

Chiara Lubich's
Communitarian Way
to Holiness
in the Light of John 17:11b-19



Paloma Cabetas

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Introduction

Taken from Gospel of John Chapter 17: 11b-19

Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they be one, as we are. ¹²When I was with them, I protected them in your name that you gave me, and I guarded them, and none of them was lost if not the son of perdition, so that the scripture may be fulfilled. ¹³Now I am coming to you, and I speak these things in the world, so that they may have my joy made full in them. ¹⁴I have given them your word and the world has hated them, because they are not from the world, as I am not from the world. ¹⁵I do not ask that you take them from the world, but that you protect them from the evil one. ¹⁶They are not from the world as I am not from the world. ¹⁷Sanctify them in the truth. Your word is truth. ¹⁸As you have sent me into the world, I am sending them into the world.

¹⁹And for them I sanctify myself, so that they also be sanctified in truth.

John 17:11b-19¹

‘Father... may they all be one’ (Jn 17:11, 21). One by one those words seemed to come to life, giving us the conviction that we were born for that page of the gospel.

Chiara Lubich²

The twentieth century brought about a revival in the Catholic world in regards to scripture. For centuries, ordinary Catholics had progressively distanced themselves from personal reading and reflection of the Bible. Exegetical studies in the time following the Reformation saw very few Catholic scholars. However, in the decades that preceded the Second Vatican Council Catholics acquired a new familiarity with scripture both in the academic realm and in their lives of piety.³

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1. Unless otherwise indicated, all quotations of John's Gospel are the author's translation from *Nestle-Aland Novum Testamentum Graece*, edited by B. Aland, K. Aland, and B. Newman (Louisville, KY: American Bible Society, 2005). All other Bible quotations are taken from the New Revised Standard Version, Catholic edition.
 2. Chiara Lubich, *Essential Writings* (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2007), 4.
 3. See for example Joseph Ratzinger, “The Transmission of Divine Revelation,” in *Commentary on the*

One example of this new approach to the Bible is the Focolare Movement, founded by a young lay Italian woman, Chiara Lubich (1920–2008), in the early 1940s.

The Focolare Movement is the fruit of a living encounter with scripture and, in a particular way, with the Gospel of John. Inspired by John 17:11, 21 “May they all be one,” Chiara Lubich once summarized its spirituality in the following words:

Whenever we are asked for a definition of our spirituality, or what difference there is between the gift of God to our Movement and the gifts with which he has decorated and enriched others in the Church today and throughout the centuries, we have no hesitation in replying: unity.⁴

Chiara Lubich’s spiritual proposal is not a mere reflection on scripture but a practical way of applying the gospel message to daily life. From the very beginning she invited her friends to choose a sentence of the gospel to live for a period of time and then share how they

Documents of Vatican II, ed. Herbert Vorgrimler, vol 3 (New York: Herder and Herder, 1969), 158–59.

4. Chiara Lubich, *Jesus—the Heart of His Message: Unity and Jesus Forsaken* (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 1997), 22.

put it into practice. This strengthened their own personal commitment but also their desire to help one another. Because of Chiara Lubich's strong call to live for unity she urged everyone, as Father Fabio Ciardi explains, "to seek out the others so that we can journey together with them towards God."⁵ Such a communitarian way to holiness was quite a novelty for her time.

These pages will explore Chiara Lubich's spiritual and moral invitation to "become saints together," which stems from her reading of John 17. It will begin by analyzing the interpretation of the verb "sanctify" in that chapter of John in connection to Jesus' prayer for unity. It will then study some aspects of Chiara Lubich's spirituality and in particular her invitation to a collective way of sanctity by exploring some of the thematic elements of John 17:11b-19 as they apply to Lubich's proposal.

5. Fabio Ciardi, "What Kind of Holiness Comes from the Spirituality of Communion?" *Charisms in Unity* 20, no. 3 (2012): 8.

Part 1

"Sanctification"

in John 17:11b–19

Context and Structure

John 17 is called by many “the Testament of Jesus” because it concludes Jesus’ farewell discourse to his disciples on the eve of his passion and death. The whole speech extends from chapter 13 to chapter 17. For the first time in John’s Gospel, Jesus’ words are directed only to his disciples and not to the outside world.¹

The farewell discourse begins what exegetes traditionally call the “Book of Glory,” the third and last section of the fourth gospel. Scholars refer to it as such because of the important theme of the glory of God. To express the Gospel

1. C.H. Dodd, *The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel* (London: The Syndics of the Cambridge University Press, 1955), 390. The other two discourses addressed to the disciples are two brief conversations (Jacob’s well in 4:31–8 and Peter’s confession in 6:66–71) that, however, have more of a flavor of public revelations.