as being a human choice with a sacred and radical purpose. Ann described the meaning of the religious calling:

I think what fascinates me about this spirituality is the desire to have a religious experience and to have an understanding of the experience, the depth of it, of Christianity. And so, what fascinates me, surely, and this goes back to the calling, is what does that mean? That God is calling us to a mystical experience and that is why he created us.

It is important to note that each of the Focolarina/o emphasized the need to determine his or her own interpretation of the reality and to live that reality as it and it alone gives to his or her life significance and passion.

For instance, Justin's journey was one of the longest of any of the subjects and at the same time, the most developed. He first experienced the Movement as an adolescent, continued to have structural support in the form of other Gen boys and a mentor, and eventually had experiences that affirmed its spiritual power. He recalled one such incident that led to his total commitment to the movement:

There was indeed one particular moment that we had during the summer when I was like eighteen... We were like twenty Gen boys. We had our meetings separately, sometimes we joined the house, sometimes we were together. And for some reason it was a really good bonding among us, but also not just bonding, but also that I felt during the days that we got to know one another, and also the unity that we had among ourselves, you know, they say where two or more are gathered in my name, that is what I really experience (pause) it was such a strong unity, such a harmony, such a (pause) that I, that one night I just still remember I couldn't sleep all night. I had this fire inside burning, this joy of this (pause) this joy that I felt was so heavy.

Justin understood that for him the Movement meant a level of spirituality that could only be sustained by his continual involvement and development. The phrase, "Where two or more are gathered in my name" is a biblical reference to church establishment that each subject used at least once in the course of his or her narrative. Justin, however, was the first to go into detail about the *new reality* that the movement encouraged. This is his explanation of the reality:

J: It was for me really a chance that God was giving to me to really go into depth in this reality before it was too late.

N: What is this reality?

J: The reality of trying to live outside of yourself and not be preoccupied with your own plans. Or trying to be...to live the gospel very concretely like by giving of yourself by listening.

N: Were there other moments that you felt you were living this reality?

J: Um, yes, I think that moment also indicated a kind of change that I (pause) it was a certain kind of conversion. And I, so then, from that point on in my relations, the rapport with other people became much more solid, much more meaningful.

Peter also recalled two supernatural experiences that led to his confirmation and acceptance of his calling. The first determined his calling, and the second solidified it.

I remember a year later, I was walking home saying the rosary, and just when I was starting the rosary I felt inside almost like a question, said in Italian, '*A tu quise*, who are you?' I felt that I had a fairly deep understanding of the presence of God in my life. It was like I experienced the cosmos, that the whole of everything was one. I experienced in my soul. It wasn't something I had to think about. I experienced that all was one was real, that this God was, that this cosmos was one, that somehow that the ground you were walking on was sacred ground. It was really a part of the vision of St. Paul, that the fullness of God. I don't know if you know Ephesians, but 'The fullness of him fills the universe and all its parts,' Ephesians 1:31. So, I felt like I almost experienced that. That was an experience I will never forget.

This narrative echoes the biblical conversion experience of the apostle Paul's vision, to which the subject readily alludes and is understood as divine confirmation of Peter's spiritual direction.

Ann did not have the supernatural vision that Peter or Justin had, but she did come to recognize that becoming a Focolarina was aligned with her religious calling. This, she noted, was not her realization alone but was manifested through supportive structures that helped her acknowledge her calling through progressive stages:

I realized that God was calling me to take, you know, to be one of the, to give myself completely to him, not just to live the spirituality, but to be one of the

community leaders. And I thought, I can't believe it, but I felt it was...I felt that I was called, so that was a shock for me. So I didn't necessarily say yes right away, but I was sure of it and others had recognized it, too.

As the testimony of these subjects indicates, the discourse of religious vocation occurs in stages facilitated and encouraged by mentors, leaders, fellow seekers, and other participants. In fact, the spirituality of unity, from the moment one commits to it, is achieved through a collective approach. The collective experience of commitment is precisely what enabled transitioning members to *go ahead* and *say their yes to God*. In almost every case, confirmation of a vocation for unity took place through ongoing conversations about the future. Isabella discusses how she shared with a Focolarina that she had said her *yes to God*:

When I came back from the—from the meeting in Rome, yes, I went to the Focolare. Actually, the Responsible for the whole movement in Portugal was visiting my city. So as we got off the bus and I went straight to the Focolare center and said I'm going home. She was there—for me it was a surprise because I didn't expect her—so I had a chance to tell her. Just told her, you know, I think that this is what God wants for me. One thing that really helped me was her answer because I was still very new to the ideal...so she said, you know, we'll keep this as our secret. It's not as a secret, other people knew, but we keep this as our secret and in the meantime you really try to live the Gen life to know—to go ahead in this life. And that to me was to give me such a freedom to go ahead.

For many subjects, it was difficult to openly communicate the fact of their vocation, and it sometimes took years before they were ready to share it with others. Alberto described his appreciation for the personal process of discernment because it allowed him the freedom to make a decision. At one point, he decided to go to a meeting for young people seeking to learn about the Focolarini life. After the meeting, it was clear to him that this is what he wanted to do. Ironically, after sharing with the local Focolare that he felt called to be a Focolarino, they were not surprised. He claims, “They expected me to say it. We

had talked about it before, but again with very little pressure from them. So it was just a simple thing.” Later, I asked him to clarify this collective process when he had earlier said that others had made a choice for him:

N: What does that mean, that you had others make the choice for you?

A: Not the choice, to ask, not to make, uh, maybe not to make the choice, that is not the right thing, to ask someone else for the grace to be faithful to the choice. Let me think here. It is like that it is something so big to ask for because it is a choice for a lifetime and I felt that I didn’t have the power, that I couldn’t ask for it just by myself. I said I wanted it, but that someone ask with me, maybe it’s the “with me” is a better choice of words. Also, then I would know it will have value, especially if that person is somebody who is deep spiritually.

It may be helpful to note that transitioning members were given the freedom to decide whether or not to continue the process, but the Movement’s characteristic emphasis on unity meant that subjects preferred to not continue alone. On the other side of confirmation, Helene described how Focolarini helped transitioning members discern their calling:

N: Have you ever been involved in confirming for someone that this is their vocation? Involved in sort of that decision making?

H: They usually have to pretty much decide for themselves, that I would say, because you didn’t convince somebody, you know. Sheri always told us was if we keep Jesus in the midst, there really was that love there then a vocation is just more real in a sense. If there is a vocation then that will be confirmed by their love. If there is none, that will also be confirmed because when a person lives at hundred percent or hopefully as much as possible hundred percent, if then they say this is not my vocation, then you can believe that.

To confirm one’s vocation is to live it as fully as possible. Even in deep uncertainty, subjects possess the intuition to *try out* the Movement’s spirituality as a way of testing their commitment. Carmen explained that she came to *say her yes* to the Movement by first practicing the spirituality of unity and then putting her faith in God to tell her what the next step might be:

In the meantime, I started putting into practice loving everyone, trying to be the first one to love where ever you could or really make those experiences that when it's difficult, you really do your best, whatever...I did not tell anyone about it. But, you know, when one does the will of God, and I said my yes. I remember I wrote—I wrote in a piece of paper and put it my wallet, I choose you Jesus forsaken in whatever vocation you choose me.

The pull towards the spirituality is manifested in one's actions and becomes evidence for transitioning members that the life of the Focolare is for them.

Discussion: Deprivation, Agency and a Religious Social Movement

Spiritual Discontent and a Religious Social Movement

My findings suggest that individuals join the FM because they are spiritually discontented in the Catholic Church as nominal members, experience a kind of cognitive dissonance, and thus, are seeking a more satisfying and change-oriented religious experience, one that reflects what they believe being Catholic ought to be. As a general point in regard to spiritual discontent, it makes sense to argue that individuals join religious social movements because there is a seemingly *right* feeling about being involved in the movement. (Rochford, 1982) Lofland and Stark's (1965) last condition in their model for conversion is intense exposure and interaction with the new religious movements (NRMs). Likewise, Snow and Malachuk (1984) found that NRM participants describe conversion on two levels, radical personal change distinguished by the degree of change as slight to total personal change, and change in one's universe of discourse wholly focused on a central authority. Individuals transform their spiritual discontent and cognitive dissonance into a plausible model of spiritual transformation—that the FM is the answer to their spiritual quest. Their full commitment to the Movement testifies to their ability to understand their past view of spirituality with their newly attained

perspective. The data suggests that it is indeed an intense and total process, bridging mere interest in the Movement to total commitment to the Movement. Stark and Bainbridge (1980) argue that potential members are predisposed to new religious movements (NRMS) because of personal troubles, the spiritual vision/solution that the NRM provided, and the fit between the NRM ideology and their own ideas about social problems/social change. The narrative structure of the interview data provides personal biographical reasons for why the Movement was important to them starting with spiritual discontent, how they learned about the Movement, and how they made a total commitment to the Movement.

The Role of Agency in a Religious Social Movement

Still, this analysis is rather incomplete. Whereas NRM theory covers extensively why individuals leave normative religious channels for more experimental and radicalized groups outside mainstream religious avenues, what about joining experimental groups within already established religious traditions? How does one characterize discontent with current religious experience yet choose to remain within his or her self-identified religious background? Almost all members came to the FM through a Catholic related network, and most self-identified as Catholic. For the FM members their spiritual discontent did not result in nominalism or leaving the tradition altogether; but rather, it was transformed into an intensified and agentic version of Catholic identity. FM members, especially those who grew up in the Catholic Church as lay members are not ready to relinquish their Catholic identity, but they are dissatisfied with their spiritual experience; they are searching for a deeper religious experience; and, most importantly,

they are seeking to make a difference in the world. Therefore, meeting the FM comes at an opportune time for individuals, providing a structure to mobilize their discontent into something better which includes a mechanism for making a difference in the world. Additionally, they do not have to leave their religious tradition behind. To answer the overall research question within the framework of discontent, agency and a religious social movement: how do individuals come to embrace the FM spirituality as radical, making the spirituality meaningful and plausible for social change through a communitarian lifestyle that affects their everyday life—the FM provides an opportunity for greater participation, meaning, and purpose within the Catholic Church. To put it in social movement theory language, the FM provides agency for ordinary individuals who would not on their own be as effective in enacting change both within and outside the Catholic Church. Through the recruitment process, individuals come to realize that this spirituality is what they are seeking and that it is a unique way to express their desire to make change in the world. As a religious social movement, the FM empowers individuals to work collectively to create the desired spiritual goal of unity in the world.

Agency relates to the intersection of biography with social structure, especially pertaining to individual responses and contributions within a social context. In the social movement literature, agency refers to the *meaning side* of movement involvement and to the relationships that individuals have within the movement. Strauss (1984: 158) characterizes agency, especially as it relates to joining (or converting to) a movement, as an activist⁶ experience within the movement:

⁶ As opposed to a passivist experience, whereby participants are coerced and manipulated into joining a movement.

This approach to the conceptualization and study of conversion is based upon the ‘activist’ imagery of human actors constructing and managing their lives within the context of those social, phenomenological and empirical situations comprising their environment. The collective levels of behavior are treated as deriving from such individual action, but also as becoming a prime determinant of the contexts upon whose basis that action is constructed. Thus, there is no contradiction between analysis from the perspective of the collective and of the individual. However, from this alternative paradigm, conversion is seen as an accomplishment on the seeker’s part, rather than as the effect of social, psychological or other forces.

Through the interaction of the Movement’s activities such as the FM, individuals come to realize that the connection between their everyday experiences and those of others in the Movement constitutes a collective voice. The FM gives ordinary individuals an amplified connection with others while simultaneously generating a collective force for achieving the movement goal of unity. Young (1997) calls this a *shift in consciousness*, especially for the way that individuals speak of their personal experiences—as in, *my* feelings of disenfranchisement or injustice are now symbolically reconstructed as the feeling of us all.

It is imperative note that the concept of agency highlights the fact that individual action in favor of social change cannot be taken for granted especially because agency is an interactional force within a movement—not only a reactor to the social system, but an agent of change within it (d’Anjou, 1996). Agency is particularly interesting as a factor in the FM given the strong forces that discourage concerted action within a highly hierarchical structure of the Catholic Church, (i.e. the overall feeling of helplessness that change is possible) and the day-to-day issues that remove people from the power structures of the Church. As a point of strategy, therefore, “to increase a sense of agency, symbolic strategies should attempt to draw out the latent sense of agency that people

already carry around with them.” (Gamson, 1995: 106) As an interpretive and socially constructed process, agency in yet another way overcomes the *free-rider* problem and feelings of religious nominalism, and it emphasizes the potential effect that individuals can have on their social structure—in this case, the Catholic Church. Bringing the discussion back to the issue of individual biography as it relates to the ideology of the FM, it makes sense to argue that individuals join the FM because they feel empowered by the Movement, and in feeling empowered, they are led to believe in the collective plausibility of achieving unity in the world, which in turn motivates, inspires, and eventually fulfills their desire to be agents of social change. Chapter Three will more fully address the institutional issues related to the Catholic Church and the effect that the FM is having within and outside of the Church.

CHAPTER THREE

A CHANGED WORLD: A VISION FOR A MORE PERFECT SOCIETY

After four years in England at her first Focolare center as a Focolarina, Gabriela arrived in New York in 1977 and spent the next seventeen years living in Focolare centers in Manhattan, the Bronx and Queens. While in New York, she worked as a secretary at the UN and served as a Spanish translator to new immigrants, also helping them to find jobs and schools for their children. At the Focolare centers, one of her primary responsibilities was working with Focolarini nuns (also known as religious sisters). Her description of working with the religious members of the Focolare reflected the institutional shift that had happened in the Church as a result of Vatican II:

It was a time that many religious were throwing their religious life out the window. There was a lot of—because after Vatican II so many religious left and those who stayed, there were difficulty between those much elderly and those younger ones. And the younger ones didn't want to have it anymore and they didn't want to have authority...They knew their religious commitments, but I found that it was—we were almost walking on eggs. You had to be on your tiptoes because so many of them I guess had gone from one way of being religious, very structured, they knew what to do every single moment of their life to this complete freedom. Many of them came together and lived in apartments religious or different congregations. There was no central leader and it was just like girls in an apartment. Some of them suffered a lot because that's the way it was in their communities.

There was considerable conflict between the older generation and their desire for structure and authority and the younger generation with their affinity for freedom and social activism. This is an example of how the FM, a predominantly lay-based

movement, played a role in bridging the gap between the religious orders and the Catholic Church—providing a cohesive, organized structure found in a religious-based communitarian lifestyle and working within post-Vatican II opportunity structure for producing unity in the world.

Having Vatican II as the backdrop for the FM, mobilization for new ways of practicing Catholicism was more readily available to them. Individuals embraced the FM spirituality as radical given a specific institutional arrangement, an agentic-based empowerment within the movement, and a cultural context that made change and innovation more palatable and plausible. The overall research question in this chapter is: How are individuals within the FM empowered to frame, interpret, and implement the spirituality of unity in the spirit of Vatican II while simultaneously affirming the Church's hierarchical structure? A recurrent analytical theme in this chapter (and as a tangential point carried from Chapter Two on agency), will be the intersubjective approach¹ to interpreting how the spirituality is carried out given the institutional constraints of the hierarchy. I will divide this research question into two sub-research questions:

1. How do FM members explain their goal of unity based on their relationship to the Catholic hierarchy?
2. What are the available opportunities for innovation (or strategies to achieving unity) for FM members within and outside of the Catholic Church?

I will conclude this chapter with how the FM fits within the larger discussion of the impact of Vatican II especially as it relates to spiritual innovation and the role of the laity.

¹ Another way of stating this is how they are producing unity together.

Part I: Exploring the Institutional Arrangement of the FM within the Church

Hierarchy

The influence of the Catholic hierarchy on the FM is pronounced in the data. The Church's presence in the FM has facilitated the change-oriented project of unity also maintaining close surveillance of the Movement. One of the key ways that the Church has supported the FM is through the sharing of resources. For example, members are most likely to learn about the Movement through their local parish or parochial school. Church facilities and resources are often used to support Focolare activities such as Gen performances and events. In an example from the interview data, after being serenaded, a local bishop in Sabul, Philippines provided a room in his home so that the Gen could meet there on a regular basis. Many of the Focolare centers are based in houses donated by the Archdiocese, and several Focolarini have diocesan jobs. Cristiano was an immigration lawyer for the Archdiocese, and Crysta currently works for the Archdiocese in Los Angeles. During their time in Loppiano, they study Catholic Church history and catechism. There is very little doubt that the Catholic Church approves of the Movement and the Movement supports the Catholic hierarchy.

Affirming the Catholic hierarchy is an important theme to highlight—the FM is not a radical break from the Church, but rather a social movement branch of the Church also known as an ecclesial movement. The clearest presentation in the data of this institutional relationship was expressed in a talk on the church in 2004. Ann, the presenter turned to Acts for the story of how the church emerged as a community “of persons who believe in Jesus and live his words, people who are different from one another and have different roles to play, but who love one another and help one another

to fulfill these roles.” Over time, the presenter continued, this community required organization and wisdom to guide the community in God’s will. Therein is the need for the hierarchy, Ann states:

These are the priests, bishops and the Pope, what is called the hierarchy of the Church...They have a threefold role—to be prophet, priest and pastor. As prophet, they are called to preach the truth, to teach moral values, even when these may be counter-cultural and perhaps are rejected by society, just like the prophets of old were rejected...The second role they have is to be priests, meaning the one who offers the sacrifice, the one who celebrates the Eucharist for the community. And the third role is to be pastor, to care for the people, to minister to their needs.

Still, this emphasis on the hierarchy cannot be allowed to be overestimated as an important aspect of the Church. The community is comprised of ordinary people attempting to live the Gospel in their everyday lives.

In times of crisis, Ann further stated that God sends to the Church “Holy persons who will show us the way, who point the community back to the Gospel, who help to purify and remind us of our vocation to be another Christ in the world. And this is happening in our times, too.” The FM is representative of several religious movements (or ecclesial movements) she claims “both within the Catholic Church and in other Christian Churches, made up of people who want to live the Gospel in a radical way, with all their hearts. These movements include ordinary people, children, teenagers and youth, but also priests and Bishops. They cover the whole gamut of the Church, and so they are called ecclesial movements.” Social movements renew the spirit of the early church in its communal and personalist dimensions, recovering the *biblical emphasis on the importance of each individual in achieving God’s will* (emphasis mine). I think it is important to stress that while the FM affirms the hierarchy, they are also in a unique

position to see how the ordinary person can inhabit a prominent spiritual role in the Church. In the FM, Ann explains, this has been exemplified by viewing the FM as communally responsible to one another and to the Church: “Where each member has its place, its vocation; everyone should feel that they are brothers and sisters...But at the same time, we do everything in obedience with those who have the charism of authority. It is love that expresses itself in obedience...but it is a love that then returns to us. This is what we have always experienced.”

From the Focolarian perspective, the proper role of religious orders and ecclesial movements is to continue the work of the Holy Spirit, particularly as a form of mutual love that is for the Church, but not limited to it. Ann explained:

Therefore, we want to bring an invasion of love into the Church, into the Catholic Church, among Catholics...But the Church, the Body of Christ, is not limited to the Catholic Church. It includes all Christians who are united by one baptism and one faith in Jesus, and in living the Gospel. Therefore, we want to emphasize everything we have in common...The church also reaches out in love and respect to members of other religions, especially since the Second Vatican Council...It is a vision that is based on love. It is something dynamic, beautiful, invigorating for us and for the leaders of the Church. And we would like as many people as experience the Church as community, a community of persons who love one another.

The structural opportunity for innovation is present, in theological terms, to extend the work of the Holy Spirit while remaining respectful of the authority of the hierarchy. The following section explores the intersubjective nature of how individuals are actually producing the spirituality of unity through family difficulties, cultural differences, and interreligious dialogue.

Part II: Exemplifying the Innovative Structure of the FM

In the praxis of the FM, producing unity in the world is done not in the cloister, but in everyday life—it is a unity that individuals believe brings them closer to God and to each other as a community. At the meeting, John Paul II was quoted that he has affirmed the FM as a “spirituality of community that regards faith, the mystical body, sharing of joys and suffering, to respond to needs, to see what is positive in others as a prize from God, to know how to make room for others, away from selfishness, and gives soul to the structure of community.” It is living this spirituality within the community and the affirmation of the church hierarchy that individuals believe will ultimately yield unity. I will present three examples of how this organizational opportunity for innovation functions within and, at times, beyond the hierarchy and how members of the FM relate to and build on this innovation on an intersubjective level.

The New Family: Responding to the Needs of the Family

At a meeting in 2005 called FamilyFest, a video of the 1993 FamilyFest revealed that Pope John Paul II² affirmed the Movement’s emphasis on family unity. The video begins with the Pope stating, “I say to you mothers and fathers, you have been called to the high purpose of the creator of creating life...proclaim together the value of family, the value of life.” This is consistent with Pope John Paul II’s earlier statements on perceived threats to the family from secularization and hyper-individualism. In the same video, the FM is congruous with what the hierarchy desires and fears:

² This video was shown shortly after the death of Pope John Paul II. This particular event was a tribute both to the Pope and to the Family. The video produced great emotion in the audience as well as providing connections between his life with the work of the Focolare Movement.

The movement proposes what the family is and what it could be. There is presently an attack on the family, a decline of traditional values brought on by individualism, a false understanding of freedom. This kind of freedom is not about realizing God's truth about his plan for family, but asserts rights against others. It does not bring about harmony or love, but brings about human suffering.

The FM's focus on unity becomes particularly salient to the Pope's theological analysis.

As he sees it, when the family commits to mutual love in the spirituality of unity, solidarity is built: "love goes out beyond the immediate family to the world, which generates a society unto itself."

At that same meeting, Pam and Stan shared how after going to FamilyFest in 1993, they learned that "They believe that every child is first a child of God, not theirs first. They see a spiritual dimension in their children and that therefore they are taking care of God's children." This translated into greater responsibility for their children, including the need to endure suffering on their behalf. They described an experience of learning during Pam's pregnancy that their child would be born with a fatal disorder, which they refused to abort. Although the doctors expressed confusion and even anger, the couple stood by their decision. Although the child died shortly after birth, the couple testified that through this hardship they experienced greater unity as a family. They concluded their story with a quote from Pope John Paul II, "Family is the school of humanity when we love and are loved." After Pam and Stan shared their experience, Chiara's statement on the family was read:

The model of the family is a family drawn from the values of a Christian family—first to love, know how to forgive...sharing with others, and solidarity with all—these family values can be found in all religions and cultures where mutual love, basic human values and brotherhood are experienced. The family is a witness of love that builds peace, drawing us near to the day where we would all live as one.

In other words, within the private sphere of the home, the spirituality of unity is

practiced.

In interviews, members shared how family presented both opportunities and obstacles to practice the spirituality of unity. As they described, family members were often at first generally supportive, especially if they identified as Catholic. This positive first impression was helped by the fact that *acts of love* often begin with domestic efforts such as household chores, being kind to siblings, and supporting and being obedient to parents. However, as members' commitments developed, there emerged conflicts of interest and loyalty. Emilio explained the difficulty he had when leaving his family for Loppiano: "They are Catholics, but families in Spain are very close...I started to go less and less to my home and instead I was in Madrid preparing a feast for the Gen and Mariapolis where there are meetings, and my family started to be—not jealous. Yeah, little bit jealous. Let's say they miss me...We were very close. It was difficult for them." Carmen expressed her emotional pain at having to loosen ties with family and her boyfriend. She reported that her father had a difficult time understanding her vocation: "My dad didn't understand at first my choice. It was really very, very hard for him because he was trying to tell me well you can help the poor by building a family." Eventually, she said, her father gave his approval because he came to accept that she was doing what made her happy. Paradoxically, the FM both inspires traditional family formation and challenges family ties when they conflict with the pursuit of vocation within the community.

The New Humanity: Overcoming Cultural Differences

As noted in Chapter Two, members of FM are socialized into the spirituality through extended periods of time spent at major centers and in *little cities* (a process

known as formation). The data provides rich detail on these experiences, exposing the institutional structures that enable innovation and the intersubjective interpretation given by members to the spirituality in everyday life. The culturally diverse membership has occasionally experienced conflict about how to best maximize opportunities for innovation, with divisions often occurring along vocational lines (Focolarini, Gen, Priests and Volunteers). Through the process of negotiating important dimensions of spiritual praxis such as building a united world, encouraging mutual love, experiencing Jesus forsaken with others, living in a permanent communitarian situation, and increasing its relevance to its American context, responding to cultural differences has been a prominent issue within the movement.

From interview data, members shared how *going deeper* into the spirituality tested their applying the ideal of unity. The extent to which individuals were successful depended on their ability to interpret this spiritual principle for himself or herself, adapting and promoting its innovative essence through personal experience. Intercultural conflicts are the most salient example of demonstrating their successes and failures. Building a united world, for example, may sound abstract, but it was experienced as very concrete by members *making themselves one* with those of different nationalities. Greg, who went through formation in the '80s,³ estimated that Loppiano had about 40 different nationalities. In his house were Chinese, French, Italian, Swiss, Korean, and Filipino men, and he himself was from Germany. Although, this presented challenges, particularly with language, he said,

³ Helene, who represented one of the earlier cohorts at Loppiano, in her interview spoke of a more limited international diversity. There were no Focolarini from the Philippines or from any other Asian countries, if outside of Western Europe, they would mainly be from South America such as Brazil, Argentina, Paraguay, and no one yet from Eastern Europe.

I was very happy about it because in a way, it was sort of a step towards what my dream had become at that point being a Focolarino. So it was joyful. It was very exciting, adventurous, kind of. And I—you know, I learned—it was kind of a full immersion...sometimes the relationship wouldn't immediately be great because of so many different cultures...There were moments when I say man, is it possible? Is it possible that this guy lives the same ideal as I do? It certainly doesn't look that way. And this was simply because he was from another culture.

The issue of a language barrier was also mentioned by Isabella in her interview about her experience as an Italian Gen at Loppiano, although her feelings about language and the spirituality of unity are more specific:

I found myself in this reality of the challenge of living with people. Now we're talking about different cultures, different countries. And it was even more the differences because there was one Gen from Korea and I remember that I really had difficulty with her...But for her, it was really a challenge between language and a different way of thinking and I remember one day that I had offered to help her with the language to help explain again with the language problem...So I really made this effort to try to see how I could get through as we would say in the movement, make myself one with her...So I explained the same thing that instead of that, I got an image from nature and from that I explained her that way. She understood this right away. I don't know who's surprised if it was her or myself. It was like wow I got it. It was really with this effort to understand the other.

Overcoming the culture barrier of language imposed by differences in language presents opportunities for unity, but differences between men and women of different nationalities are even more pressing in responding to cultural (mis)interpretations. For example, Brianna's relationship with a woman from Mexico became a challenge when the woman refused to talk to her: "Here we were here to build unity, and she won't even talk to someone in her house. So that was very difficult. That sense of not knowing." As her story continued, she shared her impression that woman did not think very highly of people from the United States and that she had extended this hostility towards Brianna. Despite this, Brianna said that she remained focused on "working for unity, but it takes a lifetime to be able to do it, no, because we are all on one big journey."

In preparation for a lifetime commitment, experiences at Loppiano, Montet and other Living Cities became a step for transitioning members toward greater understanding of how to achieve unity in the world. Clara, a Romanian woman, found herself challenged by the issue of wastefulness, which she interpreted as a problem of class:

I remember coming from poor Romania...I remember the experience with the shopping bags when we were in Loppiano because I didn't want to throw away anything. I wanted to use everything...one of the girls, she was really offended that I really wanted to keep all those bags...Maybe I have to let it go these shopping bags...Honestly in that moment, it's like the other is more important than the shopping bag.

Ann described her cultural view as an American that achieving unity with others required material sacrifice, which gave her a theological basis for how to understand Jesus in their midst: "I had a lot of cultural things I had to learn to lose those things like efficiency. And these were not the most important things; the most important thing was to love. I learned there to give you a structure to things, how to listen to the voice of Jesus inside me to help me in each moment, which is something I struggled with before." For the transitioning members, cultural viewpoints initially triggered conflicts; yet, through continuous interaction and dialogue, many of them were able to interpret these differences as opportunities for achieving unity.

