

Year 2025

**Course: Recognising oneself**  
**The Statutes: a path and a mirror**

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Lesson 3A

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**Approaching The Statutes: a historical understanding**

In this year's UPM course - which has as its subtitle: The Statutes: path and mirror - we would like to briefly trace the path that, in the history of the Focolare Movement-Work of Mary, through the drafting of no less than 7 versions of Rules and Statutes, has led to the first General Statutes that were approved in 1990. These were then revised with the inclusion of some new elements that had matured over time, and approved again in 2007, a year before the end of Chiara Lubich's earthly life.

A historical path, therefore, that at the same time we can see as a mirror: a mirror of a growth, of the unfolding of God's plan on this new ecclesial reality, thanks to the continuous clarification, in communion with the Church, of the 'score written in heaven'. In a journey of this kind, there have been several events, that one might, at first glance consider negative, but in reality, have been very precious in the maturing of a work of God.

A path, therefore, that if we deepen it, may help our new knowledge (that recognising ourselves that the title of the UPM is indicating to us). More relevant than ever are Chiara's words in 1962, when she stressed that in presenting the Work of Mary, we must necessarily limit ourselves to a few lines so as to trace an external understanding of the Movement (e.g. its diffusion). But she said, "there is a whole intimate, interior history" known only to few people. "This history is made up of stages" and these stages "could be indicated by different Rules that we have presented to the Church".

Here we have a documented history, the preciousness of which we are becoming increasingly aware of, as was also the case for Chiara. It is sufficient to quote here one of the sentences from her diary in 1970, when, while working on the archive, she noted:

"There are - as a treasure of the Work of Mary - some very important documents that have come out year by year and tell of the gradual and ever more decisive approval by the Church.

This is an inestimable wealth of the Movement for all the centuries to come."

Reading certain documents gives the impression of a magnificent novel: it is the story of a work of God.

Of this 'magnificent novel', of this 'divine adventure,' today we can only take up a few fragments, touching on the stages that the Rules reflect.

It is well known that on the 7<sup>th</sup> of December 1943 the idea of founding a movement was definitely far from Chiara's mind. The early times, characterised by an assiduous reading of the Gospel, which

was atypical at that time, is not conditioned by a pre-established project. Something new began to germinate spontaneously and unexpectedly, as happens in the things of God. And yet, what Chiara stated as early as 1955 is also true: 'Jesus began to prepare our Rule as early as 1943'. This can be seen in the highlighting of certain phrases and passages from the Gospel that would later become cornerstones of the spirituality of unity, which would permeate and "regulate" the life of that group of young people who had met within the Franciscan Third Order, but who gradually began to show a new characteristic that distinguished them from the Third Order. In this newness, the Archbishop of Trent, Monsignor Carlo de Ferrari, recognised the 'hand of God' and he took care of this seedling that was growing dynamically, but was defenceless and already exposed to the elements. He also took care of the request, which was both demanding and wise at the same time, to put in writing the principles that would guide the life of the group. In this way the "Statute of the Focolares of Charity, Apostles of Unity" was born, and the archbishop approved it on the 1<sup>st</sup> of May 1947 ad experimentum for one year.

Only three months earlier, with the publication of the Apostolic Constitution *Provida Mater Ecclesia*, Pope Pius XII had recognised the long-desired possibility of people being able to live a consecrated life in the world. Secular Institutes had been born. Hence the approval of the Association of the Apostles of Unity as a secular Institute.

