



A very Beautiful Story

God accompanies us from creation to the "new heaven and new earth"¹
Formation course on Holy Scripture for children in the Focolare Movement

Some introductory notes: purpose and guidelines for the course.

A) Purpose:

- to help the Gen 4 know Jesus better in order to live like him. The lived Word is in fact the central feature of Gen4 formation. Chiara always stressed the need to give formation that is “serious” but not merely notional: everything is to be experienced!
- to become “teachers of gospel life” (See *attachment 1*: some of Chiara’s thoughts on “catechetical” formation).

B) Content: for the Gen 4 age group, the most important thing is to know Jesus, to become his friend, to want to live like him. However, we feel it is necessary to present the person of Jesus in the context of salvation history. This framework starts from creation, from God who thinks about humankind from the beginning and, through key figures and events in the Old Testament, prepares a people and wants to speak to all men and women, to accompany them and help them grow in love. Then God comes to speak directly to humankind through his son and never abandons us: Jesus returned to heaven after offering us many ways of finding him on earth. God’s love will always accompany us on our journey to heaven, to “new heavens and new earth”. And each of us is “part of” this journey of love.

C) Course structure

-22 stages: 4 stories from the Old Testament, 15 stories from the Gospels and 3 on the life of the first Christians.

-Titles: each story has a *title* which helps identify the content (e.g.: Creation); a *subtitle* as a starting point to understand its “wisdom based” aspects² and then further *headings* which sometimes introduce different parts of the same story.

-Introduction, conclusion and notes: each passage from scripture is preceded and followed by texts that help not only to locate the passage within the course being followed, sometimes referring to passages from the previous stories (*the introductions*), but also to

¹ We would like to underline that this title, must be considered as a whole: **A beautiful story**. God takes us from Creation to "new heavens and new earths". It is therefore the Story of Salvation: it is not a "fairy tale" but a beautiful "true" story that helps us enter into the "mystery" of God. And Jesus, the God with us, is the manifestation of God's great love, not a "super-man", but the Son of God whom we will gradually come to know.

² For example, in the story of creation, we emphasised how nature speaks to us of God, in making us discover that we are connected among ourselves and with creation by love, referring to the Creator and taking up concepts from some of Chiara’s answers to the Gen 4: “*The law of love that binds everything and speaks to us of God*”.

highlight some of the fundamental concepts that we felt it is useful to underline for this age group (*the part that follows the passages from Scripture*). These are always to be considered as suggestions that can and must be adapted according to the cultural needs and the characteristics (age, previous studies ...) of the group of children with whom one is relating. Some *Notes* accompany the text: these are ideas that may provide a better understanding of the text itself. However, we suggest Gen assistants, when possible, do “meditation” beforehand on the scripture story in order to grasp the deeper meaning, the “sacred aspect”, that can then touch the souls of our little ones.

- **The importance of Holy Scripture:** we wanted to focus on the Word by separating the text that tells the Bible story – that has been written using simplified language and summarized in some paragraphs rather than the full text, but aiming to remain faithful to it as much as possible - from everything that is our commentary on it or an introduction or updating.



The graphics are symbolic: a book that opens and leads into the Bible stories and closes at the end, helps to emphasise this. In the case of Bible stories very distant from each other (or in the case of gospel texts taken from different evangelists) this is always underlined by the opening of the book and giving the reference to the Bible verses.

-**Revision of texts:** all the texts have been prepared at the Gen4 centre. They have been revised both from the Scriptural point of view and with an ecumenical perspective (See Appendix 2: general “ecumenical” observations on the journey). Therefore, the notes draw not only on Western Catholic tradition, but also on the richness of the Eastern Churches, as well as the Churches of the Reformation. Despite all the inevitable limits, we hope that everyone will feel included as much as possible.

-**Words to live:** a characteristic of our formation should be to connect “head, hands and heart” in a living relationship. To help in this process, some factors have been kept in mind: - for each chosen Scripture story we have tried to identify some fundamental concepts that may be more appropriate to the Gen4 age group. Our choice was helped by seeing what Chiara herself emphasised both with sentences written by her about Bible stories, and by ideas that come from her answers to the Gen4.