One of the operative constructs in this process was the idea of mutual love. Father Tim explained mutual love in relation to cultural differences:

It was really an exercise in mutual love. And it was often quite hard working together. For example, I would work side by side with someone from Uganda. And as an American, I was all concerned about getting my showering time... quitting on time and things like that. But for example when it was time to quit, he would usually say, "Now we're going to pick some old letters or something" and that meant I would have to let go of my shower or different things. It took a lot of

effort. It wasn't easy. It was sort of a boot camp in a sense that it was—spirituality boot camp because it was quite demanding. And I guess I was satisfied with that, but it was really—it was not easy in a sense. It always took a constant effort to love.

To sacrifice this *right* to do things his way was an expression of mutual love for the other. Cristiano, an Italian Focolarino, described how a conflict over household chores helped him adjust to another culture, ultimately affirming his belief that love for the other could overcome differences: “So that day while we were washing, I told him, I said this takes very, very long. He says, well but it’s better. It’s more hygienic. I said okay. So the next time...I did it his way, so he was very happy. And to tell you the truth, I did pick up the habit to do it. It’s better...It was very good. I learned this from him. George from Uganda...We’re very good friends.” The practice of mutual love was rewarded by improved relationships and the opportunity to reevaluate one’s own cultural predispositions. As Rita explained:

I think the openness to other people and also to understand that unity is something really big—that how the Gospel puts down the barriers of relationships because certainly my way of thinking is very different from the German way of thinking just in small things...I think that the interesting thing is when you are away from your own culture, from your own ways of doing things from your own country you see it in a different light. Maybe not right away but after a while because you have a way of comparing with others, then it is a very interesting thing, it is a, how do you say, it is maturing you as a person in the way that you can be more objective, analyzing, comparing, or evaluating your culture.

The necessity of this foundation becomes evident when relationships are tested during times of suffering and loss.

Another important dimension of the spirituality of unity as it relates to cultural

diversity is the theology of Jesus forsaken.⁴ Connecting with others in their pain is one of the more profound intersubjective dimensions of building unity. Silvia described an experience of working with the woman responsible for her house in Montet. At first their personalities clashed, but in the ensuing year, the woman developed breast cancer. After her surgery, Silvia became her primary caregiver:

I was trying to do my best to love her. Also because in her condition, she was sick, you know, she didn't have treatment yet. She just had the surgery, but then she had to go back to treatment with radiation, and that was tough too because she had side effects...I tried to love her and I knew she loved me...and it bonded us together so strongly that it was much better afterwards.

In sharing their hardships, the women found a concrete connection to the spirituality of Jesus forsaken (or shared experience of Jesus on the cross) not simply as individuals who were in pain but as able to engage in an intentional way with the suffering of others. Lia came to understand this expansion of the experience of suffering through her multicultural experience at Loppiano:

The understanding, the deeper understanding of Jesus forsaken, that reality that I talked to you before because it help me to realize and maybe itself within me, but also outside of me. Things that were maybe painful or challenging or, you know, it really helped me to give a meaning to suffering in my life also, and realizing this before would have stopped me or become an obstacle, was now an opportunity a springboard an opportunity to enter into a new phase—an opportunity for growth, an opportunity to open up to other realities with other people...I feel that I can go anywhere or do anything. It doesn't matter if I didn't know the language. If I didn't know the people. It doesn't matter if I think like them. It didn't matter whatever I did that having encountered this reality of Jesus forsaken and felt called to really live for him and to live this life made it—it kind of gave me the sense of freedom, you know, and readiness to do whatever.

As such testimony indicates, the deepening of these relationships within and across cultural boundaries produced a willingness to bring the spirituality of unity wherever

⁴I will address more fully the idea of Jesus forsaken in the last chapter when I address suffering in relation to the meaning of religion. This section on suffering only relates to conflict around cultural differences.

these individuals were placed.

Although the subjects found moving from one country to the next to be challenging, the experience of cooperation and participation they gained from the Little Cities prepared them to extend its spirit beyond national borders. Many Focolarini explained this transition (for instance, moving from Loppiano or Montet to a permanent Focolare center) with the analogy of passing from one room to the next in the same house; they found difference in language and culture, but the same spirituality, the same extended family, and the same ideal. It is a fact of life for the Focolarini that they must adapt to unfamiliar places and that their stay at a center is never permanent. Yet, it is the spirituality itself that permeates this reality, giving members the ability to accept and engage with its limitations and, despite its difficulties, is ultimately found to be enriching and rewarding. Marietta explained:

It is one thing to read it in the book, and another thing is to really live with the people who are different from you. But I always find it an enrichment because it's not only spiritual enrichment for sure, but also human enrichment because when you then find people especially now this globalization you come to meet so many people, you're almost ready to have a dialogue with people or other cultures because you have a training ground within the community. So I always find it a gift, you know...I think that it's really a gift because you need to learn and also the culture where you're going to live and you have to really be immersed and become a part of it.

Such opportunities for innovation can only be acquired by overcoming cultural barriers especially when members are forced to adapt to completely new environments. Crysta described her transition to Venezuela from Costa Rica,

I remember one of the hardest things were I had arrived in Venezuela and two weeks later there was this civil war. And I come to a country that was very peaceful. We don't have army. And there was much conflict...That was hard. And the second thing that was hard was in my culture, people tend to be very gentle in the relationship with others. We don't say truth to people, but we

really...we tried to be kind about it...In Venezuelan culture, people tell you straight to your face without—without, you know, any pre-knowledge. So it was tough...And the third thing was the smog because I came from a country really clean and I live outside of big city so there was no smog...after I've been there a while there was a conference call with Chiara and she said in her thoughts that it was enough to have little piece of heaven to fill me with God, to be connected with him. And I remember walking down the street going out to work and looking at the sky and thinking, you know, in the middle of this noise and pollution and whatever, you just feel better. That's the meaning of seeing everything in new eyes...I didn't even know how it happened, but I felt that I loved that nation even more than the nation I came from.

For U.S.-bound members, preparing for the States is an important part of their time at Loppiano and Montet. The experience of formation is comparable in their minds to the level of diversity they expect to find in the United States, yet, they also recognize that there are particular nuances of American culture that challenge their effort to create a spirituality of unity.

The cultural conflict in the United States that emerges in the data most frequently is that of race. Since the beginning, when the Focolarini established a center in Harlem and Southside Chicago in the late 1960s and early 1970s, racial tension has always tested the limits of the community's ability to create unity. Alberto described the experience of being in Harlem and taking college classes:

It's heart of Harlem...So that was a new totally new to me, you know, most of my classmates were blacks, African-Americans and we talked a lot about African-American history and slavery and American history, so that—I knew nothing about that. That opened up. I learned a lot. I did a lot more reading than my required reading for the courses. It was really fascinating to me, a lot of suffering, a lot of suffering for me personally too because I made some friends, some friends, not a lot though. Yeah, I was white and they were black. We were, you know, close in the classroom, but not a lot beyond that. And that made me—not their fault or my fault, there was just this wall, this barrier, you know, that I felt was very strong. And that was suffering too because I was living for united world. This is what I was doing with my life, so to come to face with that was strong. But then I didn't know what to do. Well this is—I remember many times—yeah, many times walking around Harlem going back to the subway or something and

thinking—just looking around and thinking this is impossible. We're not going to make it. We're not going to make it. I would like to do this, to build bridges with people, these kids, African-Americans.

As I will discuss more fully in this chapter, eventually, the Focolare Movement built relationships through interreligious dialogue with the Muslim community in Harlem. In Chicago, the Focolarini's decision to move the center to the Southside of Chicago came at a time of deep racial and cultural divisions. When they moved to the Southside, white members threatened to avoid the new center. Jackie explains,

When we moved in '68, March '68, the people that we knew on the Northside, many of them said, well you won't see us again because we can't go down there, we will never go to Hyde Park, so I remember the Focolarini, I was so new, they were saying, oh well, it doesn't matter, we will start from scratch...The black population was so angry, so angry at the whites that any white person that dared to even be on their street they would beat you up, or stab you. It took a while for people to have the courage to come...So, what happened is that some of these children from past 47th St. would wander into this neighborhood...The men's Focolare would invite them to play basketball, and so they got to know the boys and some of the boys would invite their sisters to come. And so it was very nice, within a year we had meetings where we had Filipinos, we had Asians, blacks, and whites, and it was really the beginning of a new era, it was so revolutionary for us who were from Chicago...They really started to have experiences, to live the ideal, to try to love, and for them, to come into a house of all white people was like incredible, probably their first experience in their whole life. Some of the adults we started to meet, too. And then also, if we knew anyone at work or school we could invite them home. So the community of the Focolare started to become more interracial and now it still is. So it was really a very scary time to live at that time, and that lasted for quite a long time. I think from the beginning, it was really a testimony of unity that we gave at that time. We made up a lot of songs about black and white building bridges, that we can build a new world with people.

The situation was different for the Movement's early days in Los Angeles in the 1980s when the Focolarini perceived the main cultural issues to be centered on materialism busyness and the unwillingness of various racial groups within the FM community to communicate or work together. The Focolare responded by building commitment and

discipline with the awareness that the membership was divided by its many social obligations. This was especially true in their work with the young people where they emphasized the idea of vocation as a focused and full-time commitment. Margherita explained the complexity of a distracted and materialistic culture: “I think especially here in California, in Los Angeles, there’s so many distractions. I guess if you grow up somewhere else, you really have to constantly concentrate because you feel that all you have to do is make yourself one.”

The challenge of striving for innovation within an American context bears many similarities to the Focolarini experience from the earliest formation days (i.e. the need to sacrifice a particular way of doing things for the sake of a more harmonious and unified relationship with the broader culture). Angela offered an analogy first used by Chiara to emphasize the need for cultural adaptation: if a well-meaning person offers to pour a glass of good wine into her cup of water, she must choose between accepting the water-down wine or getting rid of the water to enjoy the wine: “That’s how I feel even though my cup is full of my Brazilian culture. I have to empty it to get the fullness of the American culture.” Expressing a similar thought in a different way, Adriana said it was “to forget being Italian, but really try loving in an American way.” The intercultural and international dimension of the movement provides several illustrations of how FM members integrate the principles of innovation and unity and how the resulting interpretation empowers them to implement their ideals.

Universal Brotherhood: Building Interreligious Dialogue

As their work became intercultural, it inevitably also became inter-religious, particularly in the United States. As the FM has repeatedly stated, the idea of unity is not

simply a goal of the Catholic Church, but one of the human spirit. The interreligious and ecumenical work of the FM is an extension of its fundamental orientation towards innovation. Furthermore, that the FM works with both Christian and non-Christian organizations bear the distinctive stamp of the post-Vatican II era. In the decades (and centuries) prior to the Second Vatican Council, ecumenical and interreligious dialogue had lapsed into neglect. Thus, the work of this dialogue, as with that of intercultural development, was assumed enthusiastically by lay members of the FM, who recognized both the need and the opportunity. Examining the data on Focolare and Muslim interreligious dialogue reveals yet another level of intersubjectivity, defining how unity can be created between persons of different religions while retaining the individuality of religious identity. Interreligious dialogue always has the possibility of theological conflict and the underlying fear of relativism. Yet, both Catholics and non-Catholics within the FM have developed concrete ways of achieving unity without having a conversionist agenda. Finally, the data suggests that interreligious dialogue happens as a negotiation between the laity and their respective authoritative structure, whether Muslim or Catholic.

Chiara's vision of interreligious dialogue emerged from a larger project known as a universal brotherhood, which is simply to bring together all of humanity under the ideal of unity. In a video, Chiara states very clearly how members of the Focolare are to achieve unity with those who are different:

We must be the first to love. We must be sufferers of love. And we must take the initiative. This love is not idealistic, but concrete. This love needs acts, such acts to feed the hungry, help those in pain, the disabled, the homeless, single parents, those with AIDS, materialists and hedonists, we must have compassion. These are acts of love. This love must be expressed with deeds. There is a social

awareness to love other nations as well as our own.

In the same video, Pope John Paul II gave his approval for this particular work: “The fruit of dialogue is the union of people with God and with one another. Through dialogue we make it possible for God to be in our midst because as we open ourselves to one another in dialogue we open ourselves to God, too.” The goal of unity is to become a family of nations. In her interview, Patricia reflected on a conference in Stutgaard, Germany on the topic of universal brotherhood and its implications for the United States:

We too, in the US should work for peace and unity in the world. United in movements with Catholics and other religious groups including their Muslim and Buddhist friends, together we can bring about a universal brotherhood. In the US we can have freedom for all. We need values of high idealism, to develop themes to live toward peace, dialogues, solidarity with the poor, family, and the youth. We need to intensify efforts for brotherhood by sharing goods, being open, and advocates for the poor, for family, and for life.

Universal brotherhood is rooted in the intention of loving one’s neighbor as a starting point for achieving the great social goals of justice, peace, and solidarity. Max echoed the imperative to bring unity in the United States: “We need to reach universal brotherhood in the US, to really be brothers and sisters in the workplace, in our communities...this is key to experiencing unity.” His allusion is to the immigrant experience. Just as they brought cultural items from the home country, so also did Jesus bring heavenly love to earth. He also cited the four characteristics of love according to Chiara, “1. Love everywhere, 2. Be the first to love, 3. Love must be concrete, 4. Love needs to be reciprocal.” These ideals of love, understanding and solidarity for the purpose of unity can be found in every religious tradition—a fact noted frequently and with approval by the FM. For example, during the same Stutgaard meeting, a video was shown that streamed quotes from great spiritual leaders and thinkers of many religious and cultures

including Thomas A. Kempis, Mother Theresa, Albert Einstein, Edith Stein, Yitzhak Rabin, JFK, Dostoyevsky, Martin Luther King, Jr., the Dalai Lama, Pope John XXIII, Pope John Paul II, and Chiara Lubich.

Given the strong incentives for innovation that are inherent in the FM, members of the FM are led to understand and concretize this vision on a relational level. One example is the dialogue that has occurred between the FM and the American Society of Muslims (ASM). I learned about this relationship at a Mariapolis in Chicago where members of the ASM and FM were invited to speak about their experiences of each other. On the backdrop to the stage were signs with such slogans as *Unity in Diversity*, *All One Family*, and *Towards a Harmonious Living in the Human Family*. The FM speakers characterized their relationship with the ASM as an experience of being one world. Before the historical background to the dialogue was introduced, Muslims in attendance were informed of a prayer room reserved for their use. The ASM members were introduced as friends of the movement with whom relations had grown deeper, as they had learned to live together in each others' faiths.

The Imam from Chicago prefaced his remarks with the blessing, "Peace be unto you, peace that only God can give" and affirmed that the communities had grown deeper together in relationship, which has been "nourished by the blessed lady Chiara." This was followed by an overview from an FM member of the history of the relationship, which had first begun in Harlem with an agreement between Chiara and Imam W. Deen Muhammed to practice the golden rule and to work together for a world of harmony, peace and unity. At the time, both leaders made a pact to learn more about each other and both encouraged their followers to build relationships with one another under the

direction of the spirituality of unity. This spirit of dialogue and collaboration between the leaders continued until their deaths (W. Deen Muhammed passed away in 2008). One such highlight was Chiara becoming the first white woman to speak at the Malcolm Shabbazz Mosque in Harlem, which led to a proliferation of interreligious events. Max reported that, “It was like an explosion that reverberated all over the US because after that day, May 18th, 1997, we had many, many meetings all over the US with our Muslim friends. We have invented all kinds of ways... We have dinners, we have dinner banquets, and they invite us to their banquets.” Hospitality between the communities abounds. When the FM travels to Kansas City, the Imam there reserves a room in his house for them. Max shared about the last time he was in Kansas City:

We are part of the family, and I was there just in April and I have to say that I was so edified when...he has six children and adopted another, so they have 7 children in the house. They all clear out one room for me to stay in (audience laughs) so I am part of the family. So it is beautiful. The atmosphere of prayer in that home because when it is time to pray they all gone, the dining room is cleared aside so that it can be a prayer room, the little girls put on their veils, they say their prayers. The most beautiful thing is that before dawn you hear the prayer call and you hear the little feet going down the stairs because even the four year old, she doesn't want to miss out on anything, goes down to pray before dawn every morning. And Sunday morning, I was there and I came down the stairs, it goes right into the living room and there was the three teenagers sitting there studying the Quran, and this was at 6 o'clock in the morning on a Sunday morning. And their mother said, “I am so sorry that they disturbed you.” And I said, “No, no don't worry.” She said, “They do that every Sunday. They spend an hour praying and studying the Quran.” So, it made me think, I will have to improve my prayer life that this family is imbued with prayer, so there is so much that we have learned from one another and shared with one another.

Thus, it is not only the perception of the FM that mutual respect, love and understanding are crucially happening in a spirit of self-sacrificing unity, but also that of ASM members.

A member of the ASM from Chicago responded similarly that after the initial

contact between Chiara Lubich and W. Deen Muhammed, interaction between the two groups increased dramatically, including weekly deli meet-ups, banquets, dinners, weddings, canoe trips, and a basketball clinic with the youth. From the perspective of the ASM, the Focolare spirituality of unity is one that deeply resonates. For example, in an interview I conducted with an Imam from Chicago, he stated that what attracted him to the movement was its shared spirit, “They have that same genuine way serving people and genuinely being concerned about people without any condition.” Even more important in his opinion, the goal of mutual respect: “We have to get to the point where we actually put down the label of Catholic, Muslim, Jew whatever and just see each other as a human being and then I think they’re really fulfilling their roles and purposes as far as Muslims, Jews whatever your faith may be as a concern.” Alara, a Turkish Muslim, shared at a community meeting in 2002 her experience of attending an Easter mass, saying that she felt touched by the welcome she received and felt comfortable praising Allah with the result that she grew closer to her faith. At the same meeting, another Muslim woman from Detroit shared an experience of the Focolarini coming to her mosque, saying that she immediately felt their love toward her and was impressed by how they put God first in their lives through their expression of unity with others. She finished her story by saying, “You have all of my love and unity. I thank God for having the foresight to bring us together as an example to the whole world.”

The Imam from Chicago stated at the community meeting that this was all possible because the Imam W. Deen Muhammed encouraged his members to move away from earlier separatist attitudes and toward a stance of working with the world community: “Imam Muhammed removed the antagonism toward the church and showed

the way to interfaith dialogue.” Instrumentally, that barrier was removed, in part, because of what members of ASM witnessed in their relationship with the FM, “In Chiara and in all of you, we saw a demonstration of Jesus would have treated people when he walked the earth and how he could reach the hearts and souls of those the human person with his understanding of religion, and people of faith.” The collective work has been compelling enough for many members of ASM to declare Chiara a leader for them all. A Muslim woman said simply at the community meeting, “I feel eternally committed to work shoulder-to-shoulder with my Focolare brothers and sisters to unite the world with the thread of God’s love.” The spirituality of unity has indeed proved to be an innovative model fondly embraced by both groups in the shared lives of their respective communities.

This has led FM and ASM members to explore the possibility of their interreligious experience being more than a formal dialogue, rather, an ongoing relationship. In this case, the openness toward innovation provides the opportunity for lay or rank-and-file members of both groups to become the vanguard of inter-religious life. In relationship with one another it is not about convincing the other to join or convert to their religion; rather it is to engage meaningfully in shared activities and tasks, to promote the values of mutual respect, and to share their stories of bringing unity into the world. Max stated that the goal is not to convert each other to another religion; rather, it is to convert toward loving in the present moment:

The basis of what we use for our meetings together is the art of loving which means that we want to love everyone, be the first to love, be concrete in our love with other, do something practical, and then make yourself one with the other person in order to reach this bond of unity. And so in our meetings with one another, with people of other religions, we share how we are trying to live this art

of loving. This is a daily conversion. You know how you have to convert yourself to start to love again in every moment. And this is the basis for our dialogue.

For both ASM and FM members, their respective authority structures play an important role in achieving the goal of universal brotherhood. For example, Muslim members have been invited to Rome to share their interreligious experiences with FM. Jackie, a Focolarina, told a story about a trip to Rome including an audience with the Pope:

I didn't know how well the Holy Father even hears so I leaned over to his ear, and said, "Holy Father, we are here from the Focolare Movement and we bring we greetings from Chiara Lubich." And he said, "Good, good, thank you." And I thought, oh this is going well, so I said, "You know we are here with the Muslims, we are here for the dialogue with Imam Muhammed of the US." And do you know the Holy Father, it is not easy for him to move with the Parkinson's, he turned like this, he made the effort to turn, he looked right at me, and he said, "*Danae agure*" which means, every success. I wish you every success.

The importance of visiting Rome was also expressed by ASM members. Valerie, the wife of an Imam from Ohio, has visited Rome three times since 1997. She has also made a consistent effort to make regular contact with the Focolare in Ohio, speaking to community members weekly by phone or in person. She emphasized however, that it is not about converting to Catholicism, but to a better understanding of her own faith:

Since meeting the Focolare, it has helped me to live my life as a Muslim. It has impressed upon me the need to be a better Muslim. Like we were saying earlier, we don't try to convert each other, but I think the effect of being around each other is good for anyone. It makes everybody want to be a better Catholic, a better Christian, and a better Muslim, Jew, whatever.

Chiara and W. Deen Muhammed both were clear that the spirituality of unity depends on building a united world based on mutual love, acceptance of one another, and solidarity; and their followers have been intersubjectively bringing this vision to life.

As with the FM, members of the ASM experience the spirituality of unity in their everyday life and in the way they relate to others. For example, a judge shared his experience of working in the criminal justice system, “They are not a case number but a child of God whom God is wanting to reconnect that person with him, to free their soul. I would like to thank Chiara for the patience and insight to be the one who first loves those persons...This is the beginning of a love race. There is an arms race, but I think we should have a love race, to be the first to act out in love.” The Imam from Chicago reflected on the relationship between Chiara and Imam W. Deen Muhammed as:

A powerful union and it has been a wonderful model for the world as they just open up. The world is looking for models and to show that so many things can be bridged, so many things can be overcome, so many things can be put aside, is an example for the world. And we thank God for this. And we are just so excited to work very closely with our brothers and sisters in Chicago, throughout the Midwest here.

He went on to provide an example of how the spirituality impacts his professional life. As a doctor, he feels empowered to understand his relationship with patients as an act of love in the present moment, “On a very personal level, I feel that it made me a better doctor that now it is no longer a job, it is indeed a service again, it is a service, and it is a worshipful service.” Even more importantly, both the ASM and the FM have worked together to bring this mutual love to the inner city, “When I was blessed to travel with (Imam W. Deen Muhammed) to Rome and I met Chiara Lubich myself...I hope and pray that all of us, we try to get this love, this is so beautiful, I think the inner city needs to see this and I am hoping that we can do more.” As members of the FM and ASM travel back and forth between Rome, Harlem, and their respective homes, the practice of unity is affirmed in their authoritative structures, lived out in their interpersonal relationship

with each other and in every aspect of daily life.

Unity is an imperative in the Catholic Church from the top down. Yet, the data presents a unique insight into how innovation is being done from the ground up. It is not surprising that on the one hand the FM works within and affirms the hierarchy, and yet on the other hand that members interpret the communal sensibility of an opportunity for innovation as an inter-subjective reality. Moreover, the relational model that FM members have explored has led to greater and larger projects for unity. The success of interreligious dialogue in the United States has made Muslim and Catholic FM members an example of interreligious dialogue in Catholic circles. For example, when the Imam W. Deen Muhammed went to Rome in 1997, Jackie recalled that he met Catholics who had been missionaries in Muslim countries:

So they were curious about the experience of the Focolare and the American Society of Muslims, how we managed to do this. And when we were there, we were so amazed to see how unique this experience is in the whole world. There were other Muslims from Algeria, from Pakistan, from England, and Egypt...but when we got up and told them that we have hundreds of people who meet together, Muslims and Catholics together, sharing their life with one another, they were just amazed. Every moment after that they would come up to us and ask well how did you do it, what did you do, we want to know more about this.

As members of the FM engaging in interreligious dialogue on the community level, their success in relationship with one another led those in the movement to an even greater belief that unity between all people of all countries, races and creeds is a moral imperative.

Situating the FM in the larger global structure and beyond the hierarchy itself, members of the FM believe that

There are signs that show that the world is moving towards unity—many religious, social and political factors demonstrate this. The world is tending

towards a universal unity, towards a global unity...It is no longer the time of only individual rights or of only the social rights of one category of people, and ours is the time of the rights and duties of all peoples and all humanity.

The medium of change, however, is still at the community level:

Today, humanity is living as if it were a small group, but unlike the small groups of the past, we have not yet found the way to respect diversity and maintain at the same time the fundamental role of unity. Universal brotherhood is precisely the idea capable of embracing the unity and distinction that humanity today longs for. We feel that the Focolare Movement is giving a contribution to this need for brotherhood and now I would like to consider how *unity* became the goal of our Movement.

The analysis that I have presented here should be evidence of the strong correlation between structures of innovation and the possibility of unity on a micro-level, namely as a lived spirit of solidarity and mutually supportive relationship with those who share the same vision.

Part III: Innovation in the Catholic Church from the Ground Up

Although sociologists generally recognize that institutions and individuals mutually constitute and condition one another, studies tend to focus either on institutions or on the elites that are thought to exert the greatest degree of influence on ordinary individuals. However, this chapter examined how a group of non-elites embody the culture and spirit of innovation while simultaneously affirming the authority of the Church. In responding to the larger question as to how individuals embrace the FM spirituality as radical, the findings in this chapter indicate that the FM members are presented with a post-Vatican II structural opportunity for spiritual innovation and lay-based empowerment. It would be helpful to generalize these findings within the larger sociology of religion and social movement literature—especially studies that have noted the effect of the Second Vatican Council. I will discuss how Vatican II provided the

structural opportunity for developing spiritual innovations such as the spirituality of unity, and laid the groundwork for empowering the laity to explore, renew, and reinvent their Catholic spirituality.

Structural Opportunity for a Lay-Based Social Movement: The Effect of Vatican II

Vatican II, I argue, provided the structural opportunity to legitimize and facilitate the FM especially for change-oriented individuals who wished to remain in the Church. According to Ebaugh (1991), Vatican II was a result of modernization influences from without and collective discontent from within. The purpose of the council was to address theological orthodoxy in the face of liberal interpretations and to unify factions within the church, which led to several important reforms. As a general claim about modernization and its influence on forms of innovation, it is important to state that it is possible for a group like the FM to “mobilize new forces and resources without necessarily destroying the existing structure.” (Eisenstadt, 1965: 659) In other words, that which preceded the Vatican II, such as the proliferation of spiritual innovations⁵, can be analyzed within the institutional framework.

Wilde’s (2004: 598) analysis of the progressive side of the Council explores how organizational reform was possible while retaining the Catholic structure—noting to the ability of progressive bishops to develop a collegial, consensus-based model that decentralized authority, represented heterogeneous, semi-marginalized groups, and worked within the confines of the hierarchy, “They wedded hierarchy...with cooperation and participation.” Wilde depicts these bishops as semi-marginalized, not possessing the

⁵ In the history chapter found in the Appendix A (p. 6) I describe how the FM was approved as an ecclesial movement that preceding Vatican II and some have argued that these movements led to the necessity of the Council.

centralized and homogenized power of the bishops of the Curia, but not so marginalized as to lack the power to overturn the work of the Curia on the first day of the Council:

With unique positions as well-known and powerful bishops outside of the Roman Curia, the DM⁶ benefited from their semi-marginality in a number of ways. As the rules by which the Council would proceed were being established, the structure and embodiment of authority in the Church were being questioned... Because they were entirely outside of the Curia, the DM was unharmed by this shift in legitimated authority, but were well-placed to be seen as legitimate leaders as ‘representatives’ of the newly legitimated episcopal conference structure. (598)

A change-oriented Pope during the Council also generated political opportunities for progress and reform. Pope John XXIII did not intervene extensively in the Council, (except on the issue of priestly celibacy and birth control), which also partially explains its progressive results.

The Focolare Movement reflects and extends the decentralized nature of the collegiality-based model proffered by progressive bishops and Vatican II while similarly respecting the hierarchical model of the church. Furthermore, I argue along with Finke and Wittberg (1997) that the “change” project of the FM benefits both Catholics who wish to be innovative in their spiritual practices as a matter of personal devotion, and the wider Church in that it protects monopolistic interests, particularly in its response to cultural change. The structure of opportunity for reform engendered by Vatican II has been assumed by non-elites in the Focolare Movement to empower the laity as agents of change while also fulfilling a specialized role within the Church. Characteristic of both a revitalization movement and an establishment Church-type movement, the Focolare

⁶ The Curia is comprised of administratively-oriented bishops who hold Vatican offices that govern the worldwide Church and during the Council were more or less invested in keeping the Church as unchanged as possible. The DM represents the progressive faction of bishops who met at the hotel, *Domus Maria* (DM) during the Council.