Today, we cannot go into the details of this small Statute - as you have seen, it only has 27 articles - and Chiara (then 27 years old) had drafted it with the help of other people. We can only say that although the juridical form, which was the only one possible at the time, is different from what has matured over time, in this small Statute we can actually glimpse the seed from which the tree would grow. The purpose of this new ecclesial organisation is already outlined: to promote Gospel-based Charity in its most perfect expression of Unity, in the midst of the world. The life of the focolares, which the small Statute describes, is directed towards this goal. In a way it does not really conform to the characteristics of secular institutes, in which the individual's consecration to God is emphasised, although it is often kept hidden so as to allow 'secularity', i.e. the commitment to be a leaven of the Gospel in the world. Instead, the little 1947 Statute immediately highlights the community dimension that characterises every aspect: work, apostolate, prayer... 'Everything,' Article 21 says, 'including the making of vows, is expressly directed towards this goal (Unity).' Also astonishing is the universal perspective illustrated in the document, which was unexplainable at that time in history as the Movement was only in Trent: it is written 'The Association intends to extend its activities universally, subject to the consent of the local Bishops.'

In May 1948 the short Statute was confirmed ad triennium, i.e. for three years, and as the Archbishop writes, "having noted the excellent spirit and fervour of the members". In the meantime, various events followed one another, among which there were some accusations against the Focolare Movement, which had already achieved significant visibility in Trent. This aroused appreciation in some and concern, reservations and jealousy in others... since it was rather a new fact. After an enquiry at the diocesan level, which ended favourably for the Focolare, in July 1948, the initiative of some priests took the question to Rome. Thus began the time of study by the dicastery that was then called the Supreme Congregation of the Holy Office, today known as the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith. This situation, together with the spreading of the Movement in other dioceses and also Chiara's own move to Rome in December 1948, made it necessary to have an approval that was no longer only at the diocesan level. Archbishop De Ferrari entrusted an experienced religious, the Stigmatine Father Giovanni Battista Tomasi, the task of being at Chiara's side in drafting a Rule. With her, there was also Igino Giordani. We are in 1949, a year, which together with the next two years, was a period of special light. Together with the understanding of celestial

realities Chiara saw the Work of Mary, with its design and its life. Obviously, this will become more precise over time, but this light, to which the very name Work of Mary is linked, will lead Chiara to affirm that if the Movement, as a spiritual current was born in 1943, the Work of Mary was born in 1949.

It was during these years that the community at the heart of the Movement, the focolare, which had already been foreseen in Loreto in 1939, began to take shape in the image of the family of Nazareth, as “a living together in the midst of the world of virgins and married people, all given to God even if in different ways”. Giordani himself would be the first married focolarino. Married focolarini, referred to as “focolarini not living in community”, are therefore present in the proposed Rule of 1951, on which we will not focus for reasons of time, considering also that it was not submitted to the Church for examination. However, it must be emphasised that, with its many quotations from Scripture, one can feel the light and fire of the Gospel vibrating in it, the fire of the Gospel penetrating the life of the focolare described there, the relationships between the members, the outreach, confirming the openness to a universal dimension.

In the meantime, the study by the Holy Office continued, with important measures: the appointment of a Visitor, the Franciscan Father Enrico Corrà, in May 1951, a few months after the clear indication from the Holy Office: “the Movement should not be in the hands of Miss Lubich”. This was discreetly communicated to de Ferrari by Corrà, and in February 1952, this led to Chiara's step of resigning “as the leader of the Focolare of Unity Movement, remaining a simple focolarina”. These are her words in the letter.

The judgement, a positive one, expressed by Corrà on the Movement, in 1954 was followed by a replacement with a new Visitor, also a Franciscan, Father Alfonso Orlini, known as a severe and strict person. Extremely opposed to the Movement, he worked hard, travelling to different cities in Italy. He was impressed and as he admitted after visiting two focolares, he was even “converted”. However, some aspects seemed too new and impossible for him to accept. Among these, in addition to the participation of priests and religious which he had always opposed, was the vocation of married focolarini. Orlini asked Chiara to prepare a draft of the Rule for him in a relatively short time. Chiara did so, but, knowing the Franciscan's position, she also wrote him a long letter, in which she implored him to find a formula so that in what was then called the “Order of Mary”, together with the first branch - that of the women focolarine - and the second - that of the men focolarini, some of whom were called to the priesthood - married people would also find a place. She wrote: “If perfection lies primarily in love, who will prevent us from having it? Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Perhaps being married? ...

