

## ***SOCIAL ONE: THE BIRTH OF A PROPOSAL***

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I would like to open our conference by sharing with you the initial thought we had when we began planning it: to explain its genesis, to outline its objectives and the working approach we wish to take.

As you know, the proposal of Social-One was born within the context of the Focolare Movement inspired by the charism of Chiara Lubich, a Movement which is bringing about a new current of thought, fruit of the life of its millions of members throughout the whole world. The scale of values it proposes, the gamut of ideas and experiences it transmits, its social vision have been defined as “a new paradigm” by the Dean of the Faculty of Social Sciences of the University of Lublin (Poland), as he said during the conferral of the *honorary doctorate* in social sciences to Chiara Lubich<sup>1</sup>. His words of appreciation and esteem are very relevant if we consider the on-going research and revision of theories occurring in the field of social sciences, and the quest for new paradigms.

The thrust of this new charism is to strive towards the realization of the Gospel-based ideal, “*May all be one,*” with ample social consequences. We cannot speak at length on the charism right now but it is important to mention its source, in order to avoid any misunderstanding. This ideal is based on an understanding of unity which is not uniformity or standardization. If it were so, it would be a contradiction in terms in the light of the anthropological, theological and social implications that Christianity offers. Rather, it is respectful of existing identities and legitimate diversities.

At this point, we would like to point out that this charism, which has an influence on people dedicated to many different disciplines<sup>2</sup>, is essentially collective, communitarian, social in nature. Consequently, it will have something to offer also to sociology and the social sciences.

For some years *Social-One*, a group composed of sociologists, social workers and social science scholars the world over have been meeting on a regular basis. They come together to further their experience of mutual exchange and study through dialogue. The attitude of listening and openness facilitate a greater understanding, enriched by the specific competence of each one. What are the objectives that the group has set for itself? First of all, to draw from the spiritual patrimony and life that emanate from Chiara Lubich’s charism, with the goal of deriving new insights for research and understanding of the social reality. These insights are contributing to novel perspectives with their characteristic original content and approach.

Considering the number of professions and nations represented here at this conference, in addition to the schools of thought and practical orientations, it is not

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superfluous to say a few words on the reason for the journey we have undertaken together as sociologists, scholars and social workers.

At a certain point, rather than seeing our diversity as something that limits us, we realized that it was our strength and a great resource. Therefore, we valued the scientific root of the sociologist and the theoretical background of social workers. We thus began to build on this already-existing theoretical and practical foundation.

From sociology, social workers draw conceptual understandings and logical practical implications which can improve the quality of their professional practice in the complex social framework in which they operate today. Sociology therefore is seen as a science which offers new directions and models, in addition to a practical orientation. These, in turn, develop new strategies, improved techniques to ensure the short-term and long-term successful outcome of social work.

Moreover, the considerations of sociologists, in direct contact with social service professionals, find a testing ground, offering these scholars an opportunity to draw from social work practice, giving them new creative stimuli for their own theories and analytical framework.

None of the fields (sociology, social works or social policy) has any claim over another, but they certainly condition each other. In fact, we can honestly say that we had clearly understood that a unity among the difference sciences, even in the midst of the fragmentation that our specializations can bring, is very needed and not just a utopian goal.

You may ask why we chose social interactions as the specific topic of this conference. First of all, because of one basic conviction: a social interaction, the “most human of humanity’s interactions,” is not only essential to the human being but also to the future of humanity. It involves our intellect and our experiences on an interpersonal, intergroup, intercultural, international level; inclusive of the religious, political and economic realms of life. The style and quality of our relationships has a direct impact on the world around us and the societies which we are building.

Given this basic premise and the multiple needs of society, we see there is an increasing interest in this topic of interpersonal and intercultural relations both in sociology and in the social sciences. We can cite, for example, what a well-known scholar has said on this topic: “Even though social interactions have always had a prominent role since sociology’s inception, they have never been considered and analyzed in their central and complete essence. We can, in fact, say that in most sociologists have rarely considered social interaction as an essential key and focal point of reference to understand the development of different social phenomena.”<sup>3</sup>

“If you want to consider a social relationship as the basic cell of society, and therefore, the cornerstone of sociology, this to me seems to be an extremely valid proposal.”<sup>4</sup> This is how another French scholar expressed himself in regard to this premise.