Movement provides a mechanism of innovation from below while institutionalizing the movement under the surveillance of the Church.

Social Change Projects: The New Role of the Laity in the Church

The Focolare Movement seeks to empower its members to practice a deeper Catholic spirituality within the explicit context of the Roman Catholic Church. The Church is one of the oldest among Christian denominations and “is more corporate than federated in its governmental form, and its polity is episcopal rather than either presbyterian or congregational. In its formal structure, the RCC is highly centralized by virtue of policy decisions by the Holy See.” (Gertrud, 1980: 87) Yet, Colomy (1998), Kim (1980), and Fichter (1977) argue that the role of individuals within this institution is often ignored, especially when considering the degree of institutional change over time. Church-type models, in particular, tend to be subject-denying perspectives in that individuals do not simply reproduce social structures; rather, in the case of the FM, they can also challenge and change them. After Vatican II, the laity was encouraged to increase its participation in both the liturgy and the proclamation and living out the theology. Moreover, innovative responses developed after Vatican II emphasized “new approaches to religious enrichment that included adult education, marriage, encounter and charismatic renewal.” (Seidler and Meyer, 1988: 5-6)

Specifically, Kim (1980: 117) argues that four important changes have affected the laity and the structure of the hierarchy:

1. Changes brought on by Vatican II include changes in the meaning of God and God’s relationship to the people (not just transcendent but immanent as well) and structural changes (a sharing of power rather than a top-down strict form of authority vis-à-vis episcopal conferences and parish councils)
2. The changes themselves were institutionalized and legitimated (resources and

- political organization) in order to facilitate their successful implementation
3. Proliferation of new voluntary associations required another layer of institutionalization and politicization especially of associations that were non-official and non-legitimate.
 4. Change will beget further change.

These changes greatly influenced the structure and organization of the FM, especially the development of communal participation explicated through the modernization of liturgy, social ethics, doctrinal statements and devotions. Fichter (1977: 157) argues, “All of these elements were to be restudied, reinterpreted, and modernized. This is what is meant by the so-called structural approach to the new Church, and it was intended to have an impact for change in the personal lives of Christians.” In reaction to the structural changes, a shift towards the values and language of renewal was implemented against that of adaptation to the modern world: “Attention was called to the need for personal sanctity, for spiritual conversion, for internal reform or moral attitudes and behavior” (158). The attention to individual devotion and renewal became the preferred route to social change producing modernized forms of communalism that in turn challenged and changed the Church.

In my study of the Focolare, the data suggests that the changes were successful because of an institutional environment, but also that members of the movement were providing their own vision that challenged and critiqued “existing arrangements, rules of thought, and standardized practices.” (Colomy, 1998: 271) Vatican II provided the mechanisms of change, but Catholics within the FM were (and still are) the agents of change in their respective communities. FM members negotiate between the larger structures of the Catholic Church and their own spiritual needs, effectively interpreting and implementing the institutional reforms recommended by Vatican II.

CHAPTER FOUR

A WORLD FOR THE OTHER: ACTS OF LOVE

In 2007, I had an opportunity to attend an overnight formation weekend, a common event for those who were developing greater interest in the FM. The Focolarini designed the weekend to approximate how the FM community looks from an insider's perspective, that learning and practicing unity was a totalizing experience. I arrived at the Mariapolis center in Hyde Park (in Chicago) shortly after dinner. Seven women from the Midwest area were sitting at the table drinking tea. The women were sharing their experiences of trying the spirituality of unity in relation to their family life. The younger women shared how raising their kids can be difficult. For example, kids can sometimes be such *know-it-alls* and perceive their mothers as old-fashioned. Some of the older women encouraged the younger women by saying that the relationship will improve over time, and when their children are older, they will seek their advice.

The next morning, Jackie, a Focolarina, led us upstairs to a room with chairs in a circle, and we introduced ourselves. There were twenty-five women present that morning. There were ten white women from the Midwest area; eight non-white women who were from other countries including India, Pakistan, Poland, and Peru; and seven Focolarinas. As we went around the circle, I learned that most women had found the Movement through friends or family. Some were hesitant at first, questioning whether the FM was a cult, while others decided to engage right away. All were invited to FM meetings and

events to learn more about the spirituality. Jackie, in an upbeat and enthusiastic manner, shared with us the difference between the Focolare community and monasteries. She explained that the community model was for all people, especially the laity, to explore their Catholic spirituality in greater depth as it related to unity. There are many levels to learn, she explained, and although we might be *good* Catholics, we will find that through the Movement we were just spiritual babies. Patricia, another Focolarina, discussed the particular dimension of the spiritual community—sacrifice. She explained that it is through community that we can love one another, especially when we are suffering. We watched a video about this point in the spirituality. Dana, one of Chiara's first companions, shared how the spirituality is not easy but through community we are to achieve *authentic mutual love* such that we are willing to die for each other.

Jackie shared with us that the idea of unity in the beginning was not clear; rather, they had to live the idea in community with one another before one knew what it was. Through living together, they developed a new style of love—a supernatural love—which was more than sentiment or affection. Ann stated that love was the foundation for the communitarian value of the Movement. The practice of unity is the art of loving one another at all times with all people. The FM spirituality is a collective spirituality expressed in a communal, neighborly and social way. This is a lifestyle for the people of God rather than monasteries, which are for the individual. The collective nature of the spirituality led the Movement to develop in a communitarian way, attempting to go deeper into the spirituality together rather on their own. The emphasis should be on God's love for all rather than God's love for us. After they finished their talk on community, the program ended with communion led by a Focolarino Priest.

This exemplar of building community provides insight into how the FM transforms spiritual discontent into a spirituality of unity. The community becomes a vehicle for social change because FM members can experiment with the meaning of their spirituality in relationship with others who share their moral and spiritual perspective. Although the membership does not readily identify itself as hyper-individualist, nevertheless, it does exist in an American society that emphasizes personal choice over external, coercive forces and individual expression over conformity to a group or institution. Also, in keeping with Catholic tradition, the laity does not typically view their role in the church as particularly authoritative compared to that of ordained leaders. Therefore, the community model becomes a unique social setting for examining how the laity contributes to social change. I will begin the data analysis with explicating the ideological dimension of the community: acts of love, explaining the organizational and structural approach to building community, exploring the cultural influences that shape the community both from the Catholic Church and mainstream culture, and showing how and why the community is achieving the movement goal of unity. Finally, I will end with a discussion on the communitarian model.

Part I: The Moral Project: Performing Acts of Love as a Unifying Dynamic between Self and Others

The community is based on acts of love, a concrete way of creating unity between members. Acts of love were the ideological and performative glue that held the movement together. In fact, the Focolarini at meetings spent much time explaining acts of love. I will provide several examples of how acts of love were explained and why acts of love were so central to the practice of Focolarian community. Acts of love have four

main dimensions: (a) the acts were meant to be relational; (b) they brought the movement goal of unity; (c) Jesus' acts of love were their model, bringing them closer to God; and (d) they were the foundation for building the FM community.

Acts of Love: Intentionally Relational

The way toward unity begins with love for the other. An example of this comes from Chiara Lubich, recorded from the following events at a monthly community meeting: First, Max, the *Capa Zona* in Chicago, cited the four characteristics of love: "1. Love everywhere, 2. Be the first to love, 3. Love must be concrete, 4. Love needs to be reciprocal." He further explicated, "This love is capable of changing things, to bringing about universal brotherhood. This is not just a goal; it is not as distant anymore." After finishing his remarks, he was greeted by rousing applause from those assembled. As this example demonstrates, the moral project is an idea that is relational at its core.

For Focolare members, love is not abstract nor is it sentimental. Rather, it is deeply meaningful and made possible in the here and now. At the same community meeting, a speech was replayed that was originally given by Chiara in Europe:

Through love transplanted from heaven to earth, all people, especially those who are different, now make a united Europe possible. We must love our enemies, the just, and the unjust. We must be the first to love. We must be sufferers of love. And we must take the initiative. This love is not idealistic, but concrete. This love needs acts, such acts to feed the hungry, help those in pain, the disabled, the homeless, single parents, those with AIDS, materialists and hedonists, we must have compassion. These are acts of love. This love must be expressed with deeds. There is a social awareness to love other nations as well as our own. We will become a family of nations, a Europe of home. We must love in reciprocity. Jesus is among us where two or three are gathered, he promises to be there. This is a promise of fraternity.

Concrete acts of love, therefore, are what makes unity actualizable and what makes the members' commitment to the ideal visible. Love elevates enthusiasm into action and

gives substance to ideological claims about the importance of unity and its transformative effects.

Acts of Love: Bringing the Movement Goal of Unity

Mutual love is the responsive dynamic between the moral project and the commitment of the members to building that project into a lived reality. Love would not be misunderstood as primarily self-love or abstract value; rather, it is essentially relational and productive of a sacred connection. The following examples, given by Jackie, illustrate the diverse meanings of love as taught and practiced by the FM:

- Love—for example—leads to communion, communion among us.
- Love is not closed in on itself, but it spreads by its own nature.
- Love brings our souls closer to God, strengthens our union with God.
- Love heals. And Jesus among us is our health, as individuals and as a body.
- Love gathers people together.
- Love is wisdom, is the source of wisdom, is the source of light.
- Love makes unity among people. Jesus in us makes us one.

In other words, love is both sacred and communal, bringing a religious condition of unity. As the foundation of responsiveness, love gives the theological justification for the community: They are to be bound together as Jesus to his disciples, a new family that has love as its center.

Acts of Love: Being Like Christ Brings Them Closer to God

From fieldnotes of another community meeting, Jackie explained how acts of love are to reflect Jesus' own ultimate act of love: "We might wonder, 'How can we do this? What is our way?' We know it: We need to love! Love summarizes all that is required for us to be Christian. The love that Jesus requires, however, is a very particular kind of love, the same love that he brought on earth." As the Focolare understand it, such love requires a commitment to always seek the good of all persons, an action "that makes

ourselves one with everyone. If we love in this way, in each present moment, we ‘*are* another Jesus.’” The enthusiasm required for sustaining such a commitment is balanced with its outcome, which is to love so completely and thoroughly that one discovers unity not simply with another human being, but with God: “The best way to find union with God is to love all day long! When we love Jesus in our neighbor all day, we find God in our heart at night. It is a wonderful way to union with God that we have discovered through the Focolare spirituality. Our way to God is through our neighbor.” As FM members have emphasized, this kind of love is central for the modern Christian faith because it empowers lay persons to develop relationships with God through support and care for one another.

Love of God and love of neighbor as expressed in the New Testament¹ are the basis of interpretation for both the origin of the movement and the Church itself. Patricia explained this connection:

In the spirituality of the Focolare our “neighbor” is very important for us. Why? Because at the very dawn of the movement, the discovery was made that Jesus is present in every neighbor. God is present in every person we meet. So if I want to love God I must see Him in each neighbor I deal with in any way. Mutual love led the early Christians to be of one heart and one mind. Saint Paul wrote: “I exhort you brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, to agree in what you say. Let there be no factions, rather be united in mind and heart” (1 Cor.1:10). So this unity of “mind and heart” that we try to live is also a fruit of mutual love. What difference does it make whether my idea is implemented or that of another, if we are both ready to lose our idea, out of love, we can be sure that the Holy Spirit will give us the idea that Jesus among us would have in that moment, and we will be enlightened. We have experienced this many times.

At the Mariapolis in 2002, Ann gave an address on the New Commandment saying

¹They base their spirituality on the following New Testament references: “Love one another, as I have loved you...This is how all will know you are my disciples: by your love for one another” (Jn13:35); “This is my commandment: love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.” (Jn15:12-14); and “Above all let your love for one another be constant.” (1 Peter 4:8)

that to begin with the love of other is to authentically believe that each person is a child of God: “So, we have to look at each of our fellow human beings not merely as a member of our family, or a relative, a co-worker, a companion, or someone entrusted to our care, much less as an enemy. No, each person is an individual loved immensely by God.” As the New Testament states, followers of Jesus are called to love God and to love our neighbors as ourselves. For the Focolare, these two loves are intimately related in that loving God inspires love for others and loving others advances us closer to God, “The more we love God, the more we will be able to love others, and as we love others, our love for God grows.” Tangibly, increasing love for one’s neighbor builds community by supplying something that individuals are perennially lacking. The FM membership has amply testified that the challenge to individual habits comes from learning to love the other in the tasks and challenges of everyday life despite of the temptation to believe in the superiority of one’s own abilities: “It is better to be less perfect while remaining in unity with our neighbor rather than to be more perfect but in disunity, because perfection does not lie in ideas, or wisdom, but in love.” To do this, however, one must lose the ego or *self* to fully live for the other. Ann explained,

The only thing we have to do is to keep our *new self* alive, as St. Paul says, “If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation.” Paul also talks about putting on the *new man* meaning to act as Jesus would act, to allow Jesus to act in us. Our new self is alive if we allow ourselves to be invaded by supernatural love, if we let ourselves be filled with the love that comes from God.

Acts of Love: Foundation for Building the FM Community

This measure of love must be a complete surrender to the community, like signing a blank check. To truly fulfill the commandment, one must love others *as they love themselves* (i.e. authentically). Ann explained:

We have to take the initiative in loving, we cannot wait for the other person to begin. If we want to achieve unity, we have found that we have to be the first to begin, and then the others will follow. We have learned that love is sincere when we make ourselves one with the other person, live what the other person is living, feel in ourselves what they are feeling, empty ourselves and take on their burdens or share their joys. And finally, we have learned from the Gospel that real love is concrete, not just a matter of feelings or talk. To love, we need to serve others in a concrete way, as Jesus washed the feet of his disciples. So we try in every possible way to serve others, to help them in concrete ways, to prove our love with deeds.

Such actions do in fact make love into a reality, but more importantly, from the perspective of the Focolare, they are building a community based on Jesus' love. Patricia explained, "This mutual love generates unity, and wherever there is unity, there is the presence of Jesus. This is very important! Jesus can live among us, he can be present everywhere if we allow him to come among us through our love for one another." This analogy of being like Christ is essential for its demonstration that acts of love are a reflection of God's love for his son and for all people. Of course, the one who loves hopes to receive love in return, yet this is not ensured, "Human love usually expects love in return. There is always an element of selfishness or self-interest or expectations that comes with merely human love. On the contrary, divine love leaves the other person totally free, with no strings attached, and is the first to love." Still, this possibility of learning to love as God does, thereby bringing Jesus to one another, makes the effort worthwhile to practice love in all areas of one's life. Patricia added:

In the family, we keep loving without expecting anything; and sooner or later, the love returns and becomes mutual, reciprocal... This is not easy. It is very hard at times to be the first to take a step towards others. Maybe it's hardest in the family, where you expect the others to love you. We have to change our attitude, and love with God's love. God took the initiative when we were still sinners. He sent his son to love us, before we gave any love to him. So we need to love as Jesus did, with Jesus in our heart, for Jesus.

Love is central to the spirituality of unity, for generating reciprocal, mutually interdependent relationships with others and for cultivating a spirit of gratitude toward God; and this moral project is one that members of the Focolare attempt to understand and actualize using every means at their disposal.

An example of interdependence is what the Focolare call the *hundredfold*, where the needs of community are fulfilled a hundred times over what they actually need. Ann explained this concept in reference to building a new Focolare community in Australia.

She shared with me how Rene was one of the first people sent by Chiara to

Australia:

(Rene) realized she had to drive a car because in Australia, in Melbourne there was no public transportation frankly and it was very spread out. So she decided to learn how to drive and ask Jesus to send her a car. So, she learned how to drive and she was at a meeting one day with people who had asked her to talk about the Focolare, and she mentioned that she was learning how to drive and she was just waiting for Jesus to send me a car. Would you believe that a month later she got a check in the mail, an anonymous check, she never knew who it was, in the amount of money she needed for a new car. I think it was only \$3,000 at the time, but that was a lot money. So she could buy a car, and start to get around and get to know people.

Sharing of resources is key to building community, and teaching about acts of love is best exemplified through practice. In an interview with Rose, she discussed the idea of mutual love in her experience of building the Focolare in Romania. Although she was still new to the Movement, she wanted implement what she had learned about love, “Maybe I do good things or maybe I could have gospel into practice, but if I have to share with others, for me it was so new. But I remember doing out of love for them. I learned from their experience. They learned from mine. Together we built this family.”

Helene had a similar experience during the era of the movement’s early days in

the United States, with the difference being that her experience was more nuanced and more rife with conflict over how to apply the model of neighborly love. She remembered someone who seemed to be taking advantage of the Focolare because she saw the community as apparently indiscriminately willing to share its resources with everyone: “We gave her hospitality to her. We couldn’t get rid of her. It was like, you know, she was not going to leave.” Helene’s claim was that love in mutuality with others could not consist simply of receiving charity from others, but rather must include the giving of love in return. She continued, “Love is not to give each person the same thing because -- so then that certain person, we found her a job. Because she was really living off of us practically. So we found her a job and that way she could support herself.” She recalled that other orders and religious movements at the time were in similar situations with associates who would not leave or contribute, forcing the group to take care of them. Thus, despite the enthusiasm of members for being *Jesus* to others, there is still a need for realistic limitations. Helene clarified this process, “We had to learn that, because otherwise we would have ended up being a boardinghouse rather than a place where people would be formed in the spirituality. And that’s what God wanted from us not to be boardinghouses. Maybe people who have the vocation to do that, that’s good. But it wasn’t our call from God.” Brianna also shared an experience of overcoming her difficulty in building community in the more mundane aspects of living with others. I asked her to compare life in a Focolare community in the beginning with how it is now:

When I first arrived in Ohio, the Focolare had to keep everything going. We had to think of everything. Little by little, we taught them some things, but we would get stuck, something that was said or done, different things like that, a lot of personality things that break the relationships, not break it, but you know you can

feel that there is something not quite right and it would last for days, whereas now it is really settled right away.

Her responsibility to the communal demands of the movement was characterized by her ability to respond quickly and respectfully toward others:

We all have our moments, we all have our ups and downs. For me, it is always more to discover that love for each other that doesn't see the person as they are in that moment, but sees them. But what is this like in this Focolare? In this Focolare, gosh, it is about, you know you are in Focolare, not to take it for granted, to do what you are responsible, like for me to make sure that the dishes are clean. But it means for me to take the time to do it, not just wait; so if the towels need to be cleaned, I never think about cleaning the towels. Some of us, like if the light bulb is out, I will change it right away, to think about different kinds of things, to not stay with light bulbs, but to wash towels, fold the sheets, those kinds of things.

The ability to put the ideal into practice with others is not as simple as following a formula. Rather, the structure of the community enables members of the movement to overcome significant and daily challenges in building unity.

Part II: Structuring and Building Community through the Art of Loving

Whereas the previous section details how acts of love were central to practicing community, this section explores how building community is facilitated through organizational mechanisms. For example, the Focolare centers hold monthly events that center on sharing insights, experiences, and practices, with an emphasis on the art of loving. These meetings structure and organize the spirituality of unity. I will explore three organizational mechanisms that build the community: word of life meetings and updating meetings. Then, I will examine interview data to see how these community experiences built solidarity and commitment.

Organizational Mechanisms of Unity: Word of Life Meetings

Each month, the centers hold a meeting known as *Word of Life* meetings. These meetings began as reflections on biblical verses selected each month by Chiara. During one particular meeting, Jackie described the purpose of the Word of Life meetings: “We have to live the Word, the words of the Gospel, until they become us, until we are ‘clothed’ with them, until we ‘are’ the word of God, until we are another Jesus.” In other words, each sentence is to be lived in concrete ways, giving a visible testament to the members’ commitment. Jackie continued, “You can see this from the expressions of those who welcome people, from the way they greet each other, from their readiness to serve and a certain youthfulness not only in their souls - they even *look* young. This is so because the word is *life* and so people find life, a vibrant, fruitful, new life.” More importantly, the movement has always emphasized that living out the Word of Life “was always a community experience, something done together. The word for the day was like a password and those who lived it immediately feel like brothers and sisters, even though they haven’t known each other before. They live the Word together, and that makes them into a community.” Referring to the early Church community as the inspiration for the movement’s communal experience, she invokes its founding narrative, “Chiara says that at the beginning people were amazed to find a living Christian community rather than a group meditating on a sentence of the Gospel. It was a new phenomenon, something that had not happened in the Church at that time.”

The Word of Life meetings are a forum for topical discussions such as how to better love one’s neighbor and how to best follow the will of God. The subject of

neighborly love illustrates the costs and benefits of living in unity with one another. Such discussions are common, as the practice of unity is always the main emphasis at Word of Life meetings, and its ramifications for relationships with others are often meticulously explored. During one meeting, Ann phrased it thus: “There are many ‘pluses’ in living this way. It does take an effort, but then you find in your heart the joy that comes from God, that the world does not know.” She offers encouragement that if we take the opportunity to love, then “we will each be a new creation; we will lay a brick for the building up of a new world.” Love of neighbor must be constant, she explained, even if it is hard:

When unity with our neighbors becomes difficult, we must never break, but bend, until love works the miracle of giving us one heart and one mind. This has been a great help. It stops us from having heated arguments or breaking a relationship or refusing to see the other’s person’s point of view, and say to yourself: “What matters? Is this so important? What’s important is to love God...” And so we back down, we bend and then we have to keep loving until the other person is ready to listen to us, or understand us.

In response, Patricia clarified that this kind of loving is “‘a pact of mercy’ in that every morning when we get up we try to look at one another with ‘new eyes,’ forgetting all the mistakes, or shortcomings of our neighbor from the day before. Practically speaking, we begin again loving each person we live with. Try it, if you already haven’t, it really works.” Commitment must be made and re-made, given the practical difficulties of engaging in such consuming love. Alberto shared an experience of this in an interview:

If unity breaks down or if there is misunderstanding, in the morning, you get up and we say you start with new eyes—a new pair of eyes, so you see things in people around you with these new eyes... And then of course when you live with others, you have a chance to practice it. Right. So I think even in those two months living in the community, was very experiential. Very experiential. Yeah, you cook and you burn the food, and you’re forgiven. You make a joke. When somebody else does it, you make a joke. It’s a big deal. You forgive. Or you

leave the room and it's a mess and somebody comes and helps you to do that. You do it the next day for the other person.

The commitment to living in community with others is given daily and requires constant renewal. Clara explained this simply, "We all strive to becoming better, but then doing things better means loving better. It's the human part of it." The fruit of those relationships is what makes the work rewarding. Christiano explained, "But I guess the best is the time to live with others in very small houses. Rubbing elbows with everybody and trying to make happy along with in the practice. True relationships come out of that, and that certainly is good."

Another Word of Life meeting was the scene of a discussion led by Patricia on how to follow the will of God. In the movement's theology, this unseen power inspires progressively deeper levels of commitment and guides the direction of its members in building unity. Patricia explained, "To achieve this goal, it is enough to do God's specific will for each one of us, and not what seems to be more "perfect" or more difficult. God wants something different for each one of us, and that something is what will bring each of us to perfection. He has a very specific, personal plan of love for each of us." Each person must commit to his or her interpretation of God's purpose for his or her life, rather than become distracted by the beliefs and plans of others; the will of God is seen as expressly personal and so each individual should be encouraged to fulfill it. Yet, the emphasis is on living God's will together. Patricia underscored this point, "If we live like this - and we can do it together- we get closer and closer to Him and to one another, and together we give a witness to the world of God's love." In an interview with Louise, she

reflected on her experience of learning about the will of God and the level of commitment that following it required:

We went over and over that point at this little school of formation. Sheri gave us a talk over and over, until you learn to follow the will of God, we are not going to pass onto the next point because if everyone is doing the will of God, then everyone is in God and everybody meets together, but if you are all doing your own little thing or if you want to do this and you don't want to give in, or you don't want to, you know, there is only going to be division. So, everybody has to try all day long to see what God's will is, and stay there, even if you are at work for 8 hours, try to be in God's will there.

For Marietta, the idea of the will of God is closely tied to her service to the community. She speaks of this commitment as a way of serving God and her community: "It becomes what you can offer, you know, to love more in a sense, you know. It's not a type of a career. So now to be responsible in the Focolare, it's really a reality that is linked to everyone in the community or in a group of the Gen. It proves it's a commitment that we take personally and together."

Organizational Mechanism of Unity: Updating Meetings

Updating meetings are held on an annual basis and connect local Focolare with events on the global level. Zone leaders meet in Rome to share news of developments in their communities, and (prior to her death in 2008) to hear an address from Chiara. The leaders also would typically speak with Chiara individually and receive guidance from her about matters pertaining to their communities. In 2004, Chiara's health began to steadily decline and she was no longer able to appear at the annual meetings. Instead, she sent letters to the zone leaders with words of encouragement and written directives about goals for the local centers. Zone leaders responded by holding local updating meetings for their community. Chiara's poor health had the effect of increasing the members'

commitment to the movement in the race of uncertainty. The updating meetings during the period of her illness until her death in 2008 detailed the leadership's response to the crisis, which primarily consisted of encouraging the members that the movement would continue. The 2004 updating meeting in Chicago was opened by a discussion among zone leaders about Chiara's condition. Attendees at the Rome updating event learned that Chiara had been ill and was recuperating in Switzerland—news that came as an unwelcome surprise to the assembly. Although typically Chiara had presented a 120 page report to the zone leaders, at this time it was only four lines. There was evidence of a lack of preparation from zone leaders who typically relied on Chiara to organize meetings. The hope that she would soon recover and resume her normal duties caused the leaders to rearrange the schedule of activities so that she would have a better chance of participating. And although Chiara had been expected to dedicate the next year to its U.S. mission and to return to the United States for the dedication, this was not discussed.

Despite the apparent anxiety and disorganization, zone leaders seemed to realize that Chiara's illness presented them an opportunity to put their training into practice (i.e. "to keep Jesus in the midst"). Despite her absence, they held a daily retreat along with other group activities. As they later testified, they placed a renewed emphasis on learning to love and build unity with individuals whose personalities were very different from their own. This discipline of avoiding bias and personal prejudice was a way for them to keep Jesus in their midst. In living without Chiara's constant presence and guidance, they were forced to work through difficult decisions together, to rely on their relationships with each other, and to accept the truth that the work of the movement would continue with or without her. They continually reminded each other that daily life continued

despite their uncertainty and grief. In the place of Chiara's morning meetings with zone leaders and group briefings, the leaders shared the relevant information directly with each other, highlighting the passages that Chiara had underlined as points of emphasis. The internal development of the movement was explained through presentations on centers in the Middle East, Austria, Ivory Coast, New Zealand, and Argentina. Each morning an archival video on a meditative theme was played, which was a tradition begun by Chiara.

Before 2004, updating meetings had typically begun by reading a letter from Chiara addressed to all Focolare communities following the annual meeting in Rome. Beginning in 2004, however, the reading of the letter became even more meaningful for the local communities. That year, the letter was presented by PowerPoint, without the familiar accompaniment of Chiara's voice. In the letter, she recognized the work and blessings of the movement, emphasizing its communitarian foundations. In community, she stated, there is a union with God and neighbor occurring simultaneously. The letter ended with the question, "Who knows what more we can do, what more benefits, growth, greater union, and love for every neighbor we can achieve?"

In 2005, the updating meeting inaugurated the year's theme, *Always be a Family*. With eyes cast toward the inevitable transition that would follow Chiara's death, members were encouraged to continue building the movement. Chiara used the idea of family as a metaphor, saying that each individual has both the love of a mother, realized through hopefulness, and the love of a father, realized through security. To have a love that is typical of a family is to bear witness to unity, which is what Jesus asks of his followers. Finally, Chiara stated that the work of the movement is the work of Mary. The

impact of these updating meetings on the community was to provide a sense of solidarity and commitment during a time of hardship, as members endured their personal grief and realized that they longed to see the movement continue.