If for God what counts is love, charity, can the Church (Christ's Bride) perhaps not know how to interpret His tastes and leave the Work of Mary as (underlined) God has raised it up?”

The months of autumn 1954 are consequently lived in apprehension. One has the certainty of the good intentions of Father Orlini who is sincerely striving for the Focolare to be approved, but one is also aware that what the Franciscan presented to the Church is “according to his own ideas”. Therefore, they were, as Chiara wrote “delicate and terrible” moments, in which “something seems to be born, yes, but being born as ‘something else’.” In reality, nothing happens.

In the progressive study of the Church, new figures are inserted, first and foremost Pasquale Foresi, the first focolarino who became a priest in 1954, shortly after the death of Father Tomasi. He was incardinated in the diocese of Trent and was appointed by the archbishop to assist the Movement. Of the other figures, I can only mention here that of the well-known Jesuit Father Riccardo Lombardi and his efforts to merge the Focolare, in order to save it, with the “Mondo Migliore” organisation he had founded. Meanwhile, Orlini, who was in favour of the Movement, was sidelined by the Holy

Office. A Dominican father was commissioned to draw up a new report. He did so and proposed the dissolution of the Movement. In July 1957, the Holy Office accepted this proposal, but the dissolution order was not signed by Pope Pius XII. Instead, the Pope accepted the opinion of Cardinal Pizzardo, Secretary of the Holy Office (equivalent to the current Prefect) who proposed a new canonical visitation led by a respected figure, who had already intervened to stop the process of merging with Mondo Migliore: it was the Jesuit Father Giacomo Martegani.

We could talk at length about the second half of the 1950s, which saw a general development of the Movement, both in terms of its spreading, reaching all the continents, and the variety of the vocations it included.

Alongside the “Order of Mary” with the three branches we mentioned before, the so-called League took shape, composed of priests and religious of different charisms. There was also the part of the laity, expressing the humanity that Chiara saw as part of God's plan for Giordani. This lay part was given the name of “*Movement*” and was enriched in 1956 with the birth of the vocation of the “volunteers of God”. So, we could see a constantly growing reality, as was shown by the ever-increasing number of people at the summer Mariapolis, where there are people of all ages and vocations. The first meetings with Christians of different denominations were well ahead of their time; there was contact with founders of ecclesial realities as well as with people of no religious affiliations...

Therefore, it was a lively and vibrant whole in continuous evolution. This makes us understand how in those years there was always work to create a legal order, even though it became increasingly complex to find a juridical form for such a complex organism, with lay people at its heart, which was not at all within the possibilities offered by the 1917 Code of Canon Law in force, which reflected a pyramidal vision of the Church, with a decisive priority given to the clerical state, which, as it was written, was distinct ‘by divine institution’ from the lay state.

In April 1958, Martegani delivered his report, in which, while noting aspects that needed to be developed, he stated that this did not justify “measures to suppress the institution”. He noted, “in my opinion, it would be an offence to justice”. This explains how in the following months there were explicit signs of the approaching approval. Pope Pius XII himself had Chiara privately informed that the Work of Mary would not leave the Holy Office “just because it was recommended by someone, but because it is the Work of God”. On the 4<sup>th</sup> of October 1958, five days before his death, he verbally sent her a blessing. Chiara wrote in those hours before his death: “...we felt something unusual pouring down on our souls. ... It seemed that everything in the world acquired value .... That very obvious smile from the Church had the flavour of a mother's kiss to her child.”

he Pope died, and his death reopened the doubts about the future. Precisely at that time Chiara distributed to her people the Notes of the Rule of the Work of Mary that she had written, which the Pope had read and appreciated. Therefore, it was no longer “Order of Mary”, but, for the first time, “Work of Mary”, “spontaneously dedicated to Her”, as it is written.