-Each story included in the course will, therefore, have a part called: **“We live like this”**, where a sentence of Scripture taken from the story itself will be highlighted (here too using the symbolism of the open book, highlighting this sentence). One of Chiara’s sentences will be included which already offers a “living” reading of the chosen sentence and there will be one or two experiences of Gen4 who have tried to live like this. In some stories, only one sentence will be emphasised; in others two and in some even three, depending on what we felt it was important to emphasize.

D) Flexibility of the material, possible extra information and further resources:

- **Flexibility:** once the structure of the material and its characteristics are understood, it lends itself to flexible use, that can be adapted to the circumstances and the course you are following with a group of children. You can choose which stages to cover in a year, whether to emphasize all the concepts in a story each time or whether to do one aspect one year and another for the following year. (We are thinking, for example, of the stories that characterize key moments in the liturgical year: Perhaps one year, at Easter for example, mutual love can be emphasized, the year after, it could be the Eucharist, the third year service - the washing of the feet ...).

The course itself could be enriched in the future with additional stories from the Gospel or by highlighting other phrases of Scripture.

- **Supplementary resources:** all the Gen4 material is deeply interconnected and can be used to support and enable this “integral” formation. As we said, many of Chiara’s answers underline, explain and help translate into life many of the Scripture stories we have chosen for this course. Many of the songs written for the Gen4 have words inspired by Chiara’s answers or stories from Scripture and these can therefore be used too.

Even some of the “Gen4 Actions” draw inspiration from or are supported by Scripture stories (e.g. *They have evicted Jesus* at Christmas; the little business “*Spark of love*” by the life of the First Christians ...).

A **resource** we feel is particularly “suited” for the proposed course is a **poster** giving an idea of the way to go, with the 22 stages. For each stage, in addition to the symbol that identifies the stage itself, there will be a blank space where a “sticker” can be put. This will be handed out after having seen and experienced that particular story. In this way, the Gen4 will be better able to “follow” visually the course they are taking and be encouraged to finish it. There will also be a “space” where each Gen4 can paste his or her photo, or paint their portrait ... they can include themselves: in salvation history ... **I’m here too!**

Appendix 1) Excerpts from Chiara’s thoughts on “catechetical” formation

Chiara repeatedly stressed the importance of making the life of Jesus known to the Gen4. Already in 1974, answering the question of the Gen3: “*Could you tell us what you think is the most important thing that we Gen 3 should do for the Gen 4*”, Chiara replied:

"Look, it is enough for us, and for the Church too, that the Gen 4 get to know Jesus little by little. So you have to be very creative. For example acting out scenes about when Jesus was born and explaining: this is the Virgin Mary, this is St Joseph [...]. You explain the Annunciation, and then the flight into Egypt, and after that Jesus who is lost by his parents and [then found] in the Temple. Then the parables; you can do many sketches, or do what they do, I think, in Holland or Belgium, I don't know, with puppets, or with films. We will help you...". (Rocca di Papa, 2.7.1974, Chiara to the Gen3 girls, answers to questions)

In 1977 Chiara reviewed all the programs of the Gen4 centres and underlined the importance for this age group of giving the reality of the Commandments, but in a way suited

to their age: “Giving the meaning of the commandments themselves, almost without naming them”. Chiara gave some examples:

“I am the Lord your God ”: giving a sense of God’s presence, teaching that he is in heaven, but he is also everywhere. Then discovering him in the church, in the tabernacle. Perhaps when you walk past a church, going in to pay a visit with them, taking them to Jesus in the tabernacle and also teaching them to give him a kiss. Just these few ideas can give the reality of the first commandment at this age. [...]

“Do not kill”: when they argue, teach them how to overcome themselves, perhaps giving a hug to the other [child]. That would be enough at this age. [...]