Organizational Goals: Building Solidarity and Commitment

The data provides an empirical perspective on how solidarity can be generated in the context of a religious community. FM members view their spirituality as an experiment to love as fully as possible and an opportunity to build communities based on unity. Each local community is designed to have a local impact with the goal of *giving a soul to the city*. This means responding to the needs of the local community (*acts of love*) through, for instance, cooking meals, providing materials, and planning recreational activities. Members attend community meetings where they share news, personal experiences, and help each other to live more authentically. The following passage about Luminosa, the little city in North America, exemplifies the relationship between solidarity and community:

My name is Norah and I had the privilege of living at Luminosa for 15 years, practically from the very beginning of this little city. In fact, it was in May, 1985, when after a long search, a summer camp of 75 acres in upstate NY was found, and became the site for one of the 33 little cities of the Focolare...they are little towns that strive to be a sample of society renewed by the Gospel message of unity. I had just moved to New York from Cleveland because I felt a strong inner call from God to follow him through the life of the Focolare. Little did I know what God had in store for me - to be part of building the newborn little city for North America. I remember the first days when we moved to Luminosa, feeling a real sense of sacredness and a strong presence of Mary. There was a lot of work to do to transform the children's camp into a little city, and there were only a few of us living on the premises at the time and most of us had a full time job to support ourselves. But each day was like a miracle of love: the love and generosity of the friends of the Focolare from all over the United States and Canada, who wanted to do their part to build this little city, and so distance was no barrier for them. I remember the first Thanksgiving weekend: Cars and trucks arrived from Chicago, full of friends - carpenters, strong young men, women, families and a lot of

supplies – food, tables and chairs, household goods, everything that could be put to use immediately. Everyone rolled up their sleeves and started to help. It was hard work, but we had a lot of fun together and we built strong friendships. Right from the beginning, you could see a sample of society renewed by the gospel, because everything was done in unity and with mutual love.

The work required to build and maintain a community is substantial. Therefore, community members are integrally involved in all aspects of life in the little cities. Kailey, for example, committed to living at Luminosa as a Gen for one year after being inspired by Chiara's call for members to take greater initiative. She made this commitment in full knowledge that the Gen house had been closed for some time and that due to her age, she would soon *graduate* from the Gen. She explained, "I really feel that maybe we really need to make an effort in having it open so there will be a place to contribute to the Living City, but also to...just live this life together. And maybe we'll understand better how to also go ahead, but also to take the initiative...I'm going to grab these last moments that I have the Gen and try to live them fully." The opportunity to live the spirituality with others helps to form and realize their commitment to the movement.

When asked to reflect on what the movement has meant to them, many of its members resonated with its communal dimensions. In an interview with Ann, she stated, "The spirituality of Focolare is a collective, communitarian spirituality. So therefore when I began trying to live it...the more that I loved the more I understood. But it wasn't easy. So, because it is collective and communitarian, it was the unity with the others that I think that I was able to then act, which means that we go to God together." Considering their commitment to this way of life, building community becomes the means to an end and a purpose in itself. Theodore shared his hopes for his future in the movement, "Hopefully, I'm more tempted to be always very active, but hopefully to be more, you

know, and then also because like the ideal because it teaches how to love and like love creates a home. And now I'm here, I'm at home." Community becomes the site to practice, live, and fulfill the spirituality of unity.

Part III: Cultural Influences of Catholicism and Mainstream Culture

The FM community does not exist under abstract conditions; rather, it takes its cues internally from the Catholic tradition and externally from mainstream cultural influences. The Catholic Church institutionally places the movement within the larger structure of the hierarchy and therefore shapes the direction that the community can legitimately take. The FM community is also responsive to cultural shifts, such as secularization and globalization.

Catholic Cultural Influence on the Community

The Focolare is closely aligned with the Catholic Church in two ways: (a) the Catholic hierarchy monitors its activities and (b) the Catholic tradition helps to negotiate the community's identity. In a presentation about the Church, Ann asserts that the relationship between the movement and the Church is akin to being part of the larger community of Catholicism. She explained, "People rarely think of the church as a living community. But because of the charism of unity, we have had a much deeper understanding of the Church, a much more beautiful vision, and that is why we love it so much." The Focolare, as previously mentioned, are not interested in breaking from the Church community; rather, they serve the church through their understanding of unity. It is the tradition of the church that continually inspires the movement to reflect on its future possibilities. For example, the discussions of love of neighbor and will of God are rooted in traditions that extend back to the experiences of the first Christian communities.

The Catholic tradition is especially important in defining the identity of the movement. For the Focolare, the emphasis on community was a reaction and a communal alternative to other Catholic groups, especially religious orders. The original pattern of the Focolare was that of a collective spirituality, rather than an individual experience. Its emphasis on unity is Augustinian, however, this is not an *inner* or private spirituality; rather, it is communal, neighborly and social. Love of God and love of neighbor are mutually interdependent. Finally, the FM is a spiritual lifestyle for the people of God, the laity. The careful distinction made by the Focolare Movement is that it is not separate from the Catholic tradition; rather, it is inspired by what has gone before and seeks to add to the tradition of lay-based religious movements. In a talk given by Ann, she stated that Chiara was aware of this relationship between the Focolare and past religious orders:

Throughout the centuries we have seen the flourishing of many religious orders. Each order is the 'incarnation', so to speak, of one aspect of the life of Jesus, of some episode in his life, or of his passion, or of one of his words. There are the Franciscans who continue to preach to the world: "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." The Dominicans, who contemplate the Word of God under the aspect of Light, and Truth, explain and defend the truths of our faith. The Benedictines combine action and contemplation. Their motto is "Pray and Work." All the missionaries of the Church fulfill the command: "Go and preach to all peoples." There are many orders, congregations, and institutes that live the beatitudes and repeat the actions of the Good Samaritan.

Still, the Focolare seek to be more present in the world, to be sustained by the efforts of ordinary individuals in all aspects of everyday life. The difference between the religious orders and the FM is stated as such,

Right from the beginning, certain people have been called by God to be the "center of unity" or we could say the "loudspeaker" for Jesus in the midst of the community. These persons need the love and unity of the whole community, they need to listen well to the community, and then they discern the truth, and then give guidance so that all will know what is the will of God.

There are also external cultural influences that shape the direction of the FM community.

Mainstream Cultural Influences on the Community

The larger concerns of secularization and globalization are present in the movement. For instance, at a community event exploring the movement's current effort in Europe, the ideal of unity was raised as a response to political, cultural and religious divisions between European peoples. Alberto stated that we need to "be aware of the division that has been the cause of the lack of respect between peoples. We need to walk toward communion." At the same event, Chiara spoke via video about a united Europe, stating, "With the love of the Holy Spirit we can spread this love in Europe through movements and communities down throughout the centuries. We are but poor instruments that will counter materialism and secularism."

More specifically, the Focolare have responded to political and cultural changes following the attacks of September 11, 2001. In a talk on unity at the Mariapolis in 2002, Jackie addressed membership, "What happened one year ago on September 11 has changed not only the history of America, but of the whole world, and it makes us say, unity is an imperative of our times, which was the title for this year's Mariapolis." In other words a world for unity is what is most needed in the aftermath of 9/11 world.

Jackie continued:

In fact, people around the world are demanding unity as something that can no longer be delayed because unity means brotherhood, solidarity, communion among all. Let's look at the world today: even though we see war and terrorism threatening peace, there are signs that show that the world is moving towards unity: many religious, social and political factors demonstrate this. The world is tending towards a universal unity, towards a global unity... We are no longer independent from one another; what happens in the economy of one country can

have immediate repercussions in many other countries. Also, some problems are of interest to humanity as a whole, problems which no nation can face isolated from all the others. Many issues involve the whole international community in our times, such as the environment, human development and nutrition, immigration or preservation of the cultural heritage of whole nations. Today we live in a world invaded by negative attitudes: the desire for money, for unlimited freedom, for pleasure... and we are compelled to wage a war against such attitudes in order to save ourselves. But we are not unarmed. We know from experience that if Jesus is alive in our communities, he is the most powerful weapon. He said: "I have conquered the world."

The trend toward globalization is a near perfect correlate to a spiritual paradigm of unity for all peoples. In the months and years following 9/11, the Focolare was quick to assert that unity must be achieved peacefully. When asked about conflict and division in a 2006 interview, Chiara responded, "God is telling us that we are missing unity. Christianity should have the same recognizable characteristics, which is unity. 9/11 should be seen as a human loss and a human response. We must not be violent, and instead look for the good, to see the solidarity in the midst of 9/11...It depends on us to bring peace in our lives and in the environment." The movement's response to unity is deftly situated within the Catholic tradition and responsive to cultural shifts in mainstream society.

Part IV: The New Catholic Identity: The Worldly and Sacred Purpose for Building a United World

Being part of the Focolare community is an enormously meaningful source of identity and purpose for its members. On one hand, members of the FM believe that they are participating in building a united world—that the FM spirituality does have an influence in making the world a better place. On the other hand, they believe that the path toward sanctification is through building a united world. This secures two goals:

Participating in the FM gives them a sense of purpose in the world and sacralizes their role in the movement.

The primary goal of members of the FM is establishing unity in the world. This begins with building communities skilled in the art of loving. In her talk on this art, Ann suggested that once unity is realized, “Families are recomposed, neighborhoods are transformed, society is renewed. It may seem very simple (even simplistic), or it may sound too spiritual, but in reality, it is the most concrete way to change the world.” (The meeting concluded with this rousing statement, “Let’s live it together! We can change the world!”) In an interview, Christiano similarly concluded, “I certainly believe that the gospel put into practice can be a tool to change society, to make society, to make this a better world.” Simply stated, being part of the movement makes a difference in that participants develop a new identity that gives them greater reach in the world. In an interview, Rita combined these two elements of the path to sanctification and the possibility of making a difference through the practice of community:

Well I guess the movement has changed me a lot, I hope, for the good...from the beginning when I met the Focolare, I started living this race towards sanctity because that is the ultimate goal of the movement is that you become a saint. Everybody is called to be a saint, so but we try to do it all together, we try to do it united with the collective spirituality, helping each other...I’m hope that I am more virtuous than what I was before, I have more patience, more charity. I think this is what I hope, you know, that this is the change that movement brought me. Certainly, living the ideal, living the movement has enriched me a lot as a person, culturally if we are going to talk about that, it matured me, it gave me so much more experience to be able to travel to other countries, to be here now in a completely different culture. So all of that has certainly changed me. It changes your way of thinking, it changes the way you are acting, also, but I think that...the most important thing I hope is to really be in that race towards sanctity. And you know Nori, I guess our lives are beautiful. It is demanding because it is the vocation that demands everything of you, but also it is very beautiful because it gives you a lot of joy...I can say it brings me to experience union with God maybe a little, maybe it is not as constant as I wish it was but I can’t say that I

never experienced God because I have. And that gives you the joy that repays you of everything else...The beauty is that I feel I am doing something for God by building this reality of God and living for the Church. It opens your horizons, your role as a Christian, as a Focolarina.

The connections between unity, community, sanctification, and social change are made more evident in the actual practice of the spirituality. As members make sense of their experience and continue to participate in community, they gain greater understanding of how their lives can be transformed to work toward the greater goal of unity in the world.

The ideal of unity is based on the principle of relational love, which is realized through the daily practice of communal life. Theologically, the experience of community makes sanctification possible. In other words, expression of unity is a sacred act. During a discussion about love, Jackie explained this path to sanctification, “By living all these aspects, our life acquires a certain unity, and everything we do becomes solemn, sacred.” Members testify that they see Jesus in one another and are made holy by that experience. Jackie asserted, “This is what we can aim at – to *be* Jesus whatever we are doing.” This transformation is of the highest importance for the ordinary lay person. How is this saintliness characterized? Jackie explained, “Maybe the word “saint” seems far from our experience, but it only really means someone who has done God’s will in their life and because of this are now spending eternity in heaven with God whom they have loved. In this sense, a saint is something we must all strive to become.” For many who have been greatly committed to the movement, this experience has become a reality. For example, some members of the FM have undergone the canonization process. At a Word of Life meeting, Ann shared,

In fact, several members of the Movement who have reached the next life are already considered by the church as “Servants of God,” which is the first step towards their beatification: Santa, a young woman who wanted to safeguard her purity and was stabbed to death; Chiara Luce, who died of cancer at the age of 18; Renata, a Focolarina, and Igino Giordani, known as Foco, co-founder of the Focolare.

For many Focolarini, sanctification is the ultimate and most prized reward of participating in the movement.

The community model of the Focolare is simple—to love one another—yet, its goal is complex, which is to bring unity to the world. FM members seek to deepen their identities as Catholics while trying to achieve social change. Living in community gives them the opportunity to express their Catholic faith as a sanctified act of love and to see how this helps to build a united world. Furthermore, the bonds of community give them the strength of knowing they share equally in both suffering and joys, and by building unity with others, they will better understand how to love more strongly and more deeply than if they had approached life in a more individualistic and singular way.

Part V: Discussion: The Communitarian Model and Its Relationship to a Religious Social Movement

The communitarian model promotes and implements the religious movement goals of the FM. Cultural influences within and outside of the Catholic Church structured the kind of community that was possible. I also found that through community, individuals felt greater empowerment to make a difference collectively than if they were make to change as an individual. Based on my findings, I argue that the communitarian model is ideal to achieve the goals of a religious social movement. The communitarian model overcomes the particular problem given a highly hierarchical institution, the need

for spiritual renewal and innovation, and external cultural pressures of secularization and privatization. The communitarian model is best operationalized through a strong organizational apparatus, also known as a religious movement organization (RMO), providing mechanisms to promote and sustain forms of religious renewal and innovation. Finally, the communitarian model is responsive to the spiritual needs of religious individuals. I will discuss each of these three points and connect the findings with the broader discussion found in the sociology of religion and social movement literatures.

The Communitarian Model: Catholic Renewal Movements and Mainstream Cultural Influences

Studies of religious social movements (particularly Catholic social movements) often emphasize the dialectical relationship between innovation and traditionalism. For Catholic movements characterized by innovation, the hierarchy plays a role in shaping the direction and nature of religious experimentalism. Throughout its history, the Catholic Church has experienced waves of expansion and decline. Yet, such cycles are not always homogeneous and cannot be directly correlated with affirmative attitudes towards religious authority. The rise of the FM along with other lay-based communitarian groups has corresponded with a decline in religious orders (Neal, 1970; Neal, 1971; Stark, 2000) and an overall decline in church membership (Neal 1968, Kim, 1980, Prevallet, 1984, Greeley, 1985; Hoge, 1986). Therefore, the FM, a movement of revitalization and innovation, can occur simultaneously with phases of institutional decline, or to put it in differently, the FM may be a response to discontentment with religion if, instead of leaving or remaining a nominal member, individuals seek new ways of being Catholic.

Availability of spiritual innovation is especially imperative during times of institutional weakness and amidst fears that religion may be increasingly irrelevant. Wittberg's (1994:3) study of renewal movements in Catholic religious orders helps to explain the longevity of the tradition: it has persisted through waves of religious enthusiasm provoked by internal and external cultural changes. She argues, "Waves of enthusiasm for religious life among Catholics were each organized around a particular ideological conception of what the value and content of religious virtuosity should be, with more or less explicitly articulated alterations adapting this ideology to the needs of the time." An ideology of *love* portrayed by discussion and performance of acts of love helped to sustain the Focolare spirituality. Wittberg uses social movement theory, especially resource mobilization and frame alignment theory, to explain why the hierarchy supported new communitarian efforts and how Catholic theology was used as a plausible transformative ideology for interpreting the new communitarian spirituality. In times of renewal, resources from the hierarchy have helped to sustain communities of Catholic faith and to mobilize new forms of spiritual practices. Renewal movements also took theological rubrics and liturgical practices from past movements to construct *repertoires of action*: "Various methods of 'frame alignment' exist whereby ideological constructions of virtuoso spirituality can be revised, expanded and/or extended toward new audiences." (24) The community model that I found with the Focolare is well suited for sustaining and reinforcing commitment to an ideological project of unity, particularly because of their emphasis on insider/outsider boundaries, acts of love, and the shared sense of sacrifice that suffuses their way of life.

Thomas Csordas (1997), in his study of the Charismatic Renewal Movement, also examines the social and religious movements within the Catholic Church, utilizing social movement theory to understand the relationship between the movement, the Church, and the greater social forces that are determinative of plausible change. His argument for the renewal of Catholicism has two dimensions:

(1) To demonstrate precisely how that creation is achieved by identifying the conditions under which creativity is possible and the processes through which it works; and (2) to demonstrate that something in particular is created, whether it be a new meaning, a new state of mind, a new way of understanding the world, a new community, or a new social order. (157)

It is in this spiritual context that something new can be created, which for the Focolare Movement gets worked out through a communitarian model. The early church is frequently used as the example par excellence of Christian community, a mystical body that becomes the basis for action. The community is responsive to this *sacred self* as well as to the larger Catholic tradition:

Within the Catholic Church they sketch the space between Charismatic and movements espousing social activism, between laity and clergy, between movement and hierarchy. In society at large they outline interaction between the movement as an element of Christian neo-conservatism and trends of secular society and culture, between microsocial and macrosocial analysis with respect to interpersonal interaction and institutional constraint, between personal and political with respect to issues of power and experience, between local and global with respect to cultural process and relations of dependency, between premodern and postmodern with respect to the structure of meaning and authority. (39)

The spiritual and organizational gestalt of the Charismatic Renewal Movement bears many similarities to that of the Focolare, both in terms of its institutional alliances and its situation within its cultural context.

Finally, external cultural forces inevitably shape the direction and form of any religious social movement. New religious practices develop within a particular context,

and mainstream cultural ideas are mobilized as resources for increasing the effectiveness and relevance of the new spirituality. Richardson (1985) suggests that culture helps to understand how the new religious movement emerges and whether it survives. Due to the rise of social and economic forces such as secularization and privatization, coupled with the increasing influence of the religious right, new religious movements have been forced to address larger cultural concerns to gain credibility and influence. They have responded organizationally by minimizing elements of conflict to appear mainstream, and by seeking external resources and developing networks to gain cultural legitimacy. Although the FM does not have a high degree of tension with the external cultural world, there is still a generalized climate of suspicion remaining from the explosion of NRMs of the 1970s that has generated an internalized response. The FM claims that it is not a cult primarily through its organizational connection to the Catholic hierarchy and by making a cultural appeal to mainstream society that highlight the benefits of its communitarian lifestyle.

The Communitarian Model: Religious Movement Organization Theory

To understand the organizational side of the FM community, I examined studies that include Religious Movement Organization (RMO) theory, a derivation of SMO theory. Lofland and Richardson (1984: 30) explain the three parts of the theoretical concept:

The term organization refers to a plurality of persons who view themselves as a corporate social entity that has consciously conceived goals and a program of achieving these goals...The term movement refers to any organization (and to other forms of collectivity not here relevant) that opposes the dominant institutional order and proposes alternative arrangements...The term religion refers to belief systems that overtly and significantly define and sanction action by reference to a super- or extra-natural realm of thought and action.

Considering the previous discussion on community and Catholic religious movements, RMO theory is particularly useful. With this conceptual model in mind, Lofland and Richardson propose five types: the clinic, congregation, collective, corps and colony. They then apply their typological paradigm to New Religious Movements of the 1970s. For this study, the collective type is of most interest: Collectives are split into two sub-types of RMOs: work-oriented and household-oriented. The first type emphasizes the “income or other substance producing work,” “family or other emotional support circles” and “collective promulgation of cognitive orientation,” whereas the second type emphasizes “shelter and residence, food provision and eating organization, family or other emotional support circles and collective promulgation of cognitive orientation.” (32) This RMO type is more radical than clinics and congregations and is formed around “four aspects of everyday life, work, residence, eating and family/personal support circles. At the extreme, all four are brought under a comprehensive plan and efforts are made to implement an ideal scheme of each respective functioning and relation to one another.” (37) Even though the collective type accurately portrays the FM as a combination of both sub-types, the organizational characteristic of opposing the dominant institutional order does not fit. What makes the FM radical and also similar to other Catholic social movements is its reinterpretation of the early church communal model. This innovative lifestyle does not inherently stand against the Church hierarchy; rather, the relationship of the movement with the Church is one of internal tension existing along external tension with the broader culture, negotiating change through the systemic processes of production, reproduction and transformation.

Combining Csordas' study with Lofland and Richardson's typology, Margaret Poloma's (1997) discussion on the organizational features as dynamically related to charisma and group longevity adds further nuance to the tension between the communitarian based spirituality and institutional forces. She asks, "Is it possible for these two actors—charisma and organization—to work together in a long-term revival? Or would strong institutional forces shear the wings of the soaring charismatic spirit?" (258) How do religious social movements not only sustain charisma, but also organizationally balance "order with spontaneity, structure with freedom, and stability with change?" (259) Since the FM has been in existence for over sixty years and has endured the passing of its foundress, the organizational side is extremely important to analyze. My argument is that while in some ways the organizational structure of the moment replicates the Catholic hierarchy through the closeness of its institutional ties, it is the core feature of communitarianism that allows the FM to sustain the *newness* of spirituality sixty plus years later. As the studies already cited have provided the importance of structure for religious communities, it is the movement's communal spirit that gives it coherence. This is the same dynamic found in religious social movements in which the innovative dimension of the spirituality reproduces itself according to its context, allowing the participants to explore ever new qualities of its fundamental charisms (e.g. unity) and how they ought to be practiced in the interactional, everyday sense. The FM, as a religious social movement that is practiced communally, tries to retain both spiritual innovation as well as organization.

The Communitarian Model: Responding to the Spiritual Needs of Religious

Individuals

Studies of religious communities explain the *moral project* in terms of practicing spiritual innovations, creating solidarity, and overcoming the modern problem of self-interest, all of which are relevant for examining the communal aspect of the FM. Theoretical discussions of community in the general sense initially emerged as a response to growing concerns over the effects of modernization on individuals, particularly the forces of differentiation and impersonalization. The moral project activated what Durkheim (2001) conceptualized as the moral force, which spoke to the ideal form of social cohesion—that members of society feel a certain bond with one another through community interest and tradition, creating common symbols to communicate their understandings to each other, constructing a collective consciousness. The moral project is not, however, at the expense of the individual, but rather functionally structures the individual's interest to act on behalf of the greater whole. Collective life through their communitarian practices, therefore, is at heart of the Focolare Movement for the purpose of sustaining a strong Catholic identity, a collective consciousness, for achieving personal sanctity through the ritual action of the art of loving, and mobilizing change over and against perceived threats of disunity in the world.

Ferdinand Tönnies (2001) made perhaps the greatest contribution to this discussion by articulating the conceptual distinction between *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft*. According to Tönnies, the *Gemeinschaft* type emphasized the communalism of shared culture, focused on values such as responsiveness to others, and was marked by kinship- or class/ethnic associations, whereas *Gesellschaft* idealized self-interest and individualism, secondary relationships (such as one's coworkers), heterogeneous populations, and complex structures arising from divisions of labor. As

applied to the Focolare, their community is effectively bringing together individuals committed to the ideal of unity, with the outcome being that the needs of others are prioritized over self-interest. The moral force of this collective action is greater than that which any individual could accomplish by himself or herself. Still, members of the FM also have self-interest in mind, to achieve sainthood in the afterlife and in the more general sense, a more significant and deeper Catholic identity. Even in community, my findings suggest that there are individual rewards.

Building on Tönnies' ideal types, more modern studies have conceptualized the impact of modernization on community through useful theoretical frameworks. For example, Vaisey (2007) studied 50 urban communities to evaluate experiences of *Gemeinschaft*. He identified two dimensions of community building mechanisms: substantive/cultural meanings and structural/organizational features, both of which were capable of producing feelings of solidarity and group identification. The topography of Vaisey's work indicates that community is both a lived experience and a built structure. Community is defined by shared commitments to articulate and live cultural or religious ideas, and community is determined or influenced by organizational features (such as meetings, rituals, and decision-making processes). The first dimension is supported by a moral order, an ontological structure that legitimates action and control, while the second dimension coordinates opportunities for interaction and increasing levels of commitment. For the Focolare, the moral order is defined by their theological understandings of God and Jesus Christ, which definitively justifies their acts of love, and their organizational mechanisms (RMO) support greater opportunities to utilize acts of love for the overall movement goal of unity. This fits what Vaisey found, that out of 50 urban communities,

the moral project produced *Gemeinschaft* or *we-feelings* more often than structural variables, but not unilaterally. Instead, the structure of the community was found to facilitate the moral order, especially if the community required a high degree of personal sacrifice and/or commitment. The cultural and structural variables can be further refined according to the primary type of interaction that the community facilitates. The FM clearly has a defined moral project, but it is the RMO that engenders longevity and commitment to that moral project. Community carries the dual purpose of supporting both the moral project and the organized structure to facilitate the moral project.

The communal dimension of the group is focused on the project of social change, namely through innovative ways of living with persons who share a similar religious vision (Fuller, 1995, Bennett, 1995). According to Kanter (1972), American utopias were often experiments in perfection, communalism (sometimes with economic benefits), and spirituality, motivated by a rejection of economic and political ills, inhumanity and injustices, and alienation and isolation, and characterized by a strong social and moral order. Kanter's description of American utopias deftly describes the FM: "Utopian thought idealizes social unity, maintaining that only in intimate collective life do people fully realize their human-ness." (32) Utopias are characterized by perfectibility, order, brotherhood, unity of mind and body, experimentation, coherence as a group (asserting communal themes), and an interpretation of the world that emphasizes idealizations and harmony. Moreover, from a member's perspective, communalism facilitates an important function: "To this end, a utopian often desires meaning and control, order and purpose, and he seeks these ends explicitly through his community." (38) The FM, a communal approach to achieving unity, provides the individual a collective response to make a

difference in a world he or she perceives as increasingly disunited, and fulfills the individual desire to achieve sainthood.

Conclusion

A strong feature of the spirituality of unity in the FM is the communitarian manifestation, best exemplified by its practice of the art of mutual love. The community is devoted to living unity through concrete acts that test its theology of unity. Perhaps there is no better way to build unity than to create a community with others who share the same ideal—in the language of the New Testament, where two or more are gathered Jesus is in the midst so that they may *be one*. It should come as no surprise that this idea of living in community should resonate deeply with members of the FM, for its origins can be traced back to the earliest experiences of Chiara and her companions, and its development encompasses many in the present who are learning to exemplify the biblical model in their own context. Moreover, community becomes a site to negotiate, manage and navigate seismic shifts in social structures. Studies on communitarianism, such as this one, emphasize both the role of innovation and experimentalism, and the importance of preserving and maintaining traditional institutional relationships. Finally, the importance of communitarianism lies in its insights into the logistics of creating, directing, and organizing intentional communities characterized by religious social movement goals: personal sanctification and unity in the world.

CHAPTER FIVE

A SEAMLESS WORLD: THE LIVED EXPERIENCE OF THE FOCOLARE SPIRITUALITY

During one particularly difficult interview, the dynamic suddenly changed when Carol offered to show me her scrapbook. I enthusiastically accepted her offer and was pleased to see that the album depicted the impact of the movement in her life in a way that an interview could not. The album had been maintained from 1978 to the date of the interview in 2006 and contained holiday greeting cards, a picture of the crucifixion sent as a reminder of *Jesus forsaken* and *the source of our joy*, and numerous news articles, letters and pictures. Included were letters from Chiara, Adrianna and other friends. On the cover of the album was a picture of Chiara at the age of approximately 80 years. There were also pictures of Chiara in her younger years and a picture from Chiara's visit to Luminosa in 1997. Of particular interest was a letter from Adrianna, one of the first FM women to come to the U.S. and a first companion. In the letter, Adrianna responds to a question asked by Carol, who was considering leaving the Movement. Adrianna writes that she hopes Carol will remain in the Focolare, but that she will continue to love and care for her regardless. She hopes that she will remember their times of unity and always bear in mind *Jesus forsaken*. This scrapbook provides a salient example of how and why the spirituality is so meaningful to its members in the course of their everyday lives.

The Focolare Movement provides an excellent case study in how spirituality can influence and transform the lives of participants in a religious social movement. This is particularly the case due to characteristic ritualistic sharing of experiences, which is abundantly represented in the interview and fieldwork data. This subjective interpretation of the FM spirituality has analytical value from a sociological perspective. For this researcher, exposure to the richness of sharing explained how the movement has gained sustained participation of its members and how the highly structured nature of its spiritual praxis contributes to a wealth of spiritual experience on both the individual and communal levels. In thinking about the overall question of how individuals come to believe that the Focolare spirituality is meaningful and plausible, I argue that the application of the spirituality in members' everyday life is central. In this chapter, I will attempt to understand the daily significance of the spirituality of unity. As a thorough way to answer this question, I will use the data to explain why daily experiences are important to the FM, and then I will organize the data into everyday experiences with work, education, and the family. I will conclude with a discussion on the interactionist approach to the daily life of a religious social movement.

Data Analysis: Everyday Experiences and the Focolare Spirituality

Most of the examples of this everyday significance come from members' sharing experiences in meetings and interviews. The construction and framing of shared experiences from the everyday is described as a central practice of the spirituality. For example, Matthew explained that sharing stories is something that Chiara told them to do, "Chiara tells the companions to share experiences. One experience became the

experience of the other. Their experiences spoke of God. This is how the spiritual life began, as a profound union with God.” I asked one particular subject to explain the *right time* to share an experience of the spirituality, and she responded,

You feel it. You feel it. It’s the right time, it’s hard to understand. You feel that the other person is ready to take it and that person, the other person is not there to say, oh, look what I have done, but you are giving it as a gift to another person because it is something precious...God gives you the grace to tell you that it is the right moment so that when that right moment comes, then more grace flows through that experience of sharing.