The Work of Mary would like to stand in the Church in the position in which Mary stood in the early Church. It has its own individuality, as Mary was a person, but, as Mary lived for Jesus, the goal of this Work is the Church and humanity.

The 1958 Notes should be read at a leisurely pace. They are very beautiful pages, in which one can clearly recognise the charism and the hand of the author. We can read in the preliminary notes: “In the whole Work of Mary, there is the imprint of the unity and trinity of God.” It is an affirmation that resonates as a hermeneutical key to truly understand the structural reality of the Work of Mary, made up of the Order of Mary (as we already know: men and women focolarini, married focolarini), the League, which also had three branches (priests, men and women religious and Catholic

associations) and the Movement, which brought together the lay people (men, women and children), who were not consecrated.

This unity and diversity is expressed as follows: “In the Work of Mary ... there are three groups of people, three distinct roles, in the one calling.” I would like to draw your attention to this sentence for a moment. It seems to me to express, even before the Vatican Council, in a concise manner that is ahead of its time, what will characterise the reality of the ecclesial movements and new communities that have blossomed in the post-Conciliar era. Here the variety of vocations of the members is a richness and a gift that manifests the dimension that unites them all, we could say that “identifies” them. This dimension is participation in a charism, to be lived and implemented in an authentic communion, according to a specific spirituality and certain goals that are responsibly pursued by all members.

In the meantime, the new Pope, John XXIII, not wanting to involve the jurisdiction of the Holy Office and judging that the Movement was mostly confined to Italy, suggested entrusting the matter to the Italian Bishops’ Conference. A commission of several bishops was appointed to conduct a new study on the Focolare Movement. In November 1960, the negative report of this commission almost led to the dissolution of the Movement.

Two months later, in January 1961, an extensive report of defence prepared by Fr Foresi was presented to the Holy Office. In the meantime, a compilation of some fundamental norms for the future organisation of the Work of Mary had also been prepared, which was studied and corrected by a commission of the Holy Office.

Finally, on the 7<sup>th</sup> of March 1962, the Holy Office decreed that the Statutes, only of the men's section, could be implemented *ad experimentum*. They were transmitted to the Sacred Congregation of the Council, which was responsible for the Pious Associations, and the term Association that we saw at the beginning reappears. In fact, in the approved Statutes, the Work of Mary appears as a ‘Pious Men's Association’, governed in accordance with canons 684 and the following of the Code of Canon Law, “pending the possibility of establishing a Secular Institute”. It should be noted that when the Statutes of the women's section were approved in November 1963, this indication of “pending” would no longer be present.

Another significant detail: in the printing of both Statutes, the contents of Article 9, which were already present in the Compendium presented to the Holy Office, is written on the front page or even on the cover page. It later became the premise in the General Statutes of the Work of Mary.

“We were alive ... Children of the Church!” Chiara exclaimed in recalling those moments. But she continued,

“...the Statutes, which the Church gave us to live by ... did not coincide with everything that God had built. The Work of Mary appeared to consist of two separate sections, one for men and the other for women, it was an impossible new Face of Jesus forsaken, the divided one, to be embraced.”

We are drawing closer to our goal! During a historic audience that Pope Paul VI granted her in October 1964, Chiara was able to talk to him about all of this. From then on, the journey towards approval progressed rapidly. In December 1964 the apostolic visitation was declared closed and the Work of Mary was definitively approved. In the meantime, work was done on the Statute of a Coordinating Council, a *trait d'union* that would guarantee “the strengthening of the spirit of unity and the coordination of common activities between the two Sections of the Work of Mary”. The Statute was approved *ad experimentum* in January 1966.