“Do not steal”: teaching them to respect other people’s belongings, because they are not their own. Giving examples and playing games to help them understand [the difference between] something that is yours, that you can use, and something that belongs to someone else and that you must respect and perhaps ask if you want to use it. (Rocca di Papa, 2.12.1977: meetings of the Gen Centres with Chiara)

Then in 1988, speaking with those responsible for the aspect of study within the Movement, she spoke of preparing a **very serious programme** for the Gen4, using a lot of audio-visual resources. *“The emptiness that exists is incredible. If we do not give a religious formation to these “little Gen”, nobody will give it to them. [...]*” But she stressed that we can be inspired by what others are doing, but then we must find the **“our own”** way of doing “catechism” (Rocca di Papa, 12.12.1988: Chiara during the meeting for the indigo)

In 1989, when speaking with the Gen Centres about the Gen4, Chiara explained the concept of “our own [method]” better: **it is not about knowing the catechism by heart, it is not enough to “know it”, but “it must touch us”, “we need to organise it, fill it out, complete it”** (2.3.1989, Rocca di Papa, meeting of the Gen centres with Chiara: points regarding the Gen4)

In 1992, Chiara, again at a meeting with the Gen Centre, told how

“The parents of a Dutch Gen 4, who are both catechists, said: “Our little girl had never felt enthusiastic about religious things. She treated them as something ordinary, like learning to read and write. But now she told us about the Good Samaritan - and these parents were catechists - like something that had struck her, something new. [They said] Please invite us when you have a meeting for adults, we too want to know about this as it is new. ... It was really new!

The father of a Gen 4 who helped film the sketch on “The calling of the Apostles” commented: “This is exceptional! I believe that being taught in this way from an early age, the Gen 4 will be the ‘new people’ of the future! ”. (Rocca di Papa, 17.2.1992, Meeting of the Gen Centres with Chiara)

Again in 1996: *“Through the indigo the Gen 4 enter the mentality of God, **they grasp Christianity in depth and bring it into their families**, that are often distant or indifferent: in several cases they felt strongly and got permission from their parents to receive baptism. “(Rocca di Papa, 18.4.1996, meeting of the Gen Centres with Chiara)*

And in 2002, Chiara said: *“Have you seen: working for evangelization ... teachers of gospel life; it is a good method for teaching catechism. But do you remember, popi, when we were in the world, we learned the catechism, but it is not that we put anything into practice! “What is grace....?” While here, if the Bishops, if they see all this put into practice, they immediately understand that there is something [good here]! (Rocca di Papa, 14.2.2002, meeting of the Gen Centres with Chiara)*

Appendix 2) General ecumenical reflections on the journey:

Peter Dettwiler (a Reformed pastor and theologian from Switzerland, a married Focolarino), in addition to enriching the various episodes with contributions that have been included in the notes, he said something about the project in general:

“My impression is: these are excellent introductions to the biblical stories of the New Testament, carefully crafted, integrated with experiences and extracts from Chiara all of which can be easily understood by Gen 4.

After all, the Bible is the same for all confessions! From a Reformed/Evangelical perspective I can add the following reflections:

I like the title:

‘A beautiful story - God takes us from creation to "new heavens and new lands’.

This statement is a "golden thread" of the entire Bible: God accompanies us. The biblical background of this statement is God's covenant with humanity. The Reformed tradition, in particular, has emphasized the theology of the alliance: God's alliance with creation, with Noah, with Abraham, and with David, is the only alliance that God has renewed several times and opened up in Jesus Christ to all people.

A second "golden thread" for the Protestant tradition is the grace of God in Jesus Christ. The alliance underlines that human beings are also called into question: they are called to remain faithful to God and to observe his Commandments. But in the end it is God's faithfulness that counts: God always gives people a new chance. You can always start again because God is merciful. Chiara experienced this truth and continued to believe in it: God Love!”

Sherin H. Salama (a Coptic Orthodox focolarina from Egypt), sent us her input, which was included in the notes of the episodes. At the beginning of the journey she expressed thanks for the material and gave this key to understanding it, which can be useful for better understanding the notes that bring us the riches of the theology of the Eastern Orthodox Churches:

“Thank you for the material: it's very good for Orthodox too, including the beautiful notes too, thank you! I attach my first notes... and the others will follow. Just an introduction: in the Orthodox churches, and especially in the Coptic Church, symbolism is important, so I have included some ideas that help to understand the topic being discussed, or a saying from a Father of the Church!”