Sharing is important to the FM in three ways: sharing experiences reveals the impact of the spirituality, brings Jesus in their midst, and sustains commitment. In each section, I will provide examples of how members are sharing work, education, and family experiences that relate to these areas.

Sharing Experiences Reveals the Impact of the FM Spirituality

As members progress in the Movement, they gain the ability to connect spiritual ideas with their everyday experience not simply for the sake of interpretation but because sharing is central to their spiritual practice. In 2004, the talk given on the topic of *seven aspects of the spirituality* emphasized the sharing of experiences. For instance, the presenters told members that they are to *be Jesus* in every moment of life because there are *different ways to love*. Jackie explained, “When we drive, when we teach, when we cook, when we talk to someone, when we answer an e-mail message...Our life is ‘love,’ but love is expressed in different ways.” Several members then shared ways that they are living out the seven aspects (or colors) in everyday life.

Jacob shared that his experience involves “living the colors twenty-four hours a day,” because, “All colors lead to unity.” He gave examples such as having a feeling that

it was “time to live the blue aspect,” which led him to do household chores. “Living the blue aspect,” he stated, “means living as Mary and Jesus did.” He also described his feelings of joy at finding mutual love in family and closeness with God. He gave another example of having missed an early mass, (the “yellow aspect,”) because he was on a business trip. Upon exiting the hotel, he saw a church, inside of which Mass was being celebrated. He interpreted this as an experience of having a direct relationship with God. His insight, he stated, was that “love spreads by its own nature,” (the “orange aspect”). He closed his testimony with the statement that the colors are a lifeline that works universally. They are, he said, a gift for all people, to be lived in depth to increase the supernatural life of humanity. The theological idea is not simply an abstract concept, but something that deeply influences daily life.

A similar theme was explicated at a Mariapolis meeting, at which speakers represented different aspects of spirituality by sharing their personal experiences. Stephanie and Melvin shared an experience about needing to trust in God when they had to start over in a new city with a child on the way. They responded to the challenge by strengthening their ties with the FM community, attending the Mariapolis meeting, and reaching out to the members they met there. They described the resulting experience as *finding mutual love and Jesus in their midst*. Next, Ashley and Lester shared about a difficult experience of Ashley suffering a miscarriage and nearly dying in the process. Lester stated, “It was difficult, but we believed in God's love, we believed that is the reason they are here. We enjoy living in unity—it is not easy, but we want Jesus in the midst. Every day we need to be an example—to show how love conquers all.”

Ciara then spoke about how the spirituality led her to think about health. She works as a nurse and is married with three children. She told the members that although she isn't always healthy, she thinks of herself as *on the journey*. Spiritual and physical health, she said, “should not be separate, even though health tends to be about the self, and not the Gospel.” She further explained, “We are the temple, our bodies are on loan. It is our responsibility to take care of ourselves. Also we must teach our children the same thing. It is not about them, but as a responsibility to God, to be a gift for the other. We must emphasize to be fit to each other as husband and wife.” Terry shared how he learned more about the spirituality through a vacation. When he was eighteen years old, he went with his family on a month long trip to California. He was the oldest of ten children and the youngest was age one. He stated that although he had to release some things, he gained unexpected insights. Now with his own family, he considers it important to spend time with them on vacation. He closed his remarks with this statement, “We need to be open to the present moment.” Talks on sharing experiences demonstrate the wide range of applying the spirituality in their daily lives. Members might speak about their jobs, education, or family, each of which may communicate a point about the FM spirituality.

Many experiences of how members applied the spirituality involved their work. In each experience, members used the Focolare language detailed in previous chapters and attempted to see how the spirituality could help them through their daily difficulties. Experiences ended with an “aha!” conclusion; the spirituality had worked and had made their life easier, better, and/or more significant than before. Members shared how they lost their job or started a new job, but latched onto the idea of unity with others to get

through difficult and transitional times. For instance, June shared her experience with working at a Museum as an administrator. She gave a specific example of how the spirituality was useful in getting along with a difficult coworker: “Right now, I would like to share an experience of how I tried to love my neighbors at work, especially one coworker with whom my relationship really went from death to life, if I may say so. Naturally, this meant constantly starting over on my part.” She often felt hurried by this coworker to get projects done last minute, “I was always in a hurry. As a result, I made many mistakes, and I have to say that for the first three and a half years, I really lost her trust. My coworker also had the tendency, especially when she was tight for time, to start commanding instead of asking. That for me was very difficult because it felt very demeaning.” However, she did not give up loving her coworker and in fact, sought out working with this particular worker so that she could realize God’s plan for her life. She worked earnestly to fulfill the coworker’s demands as well as asked about her personal life, to love the coworker as fully as Jesus did. She shared,

Little by little, our conversation started becoming deeper, and she started sharing things about her family, people around her and about the way she felt at work which made me understand more and more why she had that kind of an attitude...She was no longer that difficult coworker but a neighbor, a wonderful gift that God has put in my path to love, which in turn helped stretched my heart.

Her acts of love were rewarded by achieving unity with this coworker, and she felt that she did so by loving her neighbor as herself.

Sally shared how she applied the spirituality to extend her help to a special needs employee named Bonnie. She began her experience with her understanding of living the Focolare spirituality: “To live this way means to have mutual love and be willing to go

the extra mile with every neighbor that God puts in front of us.” She shared how she took this new employee under her wing as her assistant and kept her busy with easy tasks. She characterized the experience as God’s will for her: “I knew that God had given me this neighbor to love, not only for her sake, but to help the others that could not handle this difficult situation. As time went on she learned to trust me. She liked me so much that she would hurry to get jobs finished so she could sit in the chair with me as I worked.” She was successful at relating to this employee to the extent that others began to do the same. Another employee helped her with conversation lessons, another employee gave her little jobs to keep her busy to give Sally a break from supervising, and a new employee asked her if it was her faith that inspired her attention to Bonnie. Moreover, Bonnie’s mother was excited that her daughter felt needed and respected. Sally eventually left for a new job, but when she returned, she saw that Bonnie was continuing to do well and saw that she was happy. She concluded her experience with the Focolare Word of Life: “If you love me, you will keep my commandments. This helped me to see that God wants us to go the extra mile, even if it is not always easy.”

In a similar vein, Molly shared how the spirituality of unity applied to reaching out to the excluded, but this time in the educational context. She shared how certain groups are often excluded, but based on the Focolare spirituality, she understood that she should love everyone and include them in her social group. Specifically, she is learning to be open, especially to those who often stand on the fringe at school.

The more prevalent examples of applying the spirituality involved family life. This included starting a family (e.g. dating, engagement and marriage) and conflicts that

arise due to child rearing. For Adriana and Ben, they grew up in the movement and had Focolare meetings for couples available to them. They shared how after going to these meetings they were able to love even while handling their differences. The spirituality gave them the courage to try again and be more understanding of one another. Amy and Brent shared their experience about putting God first in their engagement, especially in abstaining from sex. The spirituality helped them to understand that chastity would allow them to hear God's voice and God's grace. Polly and Brian were more detailed in how the spirituality applied to their courtship and engagement experiences. They spent most of their courtship long distance; she spent time at Loppiano and in Ohio to pursue college, while Brian stayed in Indiana to continue his music career. They shared how others felt that the relationship was doomed, but they believed God was in their relationship. They maintained their relationship through letters and calling, and they prayed for one another, especially for unity between them. After college, Polly was finally able to join Brian in Indiana. They joined a church, saw a priest regularly, and are now engaged. Brian closed their experience with a song he wrote about their relationship to each other and their relationship with God, titled, *We Belong*.

The spirituality has been useful for members in overcoming family related conflicts. For instance, Jill shared how her son delayed his homework until Sunday night. Usually, the entire family would endure the consequences, "And so up went that "barrier" between parent and child. An atmosphere of peace, the presence of Jesus in our home was replaced with anxiety, anger, guilt, disappointment... But the "new me" wants to live differently. The way to attack this "barrier" is with love, and I can be the first to

love.” Instead, she made it easier on him by offering her computer and her help in getting the homework done. The experience ended with the son’s response to her act of love, “He was less anxious, and he proceeded to tackle the work alone, with determination and confidence, and without complaint.” Jill shared about a similar experience with her daughter except her situation involved shopping with a pre-teen. She also tried to make herself one with her daughter when she took her school shopping. Her daughter was often discouraged by shopping because of the money constraints and the modesty that her mother demanded in her clothes. She decided to use the spirituality to see how she could make the experience more positive:

On our next trip, as we approached the mall I didn’t head for my favorite stores. I asked *her* where to park, in order to be close to the stores she liked. She was surprised and happy at my new attitude! Inside the mall, I was peaceful. I assured her that I wanted to find something she’d be truly happy to wear. To my surprise, she chose a reasonably priced store.” By working together and being sensitive to the other person, they had both learned to love one another.

Sharing experiences helped members to sort through their daily troubles at work, at school or at home. In sharing experiences, they used Focolare-based language and revealed the effectiveness of the spirituality. The following section specifically addresses how through their experiences the theological goal of unity was achieved.

Sharing Experiences Brings Jesus in the Midst

The notion of bringing *Jesus in the midst* is an actionable point of unity for FM members—that when they act in unity with one another, Jesus is brought into their midst. The biblical inspiration for this belief comes from the Gospel of Matthew, “Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there I am with them.”(Matthew 18:20) In 2002, a talk on *Jesus in the midst* was given as part of a larger event on the spirituality.

Patricia led the rather lengthy discussion:

Jesus was not only present on earth in the historical moment in which He lived. He can be found in the Eucharist, in His Word, in our neighbor, as we just mentioned, and in His Church, in the Hierarchy, in our hearts. But another place where He is really present—not just figuratively, or metaphorically—is in our midst. But he will be present in our midst only if we want Him to be. We have to do our part. We have to lay the foundation and then hope that he will come among us with the gift of his presence...There are certain conditions that we have to fulfill in order to have Jesus present - what are they? We each have to be another Jesus, He has to live in me, and in you...Jesus cannot help but make us one. There will be unity among us and His presence will envelope us...He can be everywhere - in homes, offices, parishes, sports events - any place where Christians are trying to love one another before all else. This makes life very beautiful...So, Jesus in the midst is not something static, established once and for all. His presence is dynamic, it is "life". It must be continually generated...The results are wonderful. We find that in trying to live this way, we find a greater union with God, and unity with others also grows stronger.

After the conclusion of the talk, Reggie shared an experience from high school: “I believe the spirituality makes it possible to start again during times of trial. I was afraid to share experiences of when I failed to love. When I did share, when that unity was strong enough to bring it out, it was a moment that built the unity even stronger. It made it possible to live for the other. Jesus in the midst is found in these moments.” For FM members, having Jesus in the midst is important because they take this idea literally and because its effect is sustainable unity. Even more importantly, the idea of having Jesus in the midst is simple and within the realm of the everyday, rather than an abstract, theological concept noting ecclesial or intellectual elitism. Wherever two or three are gathered, Jesus is said to be present.

In the interview and fieldwork data, the theme of Jesus in the midst arises often as that which initially attracted members to the movement. For Tony, having Jesus in the midst was critical in persuading his parents to agree to let him join the movement: “When

I first declared that I wanted to go to Focolare...it was also like an experience of Jesus in the midst...We started together with my mom, my dad, me, and Focolarini—together... At the end of the meeting, he's like okay. It was like Jesus in the midst, for everybody, it was very strong." Matthew shares how the idea of having Jesus in the midst connects with an overall feeling of happiness:

That's what life is about. Because even at that time maybe couple years before, I was convinced that there was something more to life than what I was living. My own world, my family, my school, I couldn't put my finger on what it was. I started to see something, yeah, with the Gen, with the youth, at these meetings...And I said, yeah, that's what's worth living for. That's that something more for life. It was a very simple concept to be happy vs. all those people out there in the world that had everything that were sad...I understood why the Focolare were happy—that loving one another, you know, seeing Jesus in the other, building Jesus, that's why they were happy.

Having Jesus in the midst is an opportunity for members to gain greater understanding of how the spirituality works in their lives and then by sharing these moments, to encourage others to do the same. I will provide several examples of how members are sharing experiences about bringing unity into a situation helping them to deal with problems at work, school and at home.

Members shared experiences that described the difficulty, how the spirituality was applied, and most importantly how it led to some signifier of success. For example, Felix had trouble with competitiveness at work. His coworkers accused him of saying things that weren't true. He tried to love them back, which at first was hard, but he kept at it and was able to build relationships with him. At the end of the year, he was chosen for a leadership position.

In a more detailed incident, Helene shared her experience as a student teacher

with three other Focolarini. They were having a difficult time working with one of the teachers. They were going to go to the principle to complain when they read the Word of Life, “Do not judge so you will not be judged.” They decided to change their approach. First, they tried to develop a relationship with the teacher, and they only said positive things about the teacher in front of the principal. Helene shared, “The principal looked at us like what are you doing? It changed us, and we approached the teacher differently. The relationship was built. And that eventually flowed over to the children as well.” Building unity with a difficult teacher was more important than finding ways to get her fired. Sharing experiences such as this one allowed Helene to see the bigger picture, a more sacred interpretation of the relationship than she had prior to integrating the spirituality into the situation.

Brianna shared how she helped during a weeklong training course. The instructor of the course had technical difficulties. Brianna used this opportunity to take her lunch breaks to fix the problem and to help the teacher learn how to efficiently run the computer programs. She reasoned that she did this because she wanted to see Jesus in the midst. Despite the faultiness of the instructor and difficult students, she felt that she should love them all and that through her actions, others were better able to do their job as teacher and learners, “By the end of the second day, the computer was working, the instructor was more concentrated, I left thinking we are on our way.” By the last day, “the students stayed until the end wanting to hear whatever she had to tell us.” She had successfully loved the instructor and the class until the very end, and the instructor responded in a loving way, “As she was leaving, she gave me a hug and again thanked

me for all I did to make the class as successful as possible. I left work that day feeling tired but happy. Happy because I had been given so many chances to make myself small and love like Jesus did, at the service of my neighbor.” By emulating who Jesus was to her to those around her, Brianna felt satisfied that the spirituality helped her get through a difficult time at work.

Sharing experiences also helps to see how they can be part of the movement’s goal of bringing unity into their daily life and more abstractly into the world. Ashley shared at a monthly meeting about her first year in college. She had just switched majors to international politics specifically because of her involvement with the Focolare. She paused and told the audience that she was nervous. People clapped in response to encourage her, and she continued. As a result of going to a Super Youth Congress Event in Rome, a peace march, the international youth school in New York and the International Youth event in Rome, she felt she was ready to be part of change. She felt that the Focolare exposed her to diverse experiences with religious, cultural, and socioeconomically diverse youth. She felt that the youth were working together for peace and unity for the world. She paused again and told the audience she was just nervous; people laughed, which helped her to regain composure. She shared that her new major would respond to the Focolare spirituality by bringing peace to the world, and that she needed the spirituality in her everyday life such as being more courteous to her dorm mates, her swim team, and her family. She also felt that the spirituality attended to her view of humanity in that each person has worth. She concluded her experience in the following way, “This is vague, but I try to bring about a better world. It is hopeful. It is

realistic because I am a product of this movement. The ideal of bring about unity and peace. This is possible because we can work together to seek a better world.”

Bringing Jesus in the midst is particularly important to family life for FM members. The spirituality encourages members to work through conflict by seeing unity as the ultimate goal. For example, Lacy shared how her teenage children often perceived her as overprotective. She shared an experience about her teenage daughter who was going to a rock concert. The plans to go were not well conceived, and Lacy did not want her daughter to go. However, her daughter called to tell her that she was planning to go anyway. She shared, “I thought we agreed before I left home that she would not go because of all the obstacles and for safety reasons. So...when I received this unexpected call telling me she was going instead of asking me if she would still go, my first response was disapproval.” She reasserted her opinion that she shouldn’t go, but after getting off the phone, she re-thought her position and tried to be more sympathetic to her daughter. She continued,

When I arrived home, she was sitting in the kitchen with her girlfriend who was dressed and ready to go to the concert, but she was still in tears. I made myself one with her in this difficult moment and it transformed everything...I suggested we begin again and sent them off to the concert with good wishes, guardian angels, and prayers...they told me when they arrived home that evening that they had actually met some of the rock stars in the bands and had an awesome time! Before Katie went to bed that night, she hugged me and apologized. She explained how frustrated and worried she had been and said she realized that she did not handle the situation well in the heat of the moment. She thanked me for seeing the situation from her perspective. Unity was fully restored between us.

For Lacy, she felt that the spirituality gave her a better way of handling conflict, ultimately making her daughter happy and making the relationship stronger. The next important theme I will discuss regarding the sharing of everyday experiences is what

is known to members as *living in the present moment*.

Sharing Experiences Sustains Commitment

For the FM, the seamless nature of the spirituality is exemplified by living in the present moment and not becoming distracted by the past or future. In a talk on the will of God, Chiara's writing was used to liken living in the present moment to a golden thread running throughout an entire life:

Another example of how to live the present moment well is this: Let us imagine that we are wrapping packages, with beautiful paper and ribbon, making a gift of each present moment, by trying to do God's will well, completely. When the gift is wrapped and we have finished that action well, then we send it off to heaven, where it will remain for all eternity. Then we go on to the next action. In this way, we can make every moment remain forever, because it has been done out of love for God...As time passes we will see that God has woven a beautiful embroidery of our lives, and embroidery of many colors all coming together but especially with a golden thread running through it. If you look at this embroidery design with human eyes, from underneath, you might see many knots, where the thread had been broken, moments when we stepped out of the present, and didn't do God's will.

Whereas having Jesus in the midst is important for maintaining unity, the idea of living in the present moment is concerned with the qualities of consistency and seamlessness that the spirituality must have in everyday life.

Moreover, this attention to the present moment sustains members' commitment to the Movement. In most interviews, I concluded with this question, "Where do you see yourself in the Movement in the future?" Most interviewees included the present moment as a way of answering this question. Carissa responded: "I want to be in God so wherever He is, I want to be in that reality. And He is eternal present. He is not the future. He's not what has happened. He's now—right now. So that here I'm talking to you, I can love you and give you all of myself...What's important is to be fully in the present and then

He shows where else He wants me to be...well, in the present moment.” Members describe feeling called to live each moment as if it is the only one that matters and say that they will continue to do this with practically no regard for the future. Isabella said this about the future: “I have no idea what the future holds because it’s also the experience of living the present, living in the present moment, to live fully this moment.” Still another respondent found the question fairly difficult to answer, “That’s a very tricky question. Oh, my goodness, the fact is I don’t think really—I really do not—the future is the present. This is where God wants me right now. I don’t have plans for myself. I don’t mean that facetiously...So I guess the answer to that is wherever God wants me at the present moment.”

Another closing question I often asked was, “Overall, what has the movement meant to you?” Kailey responded, “That you can actually live in the present moment or -- actually starting with the present moment with my first—the present moment transcends time and space and if you really live within the present moment, you are part of that Trinitarian love that you are more experienced in the form of God’s love as much as you can understand that.” These respondents seem to be saying that the Movement as lived in the present moment has helped them, and they believe it will continue to do so. Tony explained, “Yeah, live like day by day...There were difficult days, but we overcame difficult things in the same way, just by trying to live in the present moment.” The present moment allowed them to focus on what the FM could achieve in the here and now; and as long as they continue to build unity with one another, they could feel assured that unity would continue to be sustained.

Sharing specific experiences exemplifies how members understood the present moment and their commitment to the Movement. I will draw from the data examples of sharing experiences about work, education and family. Clara shared her experience at the work place and trying to be in the present moment. Her interpretation of this point in the spirituality is that being in the present moment is to be open to others even though she is a shy person: “I try to smile; I try to say good morning; then I try to concentrate on doing my work well.” Like the sharing of previous experiences, Clara feels that she is rewarded in her work and in her relationship with God by being in the present moment: “It’s one way I can love at work. And when I live like this, it’s amazing how close I feel to God; and when I have a chance to talk to Him, I find it easy because I did it for Him in my neighbor.”

Sara shared an educational experience. She was living with a difficult roommate and responded by loving her in the present moment. She felt that her roommate took advantage of her niceness. Sasha decided to talk to her roommate about her negative attitude. She told the roommate that she took out her stress on others and that maybe the roommate didn’t realize what she was doing. The roommate responded by opening up, and they reached a level of understanding and respect. After this experience, she realized that it was important to live in the present moment because she was able to receive reciprocal love through this experience. She concluded that the relationship with her roommate has improved, and there is decreased tension between them. This example shows how members understand a point of the spirituality, have put it in practice, and now are committed to repeat their approach to difficulties because it worked for them.

Making the spirituality concrete and efficacious gives them the motivation to stay with the spirituality.

Finally, Jacob and Jill shared how they are living out the spirituality with their family. As a general rule, they raised their family with the Focolare ideal of unity, committed to living the present moment especially to overcome family conflict. They shared how they have been married for 25 years, and that the *golden thread* through their marriage was the Movement. They met at Purdue at a retreat for musicians. They stated, “It was love at first sound.” They found about the Movement through a member in their music group, and they felt that the Movement was to live the Gospel. They feel that because of their commitment to the Movement, their children are reaping the benefits of their Focolare upbringing. For example, their oldest daughter is pursuing the calling to be a Focolarina. The oldest daughter shared how she is pursuing God’s will for her life, and her family is supporting this calling. In this example, commitment is being sustained intergenerationally.

The data provides a sense of why the sharing of experiences from the everyday is so important to members (i.e. because the spirituality has helped give meaning to their lives and provided a structure for the further sharing and articulation of experiences). It is these ordinary events experienced by ordinary people that make the spirituality both relatable and livable on an everyday basis. Sharing experiences reflects what the Focolare movement is teaching them; but, more importantly, it gives members a more integral role in emulating the spirituality in their everyday life. By seeing the direct connection between the FM spirituality and their daily experiences, members are willing to commit

to bringing unity into their lives. Finally, the act of sharing solidifies their commitment to the movement; they believe that the FM is radical, unique, useful and important to their lives, their work, school, family, and the world.

Discussion: Everyday Experiences as a Meaning-Making Process in the FM

For the Focolare, sharing of experiences is a meaning-making process. Members share events from their daily lives, using resources from the FM spirituality to make sense of their experiences. Such experiences are often quite ordinary, the kind of events that occur constantly for almost everyone and involve situations with family, school, and work. They share these experiences to communicate to others in the community how *the spirituality* matters to them, to justify and articulate their ongoing commitment in the face of adversity, and to give meaningful explanations for why things happened in the way that they did. For sociologists, this data can help to explain the religious lens through which individuals interpret their everyday life. I will discuss the implications of the data analysis in reference to the symbolic interactionist tradition, the relationship of the everyday to religion, and the relationship of the everyday to social movements.

A Symbolic Interactionist Approach to the Everyday

This analysis of the everyday is rooted in the symbolic interactionist theoretical tradition. According to Blumer (1969: 2) the symbolic interactionist perspective has three premises:

The first premise is that human beings act toward things on the basis of the meanings that the things have for them... The second premise is that the meaning of such things is derived from, or arises out of, the social interaction that one has with one's fellows. The third premise is that these meanings are handled in, and modified through, an interpretative process used by the person in dealing with the things he encounters.

The ritualistic sharing of experiences found in the FM is an expression of belief in spiritual reality underlying that of the visible world, one that is readily understood and accepted by its intended audience. Since the sharing is always an ex post facto reconstruction of events, the focus is on framing and selection of details to give meaning and purpose to the summary statement: *This is what happened*. The selection reveals the presence of the extraordinary permeating the flow of ordinary events, which for the storyteller is worth replaying. Furthermore, as Blumer argues, the social interactionist perspective emphasizes the social concept of self, the concept of both who *we* are and who *they* are. Within the context of a religious social movement, collective sharing provides an opportunity and a structure for articulating who members are to one another and why the FM spirituality is so important to them.

The defining moment of the presentation of the self is best understood using Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical perspective (e.g. that social interaction provides clues for determining the FM identity and the nature of their relationships with one another). The goal is to present an appropriate self to the group so that the individual can be accepted as one of its constitutive components:

Society is organized on the principle that any individual who possesses certain social characteristics has a moral right to expect that others will value and treat him in an appropriate way. Connected with this principle is a second, namely that an individual who implicitly or explicitly signifies that he has certain social characteristics ought, in fact, to be what he claims he is. (41)

As the example of the FM indicates, however, this is a work in progress; individuals repeatedly rehearse experiences, providing details of their experience in an attempt to demonstrate to others that this is who they are. Their goal is to achieve a seamlessness of

experience and to communicate the totality of influence that the FM spirituality has over their lives.

While these experiences are by and large ordinary, I will argue similarly to Garfinkel (1967) that through the process of their being shared, they are given the same detail and attention as extraordinary events. Outside the structure of a religious community, such events may often be taken for granted, even though they require the same processes of reflexivity as extraordinary events “to locate, to identify, to analyze, to classify, to make recognizable, or to find one’s way around in comparable occasions. The prescriptions, they observe, are law-like, spatiotemporally restricted, and ‘loose.’” (2) As told secondhand, the sharing of experience is the socially organized occasion for making sense of these ordinary events. The context says as much about the social side of the experience as the sharing itself. The normative and regulative sharing of experiences gives the FM community its essential quality of sustained, personal interaction and accountability, keeping members in continuous communication, and providing a collective framework for each individual to understand and interpret his or her own experiences. This constantly renewed sense of natural order provides meaning and insight into the socially structured scenes of everyday life. (35)

More recent theoretical discussions on social interaction have raised important questions about the study of everyday life. Adler, Adler and Fontana (1987) carefully articulate the relationship between the actor and his or her context. The individual does more than absorb the context and is more than his or her structural location: “The relationship between consciousness and interaction is seen as reflexive: People are

shaped or socialized by interaction as well as instrumental in shaping the character of interaction.” (219) The interaction itself is both voluntaristic and structured, “simultaneously determined and free, affected by structural constraints while remaining mutable, changeable, and emergent.” (223) The data presented herein provided ample evidence that the sharing of everyday life has reoccurring patterns, constancy and an organization that appears ritualistic, giving it an appearance of generalizability and allowing for the aggregation of experience. This generalizability of social interaction is of particular interest for studying the integration of the everyday life into a religious social movement.

Gonos (1977), noting the over-individualistic and indeterminate tendencies of the interactionist methodology/theory, errs on the side of separating the everyday situation from its frame. However, the frame is a cultural process that helps to categorize various experiences of the everyday: “Whereas a situation is described by its particular contents, especially by those elements that are unique to it and have been composed within its own existence, a frame is described by the stable rules of its operation, whatever the circumstances of any particular enactment.” (857) More importantly, for a social movement, the frame or the *sharing* component of the meeting lets both the sharer and the audience understand the importance of the FM spirituality. The *social situation*, (using the Weberian concept of *verstehen*), is the subjective understanding of the experience, whereas the *frame* places the actor in relation to other actors in the production of meaning-making.

This is particularly important for a social movement that is religiously

oriented. The culture of the group helps to frame the experiences selected by

members and the way in which they explore and share those experiences with others:

The situations that embody a culture at any moment all reflect that culture's core values, as well as the principles of operation of the whole, which can be described as pluralistic. Each situation is seen as a mediating fluid between culture and the individual...First, it provides a medium of socialization where cultural norms and values materialize, i.e., are made real for the individual...Second, the incalculable number of situations serve as so many collecting devices for the inputs that individual actors make to the cultural 'definitions of the situation.' (861)

In theoretically interpreting everyday situations, the content of the experience sharing must be explored as a subjective reality; and the patterns that give these experiences their normative and ritualistic character must be identified. I will turn to religion in a more directed discussion in its relation to the everyday.

Religion and the Everyday

The treatment of the everyday life within the sociology of religion literature has mainly focused on religiosity (Fichter, 1954; Lenski, 1963; Glock and Stark, 1965; Stark and Glock, 1968; Davidson and Knudsen, 1977; Yinger 1977; Wimberley, 1989; Stark and Iannacone, 1994; Wortham and Wortham, 2007). Simply stated, religiosity is conceptualized as those who practice religion on a regular basis are likely to have religion as an overall framework in which to influence the choices they make in their everyday life. Certainly, for the FM members, they understand the spirituality as something that ought to be practiced outside traditional religious boundaries such as attending mass. Moberg (1982), in his study of religion's salience in Sweden and America, discusses the relationship between religiosity, religious commitment, and the everyday life in the meaning-making process. The spiritual practice of the FM gives individuals purpose and

a coherent basis for action, whether on the highest levels of personal vocation or the mundane and easily taken for granted aspects of their daily life. The problem with this theory is that although it describes that there is a correlation, it does not necessarily explain why individuals make these particular connections nor does it help to actually characterize that experience.