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At the same time, the profession of social work, has always been oriented towards considering the client not as an isolated individual but as member of a system made of relationships and connections. In recent times, this profession has identified in “the pivotal change in interpersonal relationships” a new theoretical model which supports their social methods. “In the past these intuitions and values did not always find a structural framework in which to develop interventions coherent with these insights.”<sup>5</sup>

In the last few years we have focused our attention on the topic of social interactions and have done so in small working groups or specific conferences. From those forums we then felt the need to meet together with scholars and social workers in a wider context such as this conference, in order to exchange our ideas, to share the research studies and conclusions which matured from our work, and thus seek together new perspectives for the future.

What can we then say about the second half of the topic we are dealing with: that is, brotherhood? We have to admit that to consider these two terms together (social interactions and brotherhood) in a meeting of social sciences is a challenge. In fact, no matter how many dictionaries I consulted (of sociology, social sciences, cultural anthropology, even rural development) I never found the word “brotherhood.” To say the truth, I found it in one of the dictionaries of sociology, but as a specific entry at the end of a text, in a long list of various terms and sub-terms defined within various entries, with reference back to... “religious Orders!” This was the only mention I found.

We therefore need some courage to consider it as an essential part of the topic of this conference. We hope, all the same, that it will become one of the most influential aspects of our work, as it is laden with theoretical and practical implications for the field. But let me say no more so that we can allow for an element of surprise. The days before us, in which we will all play a part, will hopefully validate our choice of terms.

In looking at the order and content of the presentations during our conference, I want to explain that they will alternate between theory and practice, perhaps with special attention this year to issues and studies which are specifically more sociological.

Therefore theoretical elements, which include principles and criteria, will be sustained and will oftentimes be the result of concrete experiences which, in turn, will give us the opportunity to highlight specific research.

The objectives before us and the proposals which will emerge will no doubt be ambitious and will require the contribution of each of us. This conference, in fact, can be a testing ground on which we can experience that type of interpersonal and social relationship which scholars and social workers often focus on. In other words, we want that this forum for intellectual and professional exchange in these days, be rooted in an experience of relationships that are characterized by “relationships of brotherhood,” which is the specific goal of our conference. There will be no lack of opportunities for this. We can live such an experience through the talks that we give and listen to, by proposing new insights, asking questions both in the hall and during the breaks. What’s important is that we are open to dialogue, ready to welcome the gift that each person offers: their knowledge, their experience, their life. This would be a way to live our

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personal commitment and our responsibility as sociologists, as holds true for every scholar, to make our research become fruitful. It will prevent us from remaining in the abstract and losing touch with reality.

It would also prove to be an effective strategy to free us from any biases and conditionings that could, at times, be a barrier to a more complete understanding. It would also lead us to a way of thinking and studying which is not removed from real life but which includes it and gives it value in the academic level. We want to live all this as “unified persons” which the world is calling for today in every sphere, people capable of integrating the multiple experiences and the plurality of knowledge bases, and thus compose a new synthesis, fruit of that profound relationship with the other.

## Notes

1. See the entire speech with a brief introduction by Vera Araújo, in “*Nuova Umanità*” XVIII/6 (1996) pp. 699-708.
2. Very illustrative in this regard is the documentation collected in C. Lubich, a new culture for a new society (Speeches delivered on the occasion of the conferral of degrees *honoris causa*, congresses and conventions 1996-2001, edition for use within the Focolare Movement) *Città Nuova* Ed., Roma 2002, and the articles published in the “*New Humanity*” cultural review starting from n. 102 (1995) in the section titled *In the light of the Ideal of Unity*.
3. P. Donati, *Introduzione alla sociologia relazionale*, Franco Angeli, Milano 1993<sup>5</sup>, p. 237.
4. Guy Bajoit, *Pour une sociologie relationnelle*, Presses Universitaires de France, Parigi 1992, p. 297.
5. A.M. Campanini, *Servizio sociale e sociologia: storia di un dialogo*, LINT, Trieste 1999, p. 75.