Of the years that followed we cannot fail to mention at least one important moment. In December 1978, the Congregation for the Clergy responded positively to a proposal presented by Chiara as President and Fr Foresi as Assistant of the Movement in which they asked, given the predominantly

lay nature of the Movement, to be able to depend on the Pontifical Council for the Laity, while safeguarding - these are the words of the letter - the “undeniable” membership to the Work of Mary of priests, religious men and women, who constitute “an integral part of the Work of Mary itself”. In the Work of Mary, still in foundation, the study on the statutory form continued. Starting from 1979, Chiara, with Fr Foresi, Lionello Bonfanti, Antonio Petrilli and other focolarini devoted a lot of time to the final drafting of the General Statutes of the Work of Mary, which were approved on the 29<sup>th</sup> of June 1990, the feast of St Peter and St Paul. The next day Chiara and a group of focolarini were received at the Pontifical Council for the Laity by Cardinal Eduardo Pironio, who was the President of that dicastery at the time and in 2023 he was proclaimed Blessed. An eagerly awaited and solemn moment, in which they stood and listened to the reading of the Holy See's Decree approving the Statutes of the private, universal association of the faithful “Work of Mary”, recognised “for all intents and purposes, an Association of Pontifical Right”. Let us now let the images take us back to the joy of that day, and may they help us to welcome the Statutes with the solemnity of that moment, as Chiara said in a link-up, as “one of the Lord's greatest gifts”.

(Excerpt Video presentation of the Statutes)

Cardinal Pironio: ... “The Focolare Movement, the Work of Mary, was approved by a decree dated the 5<sup>th</sup> of December 1964 by the Congregation of the Council, as a Pious Union endowed with a special statute, insofar as those belonging to this union expressed the desire to wait for the new canonical legislation on the organizational forms of the apostolic mission of the laity, to see whether new juridical forms might emerge which could more adequately reflect and embrace the spirit and ideals of their apostolic activity.

In the following years, the Movement developed in faithfulness to its charism and it spread, growing in maturity. Thus it brought abundant spiritual fruits to the Church, and bore a credible witness of unity to the world.

The President of the Work of Mary has now petitioned this Council for approval of the updated version of the Statutes of the Work of Mary as a private, universal association of the faithful, holding this institutional format more suitable to its nature and its history.

In response to this request, this Pontifical Council for the Laity in accordance with canons 298-311 and 321-329, approves these updated Statutes and confirms this association called the "Work of Mary" (Focolare Movement), as a private, universal association of the faithful, a juridical entity in the canonical order by decree of the Holy See, declaring it to be, for all intents and purposes, an Association of Pontifical Right, and establishing that it be recognized as such by all.

Wishing for a fruitful missionary commitment in the service of the Gospel and of the Church, in the footsteps of Mary, and a fruitful collaboration with brothers and sisters of other Christian Churches and of other religions, and with all people of good will, in the spirit of the Focolare Movement, for the Glory of God and the good of the Church and the world, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit and the maternal protection of the Mother of God.”

*(applause)*

So I present this to you, but first, please allow me to say a few words. In reading over this text: "... it brought abundant spiritual fruits to the Church and bore a credible witness of unity to the world". It's beautiful to be able to say this of a Movement, which the Lord has blessed in an extraordinary manner, both within the ecclesial community and outside of the ecclesial community in its missionary dimension. In a communion that is in view of an even deeper communion with people of other religions or different forms of belief.

This missionary spirit which brings the men and women focolarini everywhere, should be underlined very strongly. In fact, wherever one goes, one immediately meets the focolarini. This spirit of unity which is rooted in the abandonment of Christ on the cross, this unity which necessarily comes from

the total annihilation of Christ dying on the cross, produces much fruit, much fruit in the world. And I must underline it today... on behalf of the Holy Father who I met with on Thursday.

I want to thank you for all that the Movement, that the Work of Mary has done in the Church and particularly with us here at the Pontifical Council for the Laity. ... My wish is that the Movement may grow more and more, that it may develop with the dynamism of the Holy Spirit and bring abundant fruits. This is my desire. Once again, I express my personal joy and the joy of the Pontifical Council for the Laity.

Chiara: Thank you. Your Eminence, we will do our best to do what you have just said.

Cardinal Pironio: With all my heart.

Chiara: With your blessing, of course.