Recently, McGuire (2008) sought to move beyond the religiosity focus of earlier studies by emphasizing the experiential living of religion by the *average* religious person. She poses this research question, “What might we discover if, instead of looking at affiliation or organizational participation, we focused first on individuals, the experiences they consider most important, and the concrete practices that make up their personal religious experience and expression?” (4) The lived approach (à la Berger) plausibly connects religion and the everyday life by elucidating practices through which religious action is embodied, “Its building blocks are shared meanings and experiences, learned practices, borrowed imagery, and imparted insights.” (13) The everyday life of an FM member is structured pragmatically to achieve the collective goal of unity. Through the sharing of experiences, I argue that the members of the FM create a coherent framework of interpretation for daily life and motivate each other to achieve the Movement’s goals. The structured ritual practice of sharing experience interactionally explains why making the connection to FM spirituality to one’s daily life is so important (i.e. they seek to make a difference in their daily life) and characterizes the application of the spirituality as a way of making their life, as Matthew put it earlier in this chapter, *worth living for*. This is more than a simple, rational correlation between religious beliefs to non-religious

dimensions of their life; members of the FM live ordinary lives, but through the spirituality, they understand that even the most mundane examples highlight how they are achieving unity in the world and how this elevates their daily life as significant, *worth living for*.

Social Movements and the Everyday

The discussion of the everyday life in relation to social movements is an effective way of explaining sustained commitment and collective repertoires of action, especially in understanding how a movement such as the FM relates to one's personal life. According to Passy and Guigni (2000), sustained activism is best achieved by building a sense of coherence between one's personal life and one's social activism. They argue, "A critical factor in these dynamics is the way participants perceive their position as activists and relate that to their own personal life, both concretely and symbolically... We focus on the symbolic dimensions of activism." (119) I found that in the FM, a frequent result of social movement activity is its entanglement in other parts of the actor's life, as the Movement extends beyond the immediate group's action and into the more mundane practice of the FM spirituality. Their "explanation stresses the joining impact of the actors' structural location and their individual life histories on political¹ commitment," (119) but even more importantly, "Once activists have established a connection between their life-spheres—in particular, the three principle ones (Family, studies, and work)—and their political engagement, they are in constant interaction with the protest issues for which they mobilize...leading to sustained participation." (125)

¹ I think in the case of the FM, spiritual or religious commitment could easily replace Passy and Guigni's discussion on politicization of social movement activists.

The totality of involvement in a social movement can be transformative for FM members. The capacity of social movements to exert a seamless influence on everyday life shows how long term commitment can be sustained and demonstrates the totality of significance that a movement can have over the life of an individual. This particular understanding of commitment is important for a religious social movement with the goal of unity because this goal is realistically never ending. Although the FM has concrete goals as steps for achieving unity, unity as an ultimate goal requires a life-long, thorough-going commitment. Because the movement requires so much from its members, a sustained commitment model must be produced to give theoretical coherence to such commitment.

There is overlap between social movement theory, religion and the sociological examination of the everyday. Similarly to the social interactionist perspective, there is a relationship between the subjective perceptions of reality (i.e. spiritual consciousness and the perception of the objective, normative world) and structures of opportunity, “We treat social interaction, social ties, communication, and conversation not merely as expressions of structure, rationality, consciousness, or culture but as active sites of creation and change.” (McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly, 2001: 22) Moreover, social movement theory underscores the cultural processes, “Cultural analysts have given special attention to two sets of circumstances: explicit organization of contentious action on behalf of ideologies or other well articulated belief systems and action based on membership in culturally distinctive communities.” (21-2) Finally, just as Goffman argued that the social self is dramaturgically presented, the sharing of everyday experiences in the FM can be

described as performative. Social movements “consist of bounded, contingent, interactive performances by multiple and changing actors.” (Guigni, McAdam, and Tilly, 1999: 256) One particular interaction of interest for this study is the production and ritualization of collective action frames or repertoires of action. This mechanism of the FM helps to shape how claims are made for unity in the world.

Sharing everyday experiences then becomes part of the culture of the FM, structuring an interactive style of and sustained commitment to collective action. This model helps to explain how FM participants reproduce movement spirituality, feel part of achieving the movement goal of unity and the impact that interaction has on the culture of the movement, especially with regard to ritualization and meaning-making processes.

CHAPTER SIX

SUFFERING IN THE WORLD: A RELIGIOUS SOCIAL MOVEMENT APPROACH TO THE PROBLEM OF THEODICY

FM members often wrote to Chiara about their problems. The example from CH V, Carol's scrapbook, had several letters that she wrote to Chiara. I was unable to record those letters verbatim, but I did gain access to another letter. This letter was written after Jill, a married Focolarina from Chicago, lost her father-in-law detailing what kind of person he was, the family's response to his death, and what the spirituality meant to her during this experience:

Dearest Chiara,

As I read this new conference call, I want to let you know about my recent days, living the will of God in the present moment. It seems these days were almost a "head start" on your new message for us!

By human standards Jacob father had not "earned" our love (he abandoned Jacob mother when Jacob was quite young), but through the light and grace of the Ideal we have for many years made it to love him and also to love John's stepmother, to the point that they loved us in return as much as they could.

A fruit of this effort was the rapport our children had with them. Innocent of past sufferings, they grew up loving their grandparents. This was possible because we didn't allow the barrier of John's pain to stand in the way ... we conquered it by being the first to love, over and over.

This fruit overflowed into John's brother's family, healing to some degree the same pain, so that they could also love.

This past weekend, our family made it to live the last days and hours with Jacob's father and stepmother. We went all the way Chiara! We were at the bedside of each one as they died ... one on Friday morning in our home, one on Saturday morning in a nursing home. The children too stayed near, unafraid. The last hours were truly in a family atmosphere of love for one another. We could see with our own eyes how this love helped them to entrust themselves to God's love and

mercy.

We gave comfort and assured them of our love. Though neither was active at a church, we prayed with them and for them, speaking of loved ones who had gone before them. They each felt the relief of knowing that we would look after everything with love - their spouse, their friends and all their other concerns. I feel they were able to entrust everything to us because they felt God's love through us. Thank you, thank you Chiara for the beautiful gift of the Ideal. What joy it brings to us and to our neighbors when we follow this way.

I assure you of my unity for the upcoming meetings. We will follow them through the Focolare in Chicago.

One in the present moment, especially in contact with all our brothers and sisters,
Jill

The data revealed a wealth of experiences, such as this letter, involving hardship and demonstrated how the FM spirituality helped to make sense of these difficult moments.

For FM members, the path toward sanctification is paved with what the Focolare call a reality of suffering. Suffering is often seen as part of the substructure of religion, especially as a response to theodicy. The Focolare Movement may be seen as an interesting example of how members view their suffering through the spirituality as transformative, potentially helping them bring unity into the world. The compelling experience of making meaning out of their difficult moments has led members to believe that the spirituality is unique and special, giving them a greater insight into God's love. Moreover, I argue in this chapter that the paradox of a satisfying response to the questions posed by theodicy is that through a continual engagement with the realities of suffering, a religious social movement can be sustained beyond the initial phase of recruitment and mobilization of its participants. The data provides insight into three aspects of suffering: (a) how does the sharing of difficult moments and connecting it to the FM spirituality help make sense of suffering; (b) what does this sharing reveal about the individual's relationship with the sacred; and (c) what are the positive effects that

suffering can have on coping and mobilizing for change? The following sections provide examples regarding illness, death, and the family to illustrate how members understand suffering and conclude with a discussion on the sociological approach to the problem of suffering.

Part I: The FM Spirituality Response to Suffering: Jesus Forsaken

Unpacking Jesus Forsaken

The lives of FM members are rife with painful events. They share these experiences just as they do the ordinary ones to communicate what the FM spirituality has meant to them. In the vocabulary of the FM, the experience of suffering is often spoken of as *Jesus forsaken*. The notion of Jesus forsaken is one of the more abstract themes in the FM; however, it is simply the co-sharing of the experience of Jesus on the cross during which Jesus was forsaken by God the Father. Suffering, therefore, is believed not to be in vain, but is seen rather as an opportunity to participate in what Jesus experienced. Most importantly, the experience of suffering becomes part of a justification for the importance of unity because theologically speaking—the ultimate example of suffering was the separation between Jesus and God the Father. Through the sharing of experiences of suffering, members analogically participate in this separation and in the reunion of Jesus with God the Father.

There are several examples from the interview data that go into greater detail on how members understand and interpret *Jesus forsaken* through their own experiences with grief, loss, and pain. Kailey explained Jesus forsaken in her interview:

I go back to Jesus forsaken which I think I will always -- each time I encounter him in suffering, I'm going to maybe understand him more and I know I'm in the

first very beginning step of understanding what this is, that there is something—there’s something big. I think we all strive to understand suffering. I think we’re all faced with suffering, all humanity and it’s the big question mark. Why is there suffering? And to be part of a faith and part of an ideal that has that as the center to be part of a faith that is really formed by someone giving their life for all of us.

This passage is telling—the subject appears to be saying that although suffering remains mystifying to her, the movement gives her a meaningful framework for relating her experience to that of Jesus. By placing suffering at its center, the Movement acknowledges that individuals will face adversity and confesses its hope that just as Jesus’ sacrifice was not in vain, the suffering of humanity is also not meaningless. In this formulation, suffering remains a question mark, not disappearing due to sufficient explanation but rather becoming something to embrace.

Johnny explained, “The basis of the Catholic faith is based on giving yourself up, up for love, no matter what it is. Jesus forsaken is Jesus’ last love for the world. He died for us.” He also said that the greatest possible sacrifice would be to give your life for another person, but that the way to learn how to sacrifice is to engage in small acts of love: “Sacrifice hurts a lot, giving your time, and not letting your own opinions get in the way of others.” He gave an example of a “small sacrifice” he made for his girlfriend, who agreed to attend an FM event with him:

I sacrificed my 7 hour drive to get there and my 48 hours to be with her no matter how she was feeling. I saw that she needed to be with someone. Being her boyfriend made it easier, but I don’t care, I would have done that for my brother, I would have done it for anyone, I do it all the time, actually...She needed me. It kind of hurt because I was there, I wanted to have fun, too, but yet there was this person that needed me, even though she didn’t know it. It really turned out to be a really beautiful time with my friends, with my girlfriend, with my brother, with riding the rides, this and that. It turned out to be a good time.

For Johnny, sacrifice proceeded out of a willingness to suffer on behalf of another.

His sacrifice was not of his self-interest, representing to him the ultimate sacrifice made by Jesus on his behalf. Thus, the notion of *Jesus forsaken* helps members cope with daily frustrations and hardships through the belief that the sacrifice of Jesus provides an opportunity to transform difficult moments into acts of love.

Health, Death-Related and Family Conflict Experiences and Jesus Forsaken

Jesus forsaken has helped individuals understand suffering in relation to sickness, death and family-related problems. By sharing experiences or through interview data, individuals are trying to understand suffering through the FM spirituality. For example, in an interview with Peter, his approach to suffering was to offer his own pain as a way of relating to his niece's struggle with anorexia. His niece felt comfortable enough to share with him, "She was able to share what life had been like the last few years, the hurts with anorexia, the pains of what had happened with that... I felt that my own hurts and brokenness was able to penetrate...she knew I understood her." Just as he understood the experience of Jesus forsaken, he analogically understood his niece's suffering.

Shaena shared her experience of her mom's struggle with depression as a reminder of Jesus forsaken. She remembered Jesus on the cross, and loved her mother and Jesus forsaken in their mutual suffering. As a result, she gave her life to Jesus, and said her "yes" to him. She was devastated by the loss of her friend in Iraq and found that she was unable to love Jesus forsaken. She realized that she was being selfish and that she must love Jesus regardless. Now, she was happier with her life and realized that things happen for a reason. In her experience, Shaena acknowledged that the spirituality

was helpful but only to a point. Suffering still remained a problem. However, in the face of meaninglessness, she let go of her *self* to re-embrace the Focolare spirituality to help her cope with her loss.

In an interview with the *capa zona* in Los Angeles, Margherita shared the last few months with Ada, the prior *capa zona*, who was diagnosed with cancer and died shortly before I started my research. Through Ada, Margherita saw that the spirituality helped her to die as well as to live: “As a person, she was an outgoing, very joyful. And I was with her in many moments when she was told by the doctor they couldn’t do anything anymore when she had her chemotherapy. Moments I’ll never forget. But what I—you know, it’s really true when they say, you die the way you live. That’s really something that I saw in her.” It was important to Ada to be consistent in her spirituality, Margherita explained,

When she found out that there was nothing they could do anymore, so she really said okay. Let’s pray together so I will be able to be faithful to the end...And one time during the night I wasn’t there. Two of the others were there. She was not able to talk. And she asked for a piece of paper so she made gestures. So they gave her a piece of paper and something to write and then with her great effort, she wrote two times. Yes. Yes. And signed her name. So for us it was all the sign even though she cannot communicate. She cannot talk, but she wanted to let us know that she’s still there.

Finally, Ada emphasized the public nature of dying because of the communal nature of the spirituality, “She really shared her illness for everyone—to live it together for everyone...She made that choice. We live this, our spirituality, is communitarian. She wanted to share everything with everyone.” Sharing her experience of suffering in this way gave Ada the opportunity to express her spirituality in a particular way and to be in community during her last days.

In the following two examples on the family, Jesus forsaken was an important theological concept that helped them to understand and get through their difficult experiences. Early in Ciara and Lenny's relationship, they broke up just before they were to be married. Ciara was the one who broke up the engagement. In an interview with both of them, Ciara shared her experience:

All I remember was waking up the next morning beside my bed -- I was in a ball. I mean it really was a dramatic moment of Jesus forsaken. I remember waking up, my eyes were so swollen; I couldn't open them...So my mom comes into the room, Melissa (*a Focolarina*) wants to talk to you. So she hands me the phone. She says Ciara, I know you're crying. I know you are -- it's the end of the world for you, but now you have to stop crying. You need to get up. You need to call a friend. You need to go to the movie. You need to go to the beach. You need to do something. You need to love somebody and that's it. And start forgetting. And now it's in the hands of God.

Lenny expressed the desire to see Ciara so that they could break up "in person." So he flew from Italy to see her in Los Angeles, "He prayed the whole entire trip to say really thought this was for you and, you know, he really came with a purpose of leaving me free, but doing it, you know, the right way. And in the end, it was funny. At a certain point, we went to that same movies and my love started again." They ended up getting back together and proceeded to get married. For Ciara what was key in getting back together was to first focus on God's love and to "forget" everything else.

Gabriela, a Focolarina from Paraguay, shared about her experience with divorce. She had left home to pursue her calling to be a Focolarina when she received a call from her sister. They asked her to come home, "When I got there, my mother had—was at the door and said 'I'm waiting for you to let you know that this is what you wanted. Your dad and I are divorcing and I'm going. If you want to come with me, come.' I thought the

world was caving in because I couldn't understand." Even though she was learning how to bring unity in the world, she was experiencing a break up at home. In this moment she recalled Jesus forsaken, "Here this was for me that moment that everything seemed to be destroyed and disappearing and from within me, I don't know where from within, I told my mother you can't go. This is—you made a contract for life when you got married. You have to stay. You just can't go...This will destroy our family." After listening to Gabriela, her parents decided to work it out and ended up staying together. Like the previous example, by focusing on Jesus forsaken, Gabriela restored unity in her family.

These experiences include difficult life events, and they are commonly explained through the spirituality in a way that gives meaning to the event and provides an answer to why it happened. Each example ended with a sense of satisfaction in what they went through; the spirituality helped them cope with their suffering; and in the family related examples, the suffering was replaced with a happy ending.

Part II: Suffering and the Sacred

Resolving Theodicy: Growing Closer to God and Increased Commitment to the FM

In this chapter, I argue that *Jesus forsaken* is a response of theodicy. As evidence, I will describe a *formation weekend*, during which the topic of suffering was a central focus. Both the presented remarks and the response of the respondents provide an insight into how the FM understands theodicy. One of the important themes was that *Jesus forsaken* is not simply an abstract theological construct; rather, it is a framework for interpreting everyday life—participants were told to love Jesus forsaken because to do so is to bring joy and comfort to those who suffer. A video presentation told the story of one

of Chiara's first companions, Dori, who engaged with the theology of *Jesus forsaken* in her work with the poor. The video revealed that Dori endured considerable hardship in the course of her work (for example, she suffered a serious infection), but she responded positively through her belief that such adverse events made her better able to share in Jesus' suffering on the cross. As she stated in the video, her belief was that her loss had been redeemed through the sacrificial suffering of Jesus.

The presenters stated that these same principles could be applied to the minutiae of everyday life or to the extreme of sacrificing one's life for another. Each instance of suffering, they said, is a chance to engage with the basic problem of separation between individuals and God. They emphasized that even if FM members appear eccentric or become rejected by society, they are to live this way because Jesus also lived outside the norm. The commitment of Dori to an authentic response to her loss was likened to that of marriage.

After the video, two members shared from their experiences. Clara told a story about her brother's terminal illness. As she described it, this was an experience of *Jesus forsaken* because her brother eventually died. The result for her was that she grew closer to God, just as Jesus did through his suffering on the cross. Pam spoke about her sister-in-law who had been ostracized by the family shortly after the death of her husband's mother. She said that at the time she encouraged her husband to be patient with his sister, to keep *Jesus forsaken* rather than break unity with her. These presentations concluded with some remarks with a video of Chiara. Chiara began by saying that she often received letters from members going through difficult times, and that her response was always,

“Make sure your suffering is fruitful.” This idea of suffering, she said, is not sadistic (i.e. we are not taught to enjoy it), rather, it is intended to be comforting because it is an experience of Jesus in the midst. Suffering should be approached with the following steps in mind:

1. In the morning, prepare to wait for Jesus. Jesus forsaken will come;
2. In times of negativity recognize him immediately, every sorrow is his sacrament, an outward sign of Jesus crucified;
3. Observe him carefully, greet him, calling every appearance by his name. Each action is a contemplation;
4. Prepare celebration, welcome him immediately.

The counsel to embrace Jesus forsaken enthusiastically is a way of coping, of seeing the good in bad times, and of achieving closeness with Jesus. For FM members, *Jesus forsaken* is a participation in Jesus’ own suffering, a celebration of his victory, and a way of understanding their experience of pain and loss. The following health, death and family-related examples go into depth on how this approach to suffering influences and shapes their understanding and relationship to God.

Health, Death-Related and Family Conflict Experiences and Theodicy

Gene and Lacy shared at a meeting about their son’s health. After experiencing several painful headaches, they learned that their son had a brain tumor. In response, instead of questioning the situation, they put it in God’s hand. They turned to the Focolare during this time who told them to embrace Jesus forsaken and to turn their son over to God. They found a surgeon and had the tumor operated on. Over 50 people came to the hospital, including the Focolare. They wrote to Chiara about what was happening, and she replied with a letter that said she was “one with them.” The tumor was removed,

and it was benign. At the end of sharing the experience, they concluded that suffering is what makes us one. Despite going through a difficult time, they understood God to be in control; and in fact, they grew closer to God because of their suffering.

Marietta, a Focolarina from New York, shared an early experience as a teenager. She called this experience a *luminous moment* because it was a *turning point*. She explained,

When I was 18, the beginning of my second year of college, I had a car accident coming back from the city where I was going in college coming back to my city. In the car, there was three other Gen. We were going to the meeting which was in my city...I ended up in the hospital for a long time with my pelvis in pieces. My friends thank God made it through and didn't have any problem, but I was really - - it was really shock -- the shock of my life. First of all, I never had any physical pain until then. So it was an impact with suffering. Second I was brought to a hospital that was specialized for bones because I was really in bad shape. I was in the cast here to the feet...I couldn't get up. I couldn't let -- they had to feed me because I was always flat on my back with the cast all the way up to here. So I was really in the hands of everybody, you know.

Being in this situation made her question why it had to happen to her. She sacralized her experience asking where God's love was in this, now that she was suffering. It was the love of others, her family, the other Gen that helped her understand who God was. She realized:

That really God loves me immensely. It wasn't a love that was general. It was a personal love for me. And when I really got it, it was like a turning point because I realize if I was suffering or if I was far from home or I couldn't go to the university for few months because I was—it was really important because God was loving me at that moment and it was for me.

This experience changed her approach to life because she was loved by God and she loved those around her. She received a calling to live totally for God. She explained, "I finished university, the college, university and then I remember we had a party with

friends of my father and my family and when I had my graduation and they say, 'What are you going to do in life?' Then I realized I had to decide. I'm going to Loppiano." Unlike Gene and Lacy's story, initially, Marietta turned away from God. However, her experience of how people, especially the Focolare members, loved her changed her perspective on who God was. Her understanding of God's love superseded the problem of suffering for Marietta to the point that she committed her life to the movement.

Matthew shared about an experience with death. His aunt was a member of the FM and had introduced his family to the Movement. He later became a Focolarino in the Movement. Their relationship was built on their mutual understanding of God. He shared how his aunt told him, "I'm dying.' What do you say when someone just tells you that? I didn't say anything. With my aunt, I didn't know how to behave, and I knew and she knew we had something very much in common that God was everything. So she was always up and happy and trying to be joyful for me, and I tried to do the same for her." His aunt was an example of how to love and he tried to love her as he was taught in the Focolare. She was someone who he deeply admired because of her involvement in the movement and her understanding of God,

She was someone I looked up to. And I see how she died and I had heard that she wanted to do the will of God. She didn't want any painkillers because she would always say they put her under morphine and stuff, she wouldn't be able to love. She would become weak and fade in the night. She held off as long as she could, you know, and the Focolarina were always there around her all night. She was always faithful to the will of God...I have to be like her now.

His aunt's model behavior not only helped him through her death, but also gave him a

better understanding of God. Similar to Marietta, it was a strong enough experience that it helped his commitment to the Focolare Movement.

At a community meeting, an elderly FM member, Tonya, talked about her life with her husband. She saw her relationship with him as chapters. In the later chapters, he had dementia. He lost interest in everything. All the responsibilities were hers, and she could not expect gratitude. She had to love first and trust God. She wanted her husband to keep his dignity, so she started by doing things for him. He was resistant at first, but she succeeded by making a game of it. She wanted to care for him as he would have wanted to care for himself. She experienced joy out of doing things out of love for him. She was kept mutual love between them this way. She was given strength from God to the end even though her patience continued to be tested. She had to be the first to love the nurses, too, not just her husband. It had been two years since he died, but he is still alive to her, more so than when he was alive. This had been a gift for her and her husband. Through her trust in God, she was not only able to get through her husband's death, but continue to experience his presence after he passed away.

In an experience about the family, Michelle shared about growing up in a conflict-ridden house. She first described the early years with her family, "I grew up in a very simple family but at the same time very Catholic, we have faith in God, we go to church every Sunday. We were practicing Christians." Her life was disrupted when her father had a stroke and became paralyzed. She was twelve years old. She shared how everything changed after that. Her father started drinking, and the fighting began. This experience led her to question her faith: "For me, I had all these questions in me, what is the real

meaning of faith? Because in my actual life, in that moment, I could not reconcile my faith in God and the actual life that I had, because I could only experience pain and suffering and trouble, those moments of my life.” She had yet to experience God as love, until five years later when she discovered the Focolare. She assumed the spirituality because it helped her understand what was happening to her family, “I understood that I could apply it to myself, to my life, the reality of God as love. I could apply it to my life by loving the others, by being the first to love, and not expecting the others to do that to me because often the family nobody loves, nobody was loving...I can be the first to love and to put love where there is no love.” She started practicing the spirituality by helping her mother around the house, getting along with her sister, and turned to the Gen to begin her active participation in the FM. Like Marietta and Mathew’s experience, hardship at first produced distance from God, but through her interaction with the Focolare, she gained greater appreciation of God’s love. After experiencing God’s love, she not only helped her family through their conflict, but also became more committed to the FM.

These experiences demonstrate into how the spirituality works during difficult times. Sharing experiences becomes a teaching moment for the audience as much as it was for the teller of the story. Most importantly, difficult times despite their potential to break their faith actually made them stronger. Jesus forsaken is a powerful enough theological idea for members that it helps members cope with their suffering and leads them to a growing commitment to the movement. The following section discusses the next step of approaching suffering: transforming experiences of suffering into commitment to the Movement’s goal of unity.

**Part III: Positive Effects of the FM Spirituality: Coping with Suffering and
Social Change**

Transforming Suffering into Social Change

In a talk on unity, Patricia used Chiara's writing to explain the connection between Jesus' experience of suffering and the spirituality of unity. As Patricia understood it, Chiara's insight was that a theological principle for giving meaning to the reality of suffering could advance the goal of greater unity:

Jesus crucified and forsaken was a discovery that helped Chiara and the first group to live for unity even when it was difficult or seemingly impossible. When he experienced the most dramatic separation from the Father, he didn't remain still and frozen. Instead, with great strength, with boundless trust, he re-abandoned himself, he reunited himself to the Father saying: "Into your hands I commend my spirit". And he recomposed the broken unity.

FM members can respond to their suffering in the same way that Jesus did. Just as *Jesus in the midst* is to be understood literally, so also is participation in Jesus' suffering. It is analogically the same: The suffering of members of the community can be overcome by accepting Jesus' sacrifice on the cross and thus, resorting unity with God. Of course, members do not understand their suffering in the same sacrificial way as they do the suffering of Jesus, but there is nevertheless an understanding that the effect of suffering is separation and that accepting *Jesus forsaken* can result in unity with God and others,

We have all experienced small or big divisions, which cause great suffering in our communities, in our families, groups, offices, schools, etc. Because Jesus Forsaken made himself completely one with division, we can recognize him in these places too and, out of love for him, overcome that suffering within us and do all we can to recompose unity with others.

Jesus forsaken provides them a context for making sense of painful experiences and inspires hope that such losses are not in vain. Moreover, suffering is seen as an essential

experience for achieving unity. In a conference call entitled *Making Ourselves One*, participants were told that *Jesus forsaken* is the act of becoming nothing (i.e. of becoming selfless so that Jesus can be embraced in the other person). By letting go of self-interest, members learned that unity with the other becomes a real possibility and all the more so if the other person is also willing to become nothing. In such a reciprocal sacrifice, the speaker stated, individuals can love and know Jesus forsaken.

Although as stated previously, many respondents answered that their future in the Movement was about the present moment, many also responded with Jesus forsaken. For example, Father Alan said that he hopes that he would always be involved with the goal, “To totally love Jesus forsaken with my whole heart without any reservations.” Many subjects responded to the question about the overall meaning of the Movement with a similar statement: “I always think the overall meaning is the love for Jesus forsaken that brings unity if we really embrace him and say that’s the thing that I want more than anything.” Why is *Jesus forsaken* so central for community members? Sheila answered, “I think that it has taught me to see suffering in a different way, a different light. Suffering now has meaning. Before it used to be just suffering, but now I know that it is Jesus forsaken, you know, and so it has taught me to see that in every suffering there is always the love of God behind it. I think that this has made my life complete.” Simon gave a similar answer, “The movement has given a direction and a meaning to my life. Yeah, working for unity I feel is what I was made form and this has become the vehicle for accomplishing that mission...Through the movement, I have gotten to know Jesus forsaken which is also the focus of my life. I realize that he is the key to unity; he is the

one who builds unity.” The ideal gives members hope, a place to achieve unity despite experiences of hardship, grief and loss.

Relating to Chiara’s Story of How She Turned Her Suffering into Social Change

Individuals sharing experiences of suffering often reference the story of Chiara and her first companions. Rose explained that one of her initial attractions to the

Movement was the way Chiara explained suffering:

Rose: What Chiara presented to us enchanted me from the very beginning, Jesus forsaken.

Nori: What is it about Jesus forsaken that’s enchanting to you?

Rose: I really don’t know. I just know—I don’t know if you ever seen a child when you dangle something shiny and you just enchanted to me from the very beginning, that was Jesus forsaken and it still is.

Greg provides a more concrete example of how Chiara’s experience of suffering was similar to his own:

So she had to tell -- so practically while the war was going on and the whole family having lost everything, she had to tell them I’m not coming with you. I’m going to go back to the city. Abandoning you essentially. You can imagine how she felt and all night she cried and then came her experience. She came back to the city and as she did, a woman came towards her who was almost out of her mind from shock and pain because four of her family members had been killed by the bombs. So this woman kind of frantically shouted, “Four of mine are dead. Four of mine are dead.” So Chiara embraced her and tried to console her and realizing that moment that in the pain of this woman, she had to put aside her own pain of having just left her family and to embrace which symbolically meant she had to embrace the pain of humanity and leave her own behind. In a smaller scale, for me it was the exact chemistry. Leaving my own pain behind and embrace the suffering of the mind, suffering of this. Since I had asked God to give me a sign, that seemed to be the answer because it was a parallel kind of thing and that meant to me that God was telling me you’re on the right—you’re on the right track.

Rita spoke of one of Chiara’s first companions, Ginetta, who spread the word about the Movement in Brazil by sharing her beliefs about *Jesus forsaken*. She told how Ginetta

spoke to a crowd of 13,000 (Rita included) and how Ginetta's story seemed to fit her own experience:

Chiara said I don't have a material cross to give you in bronze or wood or anything, but I give you my ideal, which is Jesus forsaken, when Jesus cried on the cross, why have you forsaken me. So she told her, go to Brazil and teach Brazilian people how to love him, and so Ginetta came with that... And at that point she said 'Would you,' to all those 13,000 people that were there, 'Would you like to make Jesus forsaken, this crucified God, that Christ, my God, my God why have you forsaken me, would you like to make of him the all of your life?' And that was what really struck me because I was 17 years old, and I was living... one of those moments that are difficult in your life because my family was having a lot of problems because my dad was drinking a lot, there was lots of disagreement... And instead of this darkness, I found this experience that Ginetta told of Jesus forsaken was such a light. I still remember that day, specifically that moment that she shared that. That was a big light in my life.

In the same way that FM members are instructed to interpret their suffering via the suffering of Jesus, they also interpret their experiences with respect to the experience of the community as a whole. The practice of sharing stories of personal hardship is intended not simply for the benefit of the individual doing the sharing, but for each member of the audience to relate to his or her own story.

Exemplar: Health, the FM Spirituality and Social Change

At a Mariapolis in San Diego, there was an academic workshop on health-related issues. The workshop panel consisted of a nurse, a family therapist, and a doctoral student in clinical psychology. The workshop was titled, *The Human Person from a Physical and Psychological Perspective*. First, Vicky established what the workshop was about: "We will discuss how to take care of ourselves better, to understand the Focolare spirituality in regards to the 'helping' professions." She introduced herself as a therapist from Oakland. She worked with families and children who suffer from trauma. She

identified herself as an agent of transformation. Next, Kathy introduced herself. She was from Northern California, had been in the movement since she was ten years old, and had been a hospital nurse for the last twenty-four years. Her understanding of the FM spirituality is to see Jesus in the person next to her, especially her patients, family members and colleagues. Finally, Melissa introduced herself as a Gen who is building unity with others. She was working on her PhD in clinical psychology. She worked with kids with autism who had severe psychological problems and with schools. She stated that she is “living in the present moment and living his will in the present moment, and want to understand how the spirituality provides the best care for the person.” Each person in her introduction stated her relationship to the health professional field gave an overview of how she is integrating the spirituality into her work, and how she is contributing to the movement’s goal of unity.

Kathy shared how Chiara talked about the value of the human body. Through the Movement, there must be emphasis on physical health for the health of the soul. She then shared her experience with back pain and numbness in her leg. She saw a doctor, then a neurosurgeon. Surgery was scheduled. She was now a patient instead of a nurse. She was fearful. She shared this with the Focolare, who prayed for her. They told her that it was the will of God that now she needed to take care of herself rather than others. The surgery went well. She received a letter from Chiara that she had prayed for her surgery. Kathy shared that it was a slow, but good recovery.

Vicky thanked Kathy for sharing her experience and then shared her own experience. She told a story about a patient who has heart disease (but had no signs of it).

He needed a bypass. The doctors found it a confusing case, but they believed that the patient's anger was the culprit for the disease. She can relate because she also needed to work on her anxiety. She has had to find ways to diffuse her stressors, but through her suffering, she embraced Jesus forsaken and built mutual love with others. She concluded that it is important to take care of ourselves so that we can take care of others.

Melissa emphasized Vicky's point that stress can influence our bodies, thoughts, and actions in a negative way. Stress can create distance from others. Her specialty is in cognitive behavior, which she described as "tackling the thoughts." She needs the spirituality to better serve her patients. For example, she found out that one of her patients was Catholic and wanted a book in Spanish. She got one for him. He felt degraded because he did not know English. For the first ten minutes of each day, they taught each other Spanish and English. The patient became less isolated, and he began to change his thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. She concluded that because he felt loved, he had meaning to his life and was able to live with others.

How were they taking the spirituality and transforming it into change in the health field? Kathy did the rosary, practiced positive thinking, and prayed for her patients. Vicky emphasized interaction for her patients, creating moments of shared connections. She called these moments a chance for her patients to be Jesus for the other. Melissa highlighted the difference between internal and external conditioning. Our internal condition should be to align ourselves with God's will and build loving relationships with others, and the external condition is God's love for us that makes following His will possible. This panel discussion provided insight and detail into how FM members are

transforming difficult moments into fulfilling the movement's goal of unity.

As a theodicy, the notion of *Jesus forsaken* helps members make sense of their experiences and enhances their relationship with the sacred. Moreover, the practice of sharing experiences, especially painful ones, provides an interactionist structure for engaging empathetically with the suffering of others. For many FM members, *Jesus forsaken* provides a purpose in life, which in turn can be a resource for achieving unity in the world. Although in one sense members acknowledge that suffering is something to be endured as a ubiquitous reality, they perceive on a deeper level the goal of overcoming division, thereby transforming the experience of suffering into the reality of being desired, loved, and embraced. For the FM members, this is perhaps one of the more compelling reasons that they join and remain committed to the movement.

Part IV: A Sociological Understanding of Suffering and a Religious Social Movement

The data revealed numerous experiences involving hardship; how the FM spirituality helped to make sense of these difficult moments; and through the process of understanding their suffering, how they became more committed to the movement and its promise of unity. From a sociological perspective, the role of suffering in religion and social movement is fairly clear. Especially for religion, suffering is often built into sociological definitions of religion. Moreover, moral outrage to ubiquitous forms of suffering engenders social change vis-à-vis social movements. I will begin the discussion with sociological explanations of religion and suffering, social-psychological benefits of theodicies, and utilize the social movement theory to explain why suffering is an

important source for social change.

A Sociological Approach to Religion and Suffering

Classical and modern sociological definitions of religion often include how individuals need to explain why things happen, especially chaotic experiences leading to suffering. The theorist that has perhaps made the greatest contribution to the understanding of suffering is Weber (1993) through his sociological interpretation of theodicy. Classical theodicy is the attempt to reconcile the realities of injustice with the existence of an all-powerful God through the vehicle of salvation: “The various ethical colorations of the doctrines of god and sin stand in the most intimate relationship to the striving for salvation, the content of which will be different depending upon what one wants to be saved from, and what one wants to be saved for.” (147) There are three approaches of theodicy: (a) Messianic eschatology where there will be political and social transformation in this world; (b) focus on an afterlife where injustices will be rectified; and (c) retribution at the end of time, or in the biblical lexicon, a day of judgment. The FM has utilized the first kind of theodicy with their particular focus on Jesus forsaken and the desire to transform forms of suffering into action. For the FM, theodicy alleviates anxiety about the present experience of this world and whatever lies beyond it. From a sociological perspective, the FM theodicy provides insights into the responses given by religious individuals to the problem of suffering, particularly if they state their belief in a perfect and omniscient God. For sociologists, of course, the goal is empirical: “Our concern is essentially with the quest for salvation, whatever its form, insofar as it produced certain consequences for practical behavior in the world.” (149) For the FM, a

view of the world as tragically dis-united corresponds with a ritualized sharing of how as a community, they are seeking to overcome this problem.

Berger (1967) continues this line of sociological thinking of theodicy while adding the resources of the phenomenological approach (i.e. the social construction of reality). Similar to Durkheim, Berger argues that religion involves belief in a sacred order that is opposed to (or reigns over) a chaotic world. Similar to Weber, Berger holds that experiences of suffering are “anomic phenomena that must not only be lived through, they must also be explained—to wit, explained in terms of the nomos established in the society in question. An explanation of these phenomena in terms of religious legitimation, of whatever degree of theoretical sophistication, may be called theodicy.”

(53) A religious framework helps to justify belief in a transcendent reality despite the experience of suffering and transform this experience into something meaningful through the convincing explanation. Suffering is redeemed through a solution which is always being projected into the future, which Berger characterizes as the perpetual problem of empirical disconfirmation. The suffering is therefore explained but not eliminated. The FM definitively aligns with Berger’s interpretation of the role of religion and theodicy, especially with its goal of unity, an abstract and never-ending problem. Suffering is a pronounced reality for the FM members.

Furthermore, Berger (1967) has a sociological approach to the problem of theodicy given a Christian tradition. He argues that a biblical theodicy is a masochistic theodicy—submitting to a punishing God and redeemed by a suffering God. Within the Christological rubric, the problem of suffering has been tied to the sacrifice God made in

sending his Son to die for human sin—an idea that the FM has conceptualized as Jesus forsaken. Therefore, God himself is the sufferer par excellence, so that suffering is no longer unjust, and the focus is changed from suffering to sin: “Christ suffered not for man’s innocence, but for his sin. It follows that the prerequisite for man’s sharing in the redemptive power of Christ’s sacrifice is the acknowledgement of sin...The problem of theodicy is translated into the problem of anthropodicy.” (77-78) The FM explanation for their experience of suffering reveals their beliefs about God, their response to this belief, and the way in which their understanding of God influences their social change project of unity. Furthermore, the problem of sin for the FM is exemplified as the problem of disunity.

A more recent theorist, Yinger (1977), has essentialized religion by saying that suffering is a substructure of religion, strengthening the correlative argument between religion and suffering. Unlike any other institution, religion uniquely explains and explores injustice, suffering and meaning, which for the individual is at first seen as extremely problematic but through the acquisition of religious competency is seen as resolvable. Religion is the “final word and the final action by which an individual or a society seeks to deal with the threat of suffering, meaninglessness, and injustice.” (68) For the FM, clearly the spirituality is important to understanding their suffering and has helped them to find ways to both overcome difficulties and still have a strong faith in God. Religion provides a framework of beliefs and practices that define the problem of meaning, suffering and injustice; generate ideas for reducing these problems; and “deal with the fact that, in spite of all, meaninglessness, suffering and injustice continue.” (69)

The last stipulation is of particular interest to Yinger (1977) and overlaps with Berger's (1967) theory of suffering. The paradox of a theodicy is that religion is maintained and legitimated by the explanation of suffering, yet suffering remains "despite the perceptions of high levels of injustice and suffering, the prevailing belief is that life is meaningful for most people." (77). In fact, his research indicates that suffering is resolved by an understanding that there are greater forces at work that supercede the individual's experience. What is being resolved through these theodicies? For the Focolare, what is being resolved are past and ongoing moments of suffering and crises of faith. In sharing their experiences, they also inspire other members to consider a similar approach to their suffering. These theories of theodicies explain the problem of suffering as means of explaining why suffering happens and how they process through suffering, but I argue that it is also important to explore how individuals who engage with the realities of loss, pain, and grief arrive at hopeful conclusions despite the intractability of suffering.

The Social-Psychological Benefits of a Theodicy

As one way of responding to the paradox of theodicy, sociologists and psychologists have theorized and explored the direct impact of religion on the experience of suffering and the attempts to alleviate it (Allport, 1960; Pargament, 1997; Wilkinson, 2005). For example, Wright and D'Antonio (1980) add to Yinger's (1977) substructural definition of religion and inadvertently contest Berger's (1967) characterization of a Christian masochistic theodicy by asserting the benefits that a theodicy provides for individuals. They find in their study of American Catholic students from middle class families that Yinger's structural approach does not explain the vertical sacred

relationship or the numinal-transcendent relationship:

To the extent that the numinal-transcendent is of primary importance to the meaning of religion among students, structural theory seems quite limited in its ability to account for the diversity and complexity of religious belief and experience...Our research suggests that love is seen as the most crucial ingredient in religion, but this love is indelibly linked to faith in God. (297)

There appears to be a relationship between the need to explain suffering and the response of mutual love which is required to overcome suffering. The dual dimensionality of suffering and love also characterizes the Focolare articulation of their experience, which is offered as a loving response to God and one another despite the persistent reality of suffering in their lives and the world around them.

Although suffering is ubiquitous, the FM spirituality has eased its effects in real and perceived ways. The spirituality has helped many to cope with illness, for instance, resulting in positive effects, depressive effects, and/or greater feelings of satisfaction. In particular, the FM theodicy results in feelings of being closer to God. These findings are closely aligned to research conclusions by McGuire (1990) and Ferraro and Kelley-Moore (2001). Also, similar to other studies on the coping mechanism of spirituality and suffering, the FM approach toward suffering is experienced as a benefit by many and has produced intensifications of religious identity, especially for those who have invested the greatest amount of time in religious practice, such as those who live in the Focolare communities (Kwilecki, 2004; Pargament, 2001; Ferraro and Kelley-Moore, 2000; Anson, et al, 1991). As a final point to make, the benefits of theodicy is more than social-psychological, a theodicy can also lay the foundation for a social movement.

Suffering as an Impetus for Social Change

The religious benefits of the FM theodicy provide more than an explanation for injustices and an opportunity to draw closer to God, it justifies and sustains their social movement activity, transforming individuals into agents for unity in the world. With respect to the Focolare, the most relevant theories about the benefits of a theodicy can be found in the social movement literature. Scholars in the neo-Marxist and neo-Weberian schools have hypothesized that religion can be a vehicle for social change for those who are experiencing oppression. Especially through its use of rituals and symbols, religion has often been used to create a sense of moral outrage by those most on the margins of society. McCarthy and Zald (1987: 69), using resource mobilization and political economy perspectives, note the role of religious groups in social and political movements, such as the FM, as a vessel for change: “Religious groups are fertile soil for social movement birth and growth because they are face-to-face groups that are constituted around some commonly held beliefs. The solidarity, enthusiasm, and potential conflict that can characterize such groups make them ideal vehicles for social movement purposes if they can be appropriated.” Their main focus is on how religion provides an infrastructure of social networks and resources with which to organize. Certainly, the Focolare’s placement in the hierarchy provides the ample resources to launch the kind of change they wish to promote.

However, in the case of the FM, they can also meaningfully respond to the question, “How long, how long?” through a theological response (i.e., a contrast between what ought to be and what actually is). In other words, theodicy can be transformed and

mobilized into social action (which is where I began my analysis in Chapter II).

Moreover, the ubiquitous feeling and sharing of discontent especially seen in Focolare related events can be extended and sustained as a constant reminder of just how much change is needed. As Jasper (1997: 5) notes, “The moral dimension of protest is what makes the activity so satisfying. It gives us an opportunity to plumb our moral sensibilities and convictions, and to articulate and elaborate them. And it is important to articulate them publicly and collectively.” The Focolare members have deftly utilized common experiences of suffering to promote, sustain, and justify their goals of unity in the world.

Part V: Concluding Remarks

After collecting extensive data on the Focolare Movement, my findings suggest the following pattern: Through initial contact to the movement, individuals come to believe that the spirituality of unity is innovative, feel a calling to participate in the Movement, and feel a stronger connection to their Catholic identity because the Movement has a sanctioned position in the Church hierarchy as an ecclesial movement. After their initial contact, individual commitment to the spirituality of unity is fostered and organized through community mechanisms, and through sharing how the spirituality relates to their daily experiences and moments of suffering, they grow increasingly active in promoting and achieving the spirituality of unity. That is, the first two analytical chapters explain how members come to embrace the FM spirituality and the last three analytical chapters explain why members remain in the FM. Finally, given the social movement and religious dimensions of the FM, I framed my analysis by considering

social structures, movement and religious organization, and spiritual and agentic-based identity. In doing so, I was combining two sociology literatures to develop my theoretical explanations of the FM. Within the sociological tradition of studying religion and social movements, this study addressed how religiously-motivated, *non-elite* individuals can be collectively recruited and mobilized into life-long agents of change.

I emphasize throughout this study the perspective of FM members and their experience with the Movement's goal of unity rather than an empirical assessment of change. I did this for two reasons. Although Movement activities such as acts of love and sharing experiences are not new, it was apparent in the data that FM members clearly believed that their spirituality was innovative and radical. Given the findings in Chapters Two and Three, perhaps this was because they wanted a better way to express their Catholic identity; or based on findings in Chapter Four, maybe they enjoyed being part of something bigger than themselves, or they found a spiritual-based movement that could best explain what they were going through and could effectively transform their experience into following God's will. My data suggest that it is a combination of all three.

The second reason I used this approach is because of the nature of the movement: The findings suggest that the movement reinforced and revitalized the dominant structure of the Church. This is not to say that the laity has a liberalizing influence on the Catholic Church; still, the very fact that the FM survived Vatican II is proof enough that the laity has an innovative voice in the Church. Moreover, it appears that they have a voice because they do not necessarily *rock the boat*. FM members were adamant that they were

making a difference in the world, and I described that change from their perspective. This created challenges in the analysis of my findings, especially given the NRM approach to *newness* and social movement theories that stressed political or economic changes. The FM is neither new nor is it promoting a political or economic agenda. However, in recasting the analysis from the perspective of the FM members, I assembled an appropriate analytical model, one that stressed the structural placement of the movement, the process of recruitment and mobilization into a religious social movement, and the experiential dimension of being part of the FM. The question then is: Does the FM challenge the way we think about religious social movements?

There are a number of theoretical implications of this study. I argue in and throughout this study the insufficiency of both the social movement and sociology of religion literatures to address religiously inspired social change brought by the ordinary person by intra-institutional means. Both Chapters Two and Three provided theoretical frameworks to better understand the kind of individuals that would be interested in and empowered by a religious social movement and the legitimation processes of innovation vis-à-vis the Roman Catholic Church. Specifically, as demonstrated in Chapters Four, Five and Six, the FM provides a case study to understand the unique contribution that religion makes to social movements—the moral community and the sustainable and transformative meaning-making mechanism of sharing experiences.

Moreover, there was an underlying theme that can be explored in future studies: the radicalizing tendencies of a religious social movement and the role of innovation and social change within the highly institutionalized Catholic Church. Despite discontent

with their religious experience, FM members have been recruited into a religious social movement with a legitimate innovative structure that better reflects their desire for a deeper and more fulfilling Catholic identity. To consider the future for the Catholic Church community in the U.S., this study paves the way for understanding the experience and dimensionality of Catholic identity. If people elect to stay within a highly institutionalized, traditional community such as the Catholic Church, then what are their available repertoires of action? This has been a question primarily answered for those who essentially disagree with Church stances on social issues such as abortion and homosexuality, but not necessarily answered for those dissatisfied with the spiritual goals of the Church. The ubiquity of discontent remains an intriguing social phenomenon not so much as to why people endure or ultimately end up leaving their respective commitments, but why people stay and choose to transform their commitment into something more sustainable and satisfying. Depending on the quality of their attachment, I predict that future studies (especially of those individuals with strong religious commitments and those with a deep sense of purpose in their lives) will show that people are more inclined to stay if they have innovative structures on hand and less likely to stay if there are little or no opportunities for agency. The FM has helped to descriptively and personally understand the experience of a religious social movement, and analytically interpret and frame the recruitment, legitimation, organization, and sustainability of a religious social movement.

APPENDIX A:
THE ORIGINS OF THE FOCOLARE MOVEMENT, THE ORGANIZATIONAL
STRUCTURE, AND ITS HISTORY IN THE US

Beginnings of the Focolare Movement

When I first began to engage members of the Focolare Movement in conversation about its origins, they often told the story of Chiara Lubich. It was on December 7, 1943, that Chiara's priest confirmed her calling to consecrate her life to God, and she became a "bride of God" in a formal ceremony. As I learned more, I discovered that the origins of the movement were deeply influenced by the backdrop of WWII during which Chiara's house in Trent, Italy was bombed (in 1944) and she parted ways with her family. Yet a closer examination of the facts indicates that by then the movement was already well underway. In her biography and other interviews, Chiara dated the beginning of the movement to events that took place five years earlier (Gallagher, 1997; Pochet, 1985; Proctor, 1983). Chiara and her friends were involved in Catholic Action, a competitor to the activities of the Italian Youth group made compulsory by the Fascist regime. This is important to note due to the unique and complex relationship between the Roman Catholic Church and the state during this period of Italian history. As Wiskemann has stated while Mussolini's fascism did not "create its own deity like Robespierre, nor does it, like the Bolsheviks, vainly attempt to abolish the idea: Fascism respects the God of the ascetics, the saints, the heroes and also the God to whom the simple people offer their prayers" (Wiskemann, 36) it did compete with Catholicism during his reign. Moreover, the popular resistance to Mussolini grew into a powerful anti-Fascist movement by 1943:

Indeed, 1942-43 saw the revival of 'indigenous' anti-Fascist politics, after some seventeen years of quiescence...The new Christian Democrat (DC) party was headed by the old Popular party leaders...it was indebted to for recruits to the million-strong branches of Catholic Action and to numerous local 'discussion groups'. The Catholics, too had their clandestine papers, especially *Il Popolo*;

they, too, had their plans for the future, including political and trade unions liberties and regional devolution...What was more, they had the Vatican and the Church behind them. That implied international inks and information, a ready-made organizational network, and unrivalled opportunities for propaganda. (Clark, 293-4)

In particular, “Catholicism provided an alternative ideology and focus for loyalty,” and as Clark (1984: 253-4) claims, “The Catholic Church was the greatest obstacle to any ‘totalitarian regime in Italy. All the others—parliament, press, opposition, parties, unions—could be smashed or emasculated; but not the church.” Officially, the Church remained neutral—Pope Pius XI (1922-1939) did not reject Mussolini’s material gifts and political concessions, including the establishment of the sovereign State of “Vatican City,” in 1929,¹ but neither did he or his successor Pope Pius XII (1939-1958) oppose the populist, lay-based militant uprisings and cultural forms of resistance during Mussolini’s regime. The Church stood in defense of Catholic Action when, in 1931, the State closed the association in 1931 down due to its connections to trade unions,：“Pope Pius XI retaliated with an encyclical ‘*Non abbiamo bisogno*’, in which he recommended anybody who had to take an oath of loyalty to the Fascist regime to do so with ‘mental reservations.’” (255) In 1944, around 20,000 Catholics, emerging from Catholic Action, took an active part in the anti-fascist fighting (313-314). Furthermore, the number of priests and nuns actually increased during Mussolini’s reign:

Not only were there far more nuns (129,000 in 1936 compared with 71,000 in 1921 and 45,000 in 1911) but many more were working in schools or hospitals and over half were in the North. The increase was no doubt a consequence of the

¹ The formation and protection of Vatican City was in itself a controversial issue due to its extra-territorial rights it had, convents and monasteries were able to provide asylum for Jews. At the same time, Pope Pius XII was unable to speak openly against anti-Semitism, for fear of losing this territorial status. His silence, of course, leveled great criticism (Lamb, 41-8)

First World War, for many girls could no longer hope for marriage; but it helped the Church's '*reconquista*' of Italian society. (256)

It was within this historical context that in 1939, Chiara attended a religious retreat hosted by Catholic Action in Loreto in the venerated home of the Holy Family of Nazareth, where "tradition says that this was the house of the Holy Family in Nazareth, and that the angels moved it from place to place, finally leaving it in Loreto." (Proctor, 16) Inspired by her close proximity to the Holy Family, the nineteen year old Chiara received her calling to be a martyr and to work toward sanctity. She was 19 years old. A year later she began working as a primary school teacher for the Capuchin Fathers, the reformed branch of the Franciscans. As Gallagher states, she was then invited to join

The Third Order of Franciscans, a branch of the Order for lay people living and working in the world. While they continued to live their normal day-to-day lives, and followed their 'state of life' (i.e. either as single people or married), and went on with their jobs and other activities, they retained a special link with the Franciscan order and took part in the spiritual exercises at the Franciscan Capuchin Church. (Gallagher, 14)

Her decision not to join the Third Order was an expression of her disagreement with the order's asceticism and the stigmatic spirituality of its founder, Padre Pio. Having taken this step, Chiara changed her name from Silvia Lubich to Chiara (the Italian form of Clare) because of her affinity with St. Clare of Assisi and her attraction to the spiritual idea of charity and light. Her process of spiritual formation continued for another three years, culminating in her consecration in 1943. This rite of initiation was specifically intended for those who were following the *fourth way*, i.e., those who remain lay members of the church by not joining an order, but who deeply desired to live a consecrated life and to take the three vows of charity, poverty and chastity. In an

interview, Chiara describes the fourth way as follows:

I went back to Trent with the conviction that I had found my way in life. It was not the way of a natural family; nor the way of a convent. Neither was it only to live a celibate life, while remaining in the world. Yet it was something which had the beauty of these three vocations. It was a fourth way. It would be a family, yes, but a supernatural one. It would be a convent, a ‘convening,’ a coming together of people; but of people who form a family. It would be in the world, yes, but with the totally evangelical life of those who leave their relatives for Jesus and come to live together with others who have the same vocation, thus forming a family of people who live in virginity, like the family of Nazareth, which had dwelled in the house of Loreto. (Proctor, 17)

Chiara believed that a lay person could achieve sanctity, that anyone could be called to the highest level of holiness. Very soon after her consecration she met her first “disciple” Dori Zamboni in the spring of 1944. Dori was preparing for university entrance exams and Chiara was hired as her tutor. In the midst of a discussion about the Enlightenment philosopher Immanuel Kant, Chiara received the revelation of unity, what the Focolare Movement came to call the Ideal. “As Dori hinted, the Ideal was to build unity; or perhaps a better way to describe it would be a ‘harmony’—a harmony of thought, will, lifestyle, and above all, of heart and soul.” (Gallagher, 21) Around this same time, Chiara met Natalia and Graziella at the Capuchin school. Touched by Chiara’s demeanor and by her talk about God’s love, both young women found in her teaching answers to their own spiritual quest. Natalia recounts, “I realized that everything that had happened to me until then had been permitted by God’s love. Everything in my life seemed to fall into place.” (25-6) Graziella also talks about her first encounter with Chiara:

I realized she was speaking about God, who is infinite love—and I was experiencing this love. I realized that God had already done ninety-nine per cent, and I only had to do the remaining one per cent. I had to say my ‘Yes’. At that meeting I understood that we all have to become saints...At that moment I felt I had to make a general confession, as if to do a whole laundry and start my life

anew. Then I emptied my pockets and gave everything I had to Chiara—not because she needed it or had asked for anything, but because it seemed logical to me to do so, regardless of what she herself had or didn't have. And from that moment I never left her. (30)

Dori and Natalia took similar promises and became known as Chiara's "first companions." All three women contextualize the movement's origins with the experience of bombs falling on their city. In an interview, Chiara describes the experience of wartime as follows: "They were unforgettable days, among the best in my life...The air raid warning came one after another night and day, up to eleven in a single day...My companions already made up a fine group; they had the courage to go right across the city when the sirens wailed in order to assemble in the shelter where I was, and if need be, die together." (Pochet, 26)

Mussolini had remained out of the war between France, Britain and Germany until June, 1940 when he declared war on France and Britain. Three years later he was deposed in July, 1943, but the war continued. Mussolini reprised his power in Northern Italy two months later in Sept, 1943, and remained there until he fled and was killed in April 28, 1945. During Mussolini's reign political internal strife was rampant, and the country was a target of constant aerial bombardment (especially in the northern city of Trent), eventually leading to occupation by both the Allies and Axis powers. It was at this time, in Trent, "between 1943 and 1945 an ever-growing number of girls gathered around Chiara. They wanted to follow her in her commitment and consecration to God, and thus they became the foundation-stones of what would eventually grow into an organized movement." (Gallagher, 24) Their spiritual dedication to the ideal was solidified in air raid shelters, and in the devastation of bombs the young women began to take vows of

consecration, as Chiara had done in Loreto. In 1944, Chiara's family home was destroyed and she made the decision to leave her family, "That was a decisive night for me. It seemed to me that the Lord was asking me to leave everything, even my parents. 'He who does not leave father, mother, wife, children and lands cannot be my disciple...'" The link which had formed between my friends and myself was so strong that I could do nothing other than stay put." (Pochet, 24) She went to live permanently with her first companions in an apartment attached to the Capuchin church, which "had two rooms and became known to the girls as 'the little house', with its connotations of the little house of Loreto." (Gallagher, 36) Chiara and her followers began to live the ideal of unity in their everyday life as a community, taking cues from the first church as described in the New Testament. They shared everything in common and promised to love each other, even if that meant the sacrifice of life itself. ("A man can have no greater love than to lay down his life for his friends" (John 15:13)). Chiara further explains:

Since we were ready to die, it wasn't difficult then to share each day our sufferings and our joys, our new spiritual experiences, and our poor possessions. Mutual love was the foundation for everything. And because of this, God was preset among those few girls—He who had said, 'Where two or three are gathered together in my name, I am there among them' (Matthew 18:20)...The terrible situations which surrounded us were like a training field which brought love into action, not only among us but among those whom we encountered. The Gospel continued to guide our behavior, and we realized that with it a revolution was born. 'Love your neighbor as yourself' (Matthew 19:19). As yourself—this was something new. 'Love your enemies' (Matthew 5:44). Who had considered this? 'May they all be one' (John 17:21). (39)

They also began to live out the ideal of Jesus forsaken; the co-experience of Jesus' suffering on the cross and the identification of Jesus in every person and situation.

Finally, they took to living the Gospel intentionally and literally, one verse a day. Among

other things, they interpreted this to mean serving the poor. This led to the spiritual principle of the “hundredfold,” which meant that if they asked God for something, he would give to them a hundredfold, or in abundance. For example, if someone needed shoes, God would provide for this need in his generosity.

By 1945 WWII had ended, but it was not the end of political turmoil. Triumphant over Mussolini and fascism were the major political players—communists, socialists and Christian democrats, all of whom came to bear as the iron curtain fell across Eastern Europe. In Italy, a new government was initiated and with that, the newly formed government

had to cope with the disastrous economic legacy of war. Hundreds of thousands of ex-soldiers and former prisoners-of-war clamoured for jobs. Inflation reached record levels...The government had no revenue, for the tax system had virtually collapsed. Over three million houses had been destroyed or badly damaged, as had most of the country’s railway stock, lorries, bridges and ports. Industrial output in 1945 was about a quarter of the 1941 figure, and indeed was about the same as in 1884; the gross national product was about that of 1911, and income per head was lower than in 1861. (Clark: 317)

It would take a few years before political stability was achieved (and even then red-scare politics reigned for some time), and social economic well-being could gradually improve. During this period, the Focolare Movement was emerging as a lay-based movement. Already the movement had close to 500 members known as “*focolarine*” (fire-bearers) by those who knew Chiara and her followers, so called because they saw that “these young girls were aflame with their Ideal, the love of God, and seemed to communicate this wherever they went.” (Gallagher, 41) The success of the movement drew both support and criticism. As the populace realized the importance of the Focolare’s work, they provided food and material goods that were then distributed by the Focolare to the needy.

Although some considered the movement communist because of its communal lifestyle and advocacy for the poor, Chiara was quick to distinguish her movement from communists (which included her brother, Gino who worked for a newspaper called *Unity*) emphasizing the suffering of Jesus, the ideals found in the Gospel, and God's will in the world. (44)

Legitimation and Structure of the Movement

Initially, the Focolare movement did not have any written "Rules"² regulating everyday life, nor did they have a structure for decision-making. Instead, they practiced the model of the early church, especially emphasizing love of God and neighbor. From the beginning, they had the approval of the local Archbishop, Monsignor Carlo De Ferrari: "He could seem harsh but, at the moment of taking leave of us, on the doorstep he said to us with a smile: 'Make saints of yourselves, all of you—I mean it!...*Digitu Des est hic*—The finger of God is here.' And indeed that's how it was. There were still no structures but there was mutual love within a Christian community." (Pochet, 35) De Ferrari encouraged Chiara to write a Rule for the movement, in 1947 "granting the first official diocesan approval for the Movement, still widely known informally as the Focolare, but officially called the Movement for Unity." (Gallagher, 47) Chiara spent most of her time meeting new people through visits or through correspondence telling them about following the idea of unity, mutual love, and Jesus forsaken. She had come to accept her calling and envisioned bringing the movement to the world. According to Chiara, the structure of the movement emerged out of commitment to one's calling and to

² A rule is a common theological term used for religious communities in the Catholic Church. Rule refers to the central idea that binds the community and frames their religious action.

the lifestyle of the Focolare community. The community was the incarnation of the fourth way, the consecration of a lay member to the vows of poverty, chastity and obedience, and to a new vow, unity. (Proctor, 18) In attempting to live out unity, the community built its identity on shared sacrifice. They left behind possessions, family, and previous ways of life, receiving in their place a community that demanded their commitment to the Gospel, to “making oneself one with the other,” and to resolving conflicts by starting anew. They called this community “Jesus in the midst” because the unity through which the community defined itself was an expression of Jesus present among them. From the beginning there were degrees or levels of commitment; some chose to live entirely in community while others only visited and made contributions, but all members attempted to live out unity in their everyday life. Chiara describes the Focolare household as:

A modern community, made up of a small number of people who live in the world and mingle with the world, dress like everyone else and work like their colleagues, but unlike the others they have renounced the world, they have left their native land, their family, their work to give themselves to the cause of unity. There now exists a Rule, drawn up from experience, which gives structure to their lives and can be adapted to all circumstances. But the rule which is fundamental to their entire existence is mutual and continual love, which must never be lacking, and which makes possible—within the limits of what human beings can do—the presence of Jesus in their midst. That is the Focolare household...And the consequence is a modern, communitarian mystical life which brings the presence of Christ and enlightens members as to what they must do, about what activities to engage in, so that life in the Focolare household is contemplation-action. The Focolare household is a little piece of living Church. It is already Paradise on earth. (Pochet, 61)

Soon, the movement began to grow rapidly, with multiple communities forming in Trent and members of the movement traveling to the outside world. The movement’s organization became more solidified, necessitating channels of legitimation and levels of

consecration or commitment. Consecration was reserved for those who had taken up the vow of unity in every aspect of their life and had given total commitment to the community. A diversity of members included celibate, married members, volunteers, religious, Gen, and non-consecrated sympathizers. Celibate members (also known as Focolarini) lived in community with one another and formed the core of the community, separated by gender. Married members were called to have their own families, but interacted with and contributed to the Focolare community. Volunteers were consecrated members that were not necessarily married nor did they live in community with the Focolarini, but they were called to bring the spirituality into the world and into the workplace. The Religious members were those who were in a religious order or in the priesthood, and were also living out the spirituality of unity. The so-called Gen were young persons, some of whom were considering consecration, who were bringing the community's spirituality to the younger generation. Sympathizers were members who were not integrally involved in the community, nor were they considering consecration (although they did practice unity to the extent that was constructive for them), but who participated in various events.

These branches of the movement developed over time and in response to community needs as they arose, or as a result of Chiara's inspired leadership. Moreover, the approval of the Catholic Church ascended up the hierarchical ladder as the movement spread beyond Trent. Chiara traveled to Rome in 1948 where she sought the advice of movement leaders such as Father Leon Veuthey of the Crusade of Charity and Father Tomasi the Superior General for the Order of the Stigmata. In Rome, she also interacted

with priests and nuns in other religious orders. After speaking to the Roman hierarchy, Chiara and her first companions were asked to speak in other public places by invitation of the Vicar Apostolic, the Bishop of Rome (Gallagher, 57).

The movement's increased stature and prestige presaged a more concretized and elaborate structure, which along with the support of Pope Pius XII paved the way for the official approval process in 1960. In 1962, Pope John XXIII approved the Focolare as an official ecclesial movement known as the "Work of Mary" based on the charism or gift of unity. Papal approval was reaffirmed in 1990 by Pope John Paul II, who gave his blessing to new developments in the movement.

Following these legitimation processes, structural development ensued. According to the most recent General Statutes of the Work of Mary (2007, unpublished), this structure includes a government with a general assembly (a.k.a. the General Council) that meets annually in Rome. They elect or re-elect a president every 6 years. When the president is elected or re-elected the entire general assembly is also elected or re-elected. If the president resigns or passes away the entire council is dissolved and everyone must be re-elected. The duties of the president are to preside over council meetings, appoint zone leaders, council secretaries, and branch leaders with the consent of the general assembly. The president oversees with the General Council the life and activities of the zones, including establishing new zones, drawing up regulations, revising statutes, and replacing council members. The bylaws state that the president must be a woman, and that her co-president must be a priest.

The government is made up of delegate of General Councilors. There are two

delegates per the seven aspects of the spirituality of unity,³ two delegates from each qualifying Focolare zone, and two Central delegates.⁴ In this group, two are chosen to lead the male assembly and the female assembly. The two delegates of each area must consist of one man and one woman, both of whom must be consecrated members (typically they are Focolarini). A qualifying zone consists of three male and three female houses. The zone is based on a given territory (in the US, there is a North American zone⁵ centered in Hyde Park, NY). Each zone encapsulates the branches of the movement, and zone leaders must annually report to the General Council. Zone leaders are elected or re-elected every three years. Two Central delegates are elected for the general council, (consecrated members, one male and one female), to serve the practical needs of the president. Each member of the General Council is accorded one vote and is authorized to make proposals and call for a special assembly. Decisions are based on a 2/3 majority. Unanimous consent is needed for economic decisions that relate to goods or budget revisions. At the annual meeting, a report is assembled containing the budget and total expenditures, reports of zones and the branches of the movement, and approval of new rules and duties.

Every year in November, beginning in 2004, I attended the updating meeting where the zone leaders would give their report to the community on the annual meeting.

A typical session would include highlights of American and international center

³ The seven aspects of unity are communion of goods, apostolic activities (sharing the spirituality), spiritual life, physical life (health of the body), the mystical body (members of the church and the Focolare centers), wisdom through study, and communication of the spirituality internally and externally.

⁴ Currently, there are fourteen delegates representing the seven aspects, twenty delegates representing ten qualifying zones, and two Central delegates, which make up the thirty-six total delegates.

⁵ There are other zones in the US, but they do not have three male and female Focolare houses.

activities, major events of the year, and community goals for the upcoming year. In 2005, for example, approximately 150 community members in Chicago gathered to hear the report for the annual meeting in Rome. As Chiara was unable to attend due to illness, one her first companions, Fiorenza, led the meeting. Eighty reports were sent to Chiara, to which she responded with personal notes on each report. Later that year, Chiara wrote a letter encouraging the membership to strengthen their bonds as a family (building on the theme for 2005), and for each zone to continue to develop its spirituality. The letter was read to participants at the updating meeting, followed by a video of the members who had passed away that year.

The 2008 meeting held particular importance since Chiara passed away on March 14, 2008. On July 7, 2008, a special General Assembly was held in Castelgandolfo, Italy to elect the entire General Council body. 496 eligible members of the General Assembly unanimously elected Maria Voce as the new president and re-elected Giancarlo Faletti as co-president. In addition, they moved to elect or re-elect thirty-six General Councilors (18 women and 18 men) by July 9, 2008. By email the community was assured:

With the death of Chiara Lubich on March 14 and the election of Maria Voce and of Giancarlo Faletti, the Movement enters a new stage in its history from that period during which Chiara and the first men and women Focolarini began the Movement and who, until now, held leadership positions in the Focolare's direction. The new president's first words were to thank these first Focolarini for the trust which accompanied this transition. She was very sure to have them as 'first collaborators,' she commented. The role of the new president will obviously be different from that carried out for over 60 years by Chiara, who often said 'it would not be just one person' to replace her, but a 'body' of persons—that includes the General Council and the president in communion with the co-president—so as to always ensure the charism of unity. (July 10, 2008, email received by the Chicago Women's Focolare, foc.chicago@sbcglobal.net, "Official Press Release—Focolare Elections 7.7.08")

I will explain more fully the impact of Chiara's life and death on the community in later chapters. Up until her passing, Chiara had provided the structural mechanisms necessary to ensure the prolonged existence of the movement. Future studies, however, will be necessary to determine the success of the bylaws for future presidents.

The Unfolding of the Ideal through the Movement's Activities and in the World

In addition to the formalization of roles and rules, the movement's application of the ideal of unity unfolded in concrete ways. Its first inundation was the Diocesan and Parish Priest Movement in 1954. Church leaders who found FM's spirituality to be profound and meaningful brought it back to their congregations. The parish became an important site for sharing the ideal as well as educating members about the FM's spirituality. As the movement spread outside of Italy, its message of unity bore fruit through the ecumenical chapter in 1961, which followed on the heels of Pope John XIII's expression of Christian unity as one of the chief goals of the Vatican Council in 1959. This first flowering of ecumenical activity began as a dialogue with Evangelical Lutherans in Germany, and led to improved relationships with the Greek Orthodox Church, and the Anglican Communion, all of whom "warmly encouraged the spreading of the spirituality of unity in their different churches." (<http://www.focolare.org/page.php?codcat1=434&lingua=EN&titolo=Chiara%20Lubich&tipo=Chiara%20Lubich>) Ecumenism led to interreligious dialogue less than a decade later, especially as the movement spread to Thailand and India, then multi-religious countries such as the US and Brazil. This sub-movement has been called Universal Brotherhood, and it has produced relationships with Buddhists, American Muslims, Hindus, and Jewish

congregations and leaders. (<http://www.focolare.org/page.php?codcat1=434&lingua=EN&titolo=Chiara%20Lubich&tipo=Chiara%20Lubich>)

The Gen, or young people, emerged as an arm of the movement in 1967. In 1969, “Chiara urges the youth to carry out Operation Africa for the construction of a Focolare little town in Fontem, a locality in the heart of Cameroon, with an elevated rate of infant mortality” (<http://www.focolare.org/page.php?codcat2=889&codcat1=295&lingua=EN&titolo=new%20generations&tipo=YOUNG%20PEOPLE>). The first international “GenFest “ took place in 1973. Youth for a United World (also known as Young People for Unity) officially began at the 1985 GenFest, at which Chiara commissioned the young people to bring unity to the world through community service. Some of the social problems addressed by Gen have included poverty in developing countries, suffering and oppression in the Palestinian territories and Lebanon, and economic injustice in Buenos Aires, Sao Paulo, Santiago, Montevideo and Asuncion. (Lubich, 362-3). Since 2008, the Gen have worked with street children, raised funds for victims of natural disasters, contributed to Project Africa, and hosted an annual United World Week to raise public awareness of issues vital to the concerns of young people.

In 1973, the New Families Movement was also launched, eventually becoming an integral component of the overall movement. According to the Focolare website, “New Families has concentrated its activity on a new emphasis in family life and a new culture of the family, based on four principles: education, formation, sociality, and solidarity.” (<http://www.focolare.org/page.php?codcat1=233&lingua=EN&titolo=family&tipo=family>) New Families also has an international conference, FamilyFest, which began in

1981. New Families have focused their work on disadvantaged children, such as those affected by the aftermath of war and political turmoil in Yugoslavia. They have also worked with Bosnian women released from detention.

In 1987, the New Humanity Movement emerged with the goal of promoting God's plan of unity for the human family. (<http://www.focolare.org/page.php?codcat1=294&lingua=EN&titolo=social%20aspects&tipo=social%20aspects>) It seeks to address social problems through cultural events, projects, and economic initiatives focused particularly on developing nations. (<http://www.new-humanity.org/uk/about.htm>) By the 1990s, the movement had extended the principle of unity to education through the Abba school and economics through the Economy of Communion. The Abba School began with 30 experts from different disciplines (economics, psychology, sociology, political science, et al) to fully explore the ideal of unity in multiple arenas: "Since 1998, another group of 300 professors and experts in various fields coming from different countries have also been involved in this experience." (<http://www.focolare.org/page.php?codcat1=302&lingua=EN&titolo=culture%20of%20unity&tipo=the%20culture%20of%20unity>). Finally, the Economy of Communion is a material and cultural response to poverty. In 1991, she challenged 200,000 members of the Focolare Movement in Brazil to "establish businesses around Araceli...She proposed to all those who chose to become shareholders of these businesses, to freely give one third of the profits for capital investment. The remaining two thirds would be allocated to those in need and for the development of structures for the formation of people in the values of the 'culture of giving.'" (http://www.evrel.ewf.uni-erlangen.de/pesc/R_2001EoC.html). The Economy of

Communion is neither philanthropy nor is it a distribution of benefits, but is rather the entrepreneurial interpretation of unity with an emphasis on economic development and the sharing of profits in and with the community.

The development of the movement's structure and activities corresponded with the expansion of the movement outside of Italy. In the 1950s and 1960s, the movement made roads into several European countries. Through correspondence and traveling, Chiara and her first companions began sharing its ideals with Eastern Europeans in East Germany, Czechoslovakia, Poland, and Croatia. The movement spread to the parish level and although care was taken to maintain secrecy, members were subject to persecution and arrested by state officials. In Western Europe, contacts were made in Switzerland, West Germany, England, France, Greece, Belgium, Spain, Ireland and Portugal, again primarily through local clergy with official support from bishops and cardinals. Later the movement made contact with parishes in Africa, South America, Central America and North America. Chiara first visited Africa (Douala, Cameroon) in 1965 after word of the movement had reached the Bishop of the Diocese of Buea in Cameroon. (Gallagher, 138)

As of 2008, The Movement had established Focolare communities in 50 African countries. By 1963, eight Focolarini were present in the US (New York and Chicago), but no community had yet been formally established. In 1964, Chiara visited these Focolarini along with those in Argentina and Brazil. Later, in addition to the US, Argentina, and Brazil, communities were established in Canada, Ecuador, Chile, Bolivia, Columbia, Mexico, Paraguay, Peru and Venezuela. By 1996, the movement boasted of 700,000 members and adherents in North and South America alone (Gallagher, 149). The

Focolare is also present in Asian countries such as the Philippines, Japan, Korea, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Indonesia, Malaysia, and India (<http://www.focolare.org/home.php?lingua=EN>). Currently, the movement is comprised of 140,000 core members and 2 million adherents. Since this study is limited to the movement's structure and activities in the US, I will now turn to the details of the movement's US history using fieldwork and interview data.

The History of the Movement in the US (New York, Chicago, and Los Angeles)

The subjects of the following interviews represent the diversity of vocations (priests, religious orders, volunteers, Married Focolarini, Gen, and Focolarini) and sub-structures (parish movement, New Families, Youth for a United World, Universal Brotherhood, Economy of Communion, and New Humanity). Moreover, the movement's international origin is evident from members who discovered it outside of the US, and are currently building it here. Over half of the members that I interviewed had first encountered the movement prior to coming to the US. Further, many of the American-born members had parents that first learned of and participated in the movement outside of the US. Other subjects date their involvement to the movement's formative era. One such subject is Helene,⁶ who was part of the first school of formation for those considering vocation. Others worked in close proximity to the first companions, including Graziella and Adrianna, the first Focolarinas to come to the US. American-born Focolarini also had an instrumental role in carrying the movement outside of the US into new territories such as Louise who started a Focolare in Perth, Australia. Moreover,

⁶ All names have been changed to protect their identity except names that have been published (e.g. Chiara, Graziella and Dori).

I found that Focolarini born outside of the US often played a formative role in their respective countries before coming to the US. These include Clara who helped spread the movement's spirituality in Romania before the fall of communism, and Carla, who was one of the first Focolarina to come from Santo Domingo. The development of the movement in the US, therefore, was a consequence of its rise and transformation as an international phenomenon. I will describe the initial experiences of the US movement as it encountered particular American religious communities, analyze the significance of historical moments and persons, highlight important cultural differences as identified by membership, and document the organization's emergent structure through interview data, fieldnotes and published accounts.

In 1961, two Focolarini first arrived in the US, Graziella, a first companion and her translator, Adrianna. According to interview data, Graziella and Adrianna first took up residence in an apartment in Manhattan on 73rd St. They invited members from local parishes to their weekly "Word of Life" meetings, which took place at their home and at church. According to Helene, the movement's first US success story took place as follows:

We invited people and at one point we started a meeting of the word of life. There was a church nearby downtown, close to the World Trade Centers in that parish. And so there were maybe ten people there that by little by little heard about Focolare. And I asked one of the Monsignor if I could use one of the little rooms in the parish and people met at lunchtime and shared the word of life...People kept coming back. They liked it. People must have done that for months, it was then little by little that a community was built.

Almost immediately, the question of enculturation arose. In adapting to the American culture, dress and language became a key concern. In 1964, Chiara visited the US for the

first time. Gallagher (1997) writes,

She was immediately struck, of course, by the immensity of the place, describing New York City as ‘endless.’ When she arrived at the Church of St. Ignatius for Easter Sunday Mass, Chiara spotted the women Focolarine immediately. That night she noted in her diary: They stand out because of the mantillas they are wearing. Today almost every woman and girl is wearing an Easter bonnet, generally covered with white, blue or yellow flowers...Adapting ourselves is a cross..., but it has to be done, to be like the rest. Perhaps then the Americans will feel more comfortable with us, and we will find the way to bring our Ideal to America. (144)

After her visit, Chiara emphasized to the Focolarini that they must reduce their “foreignness” in order to engender unity with the American people, and that the only difference should be in how they loved one another. Ann, who first encountered the movement in 1965 in New York City, noted that what struck her the most was that they were dressed normally: “Now, I made a deal with myself when I got to the door and looked in, if they were like old-fashioned or funny looking, I wouldn’t waste my time. Lucky for me they were normal.” After Chiara’s visit, more Focolarini were sent to the US to start a center in Queens. By the early 1970s, center had moved to the Bronx and then to Brooklyn, which is its current NYC location as of 2008.

Shortly after arriving in New York, Adrianna and two other Focolarinas, Graziella and Helene went to Chicago and took up residence in an apartment on the Westside. None of them knew much English. Adrianna was from Brazil, Graziella was from Italy (as discussed earlier in this chapter), and Helene was from Germany. However, the three shared an emotional and spiritual bond that transcended language. Carol, who was given the title, “First American Gen,” had been in the seventh grade when she first met the Focolarini. In her interview, she remembered weekly visits to the residences where she

helped keep house and complete mailing orders for the Living City magazine. Jackie, a Chicagoan who first met the Focolare in 1966, recalled the three Focolarini arriving at her parish in a red sports car to talk about the movement. Just as Dori and Graziella had been mesmerized by Chiara, Jackie was fascinated by Graziella and her translator, Adrianna. In fact, she was so interested in what they had to say that she decided to visit them in their home. By this time there were three Focolarinos and two married Focolarini. After six months of involvement with the movement, Jackie was invited to become a member and to move in with the nine other women also seeking the Focolare as their vocation.

In 1967, the first school of formation began in Chicago for women such as Jackie who wanted to learn how to become a Focolarina. Graziella moved to Chicago to assist with the teaching while Adrianna served as formation director. During that time, racial tensions in Chicago had reached a boiling point. Jackie recalled getting eviction threats from her landlord in retaliation for her invitation of African Americans to Word of Life meetings, a situation which necessitated a move to the Southside in 1968. Cardinal Cody had given the women three houses in Hyde Park. One was the school of formation for the Focolarini in training, the other two houses were for the consecrated Focolarini. Moving from a primary white neighborhood to a neighborhood with a rapidly increasing African American population shifted the demographics of the Focolare community. Fearing they would become targets of violent crime, the women at first reacted with caution but soon began reaching out to the children in the neighborhood and invite them to programs at the house. Within a year,

We had meetings where we had Filipinos, we had Asians, blacks, and whites, and it was really the beginning of a new era, it was so revolutionary for us who were from Chicago to realize...So the community of the Focolare started to become more interracial and now it is still is. People are struck by that, but then it was so revolutionary, they said, you would never see people together, it was so divided and there was so much hate...I think from the beginning, it was really a testimony of unity that we gave at that time. We made up a lot of songs about black and white building bridges, that we can build a new world with people.
(Louise)

Initially, their mostly white base of recruits expressed trepidation about driving through Hyde Park, yet eventually most members did come. They recruited new members through weekend programs and every Wednesday night held an open house for discussion and fellowship. That same year of 1968, Chiara visited the US for the second time, focusing her visit on Chicago. Ten young American women were in formation, and all but two would later become Focolarini. Chiara stayed in the coach house with her personal assistant, Teresa. Teresa shared information on the work in Fontem, Africa and collaboration with the Anglican community in Britain. The memory of Chiara's visit has continued to inspire community members, who recall it warmly, as of this writing. Distinctively, the Chicago community is both cohesive and expansive. They hold a monthly meeting in addition to other events, and maintain close contact with the communities of Indiana, Ohio, and downstate Illinois.

It would be 22 years before Chiara's next US visit, which was to the newly acquired property in Hyde Park, NY. The facility constructed there was named Luminosa and officially opened in 1986. During Chiara's tour of the property she gave names to the streets, and instructed where the buildings should be located, including the chapel. By the time of her second visit to Luminosa in 1997, the buildings had been erected. During this

visit, Chiara solidified her relationship with the leader of the American Muslim Society, the Imam W. Deen Muhammed. This historic meeting continues to be celebrated yearly, alternating between Luminosa and the Malcolm Shabazz Mosque in Harlem, where the two first met. The official headquarters of the North American zone, Luminosa, (the “little city”), has special significance for the US community. Like the other thirty five “little cities,” it resembles a small town with craft industries, chapel, housing, and a central dining facility. It is also the publishing center for the American version of *Living City* and for the English translations of Chiara’s books. Every year, each community holds a fundraiser to support the little city, which is in a constant state of renovation. All potential Focolarini spend a year there before receiving spiritual formation in Italy. Members travel to Luminosa for annual events related to the family, the Gen, Volunteers, and other social projects (in 2007, they raised money to replace the current cafeteria). Finally, members often allude to the geographic similarities between the American Eastern zone and Europe. The relatively close geographical proximity of communities in Boston, Washington, DC, Brooklyn, NY and Hyde Park NY facilitate the achievement of the movement goals.

Around the time of the founding of Luminosa, the Los Angeles community was being formed. In 1979, Caitlin, a young woman from Ireland, was sent to Los Angeles, followed by Helene and Ada. As they had done in Manhattan, the women found an apartment which they opened for meetings. At the first meeting, two hundred people attended, including Cardinal Manning, a priest from the Los Angeles Diocese, and family members who had met the movement in Chicago. Thereafter the women held monthly

meetings with an average attendance of about twenty people. The first annual retreat (known as the Mariapolis) was held in Las Cruces, NM. Rose, an immigrant from the Philippines, arrived several years after the community had been founded. Her initial responsibilities included working with children (the Gen), whose simple play amazed her in the way that it clearly reflected the influence of the community's spirituality. Twenty-five years later, Rose was still living in Los Angeles, a witness to the maturation of these children over a generation. In her interview, she noted that she and the Gen had "grown up together" in LA. Elaborating on Chiara's concerns about enculturation, she said,

R: Well one of the challenges I would say in the United States, in the LA is affluence...

N: In what way?

R: In a way that for people, those who have grown through the movement, that's different. But for new people, I don't know if you ever heard of the term like—how did they say it now? Like church shopping. It's like you have a whole range of things to choose from. You join this for convenience and you join that for convenience and if it's not convenient, and this whole mentality of, you know, I have everything. I don't need God. And if I need him, it's like on the side. And because of the mass media and the lifestyle and California, for spirituality to take root, is a challenge. So I always say these Gens are Gen. They're still able to stay a Gen despite of what's around them, it's a miracle.

In 2008, the challenge of the Los Angeles community, in addition to differences presented by its cultural uniqueness, is one of leadership. Three months before these interviews were conducted, the zone leader Ada had died after a prolonged battle with cancer. After her death, the community had to grieve this loss while undergoing a restructuring of boundaries between San Jose and Los Angeles communities.

In the first decade of the 21st century, the development of the Focolare in the US continued at a dynamic pace, as centers grew in number and reached out to their respective communities. The movement's international composition and its transnational

activities has made diverse interchanges an explicit and useful context in which to create unity. Although the Focolare has been present in the US since the early 1960s, it remains generally unknown to the general public and even to American Catholics. In fact, when US members speak of the Movement in relation to other, older communities, particularly those of Europe, the Philippines and Brazil, they frequently refer to it as “new,” and “still growing,” and state that they are working for a more pronounced presence in the US. In spite of this, the organization of the membership does not tend to be American-centric, but rather deeply interconnected with the international community and its center in Italy. In this regard, the US movement’s successes and failures are linked to the movement’s global imprint. In its attempt to foster social change, the Focolare assume a global worldview while at the same time maintaining awareness of the contextual advantages and disadvantages of working for this change in the US.

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