

Editorial Essay

Contextualizing “Paradise ’49”

This editorial essay is intended to contextualize Chiara Lubich’s 1961 talk about her mystical experiences during the summer of 1949. These experiences marked the beginning of a period of illumination, referred to as “Paradise ’49,” that continued to 1951. Shared in a unique way with her companions, these experiences became foundational for the future life and thought of the Focolare. In order to add contextualization, first this essay places Lubich’s experiences in the history of Christian spirituality based on the scholarship of Piero Coda. Second, through examining letters written by Chiara Lubich, this essay explores the history of her spirituality from the founding of the Focolare in 1943 to the summer of 1949. Finally, it looks at the text of the 1961 talk in order to help clarify the meaning of the experiences.

Claritas: Journal of Dialogue and Culture, Vol. 1, No. 1 (March 2012)
13–23 © 2012

Most who recognize the name Chiara Lubich (1920–2008) know her as the founder of the Focolare Movement.¹ Her writings reflect her deep spiritual experience and her charisma that is the source of the life of the Focolare. It is also clear from the beginning that this life has had a marked communitarian dimension shared by her first companions and then by those who chose to follow in their footsteps. At the core of this communal dimension of the Focolare spirituality is a strong experience of unity. During World War II, Lubich and her companions would often go into the bomb shelters in Trent, taking with them only a book containing the Gospels. As they read them together, “Certain phrases stood out for us from the very beginning, especially those that spoke of love of God, of love of neighbor and of unity.”² Lubich says that when they read John 17, it was as if the words “lit up from within.”³ They sensed that God was calling them to work for the ideal for which Jesus prays in that chapter, namely, that “all may be one.” Lubich writes: “Conscious of the difficulty, if not impossibility, of putting such a program into practice, we felt the urge to ask Jesus for the favor of teaching us the way to live unity. Kneeling around an altar, we offered our lives to

1. For a biography of Chiara Lubich’s life see Jim Gallagher, *A Woman’s Work: Chiara Lubich; A Biography of the Focolare Movement and Its Founder* (London: HarperCollins Publishers, 1996; Canada: New City Press, 1997; New York: New City Press, 2002). For a compendium of her work see Chiara Lubich, *Essential Writings: Spirituality, Dialogue, Culture* (New York: New City Press, 2007).

2. Chiara Lubich, *May They All Be One: Origins and Life of the Focolare Movement* (New York: New City Press, 1995), pp. 16–17.

3. Piero Coda, “A Gift of the Spirit and a Work of God,” in Lubich, *Essential Writings*, p. xiii.

Him, that—if He wishes to and trusts us—He may use us to bring it to pass.”⁴

Chiara Lubich’s writings from these early years reveal the development of a strong mystical Trinitarian element in her community’s collective and lived experience of unity. While this is true concerning her writings from the founding of the Focolare, it was not until the summer of 1949 that the fullness of this mystical life of unity was experienced and understood during a period that came to be called Paradise ’49. While taking a rest from their demanding activities after the war for two months during that summer, Lubich experienced “intense illuminations” that she shared with her closest companions. Although she communicated some of these experiences to members of the Focolare in the years following 1949, Lubich usually did not talk about them in public.⁵

While this mystical period of Chiara Lubich’s life is called Paradise ’49, the illuminations actually continued into 1951. In 1992, the noted German theologian Klaus Hemmerle urged Lubich to begin reexamining her mystical writings and opening them to study. She formed an interdisciplinary study group to meet with her in this task that eventually expanded and became known as the Abba School. Some years after its founding, scholars in all fields of study from around the world were invited to meet in Rome on a regular basis to discuss the work of the Abba School in a broader venue.

4. Chiara Lubich, *Unity and Jesus Forsaken* (New York: New City Press, 1985), p. 25.

5. Chiara Lubich gives the following reason for not talking about her experiences: “Because we were aware, as we are even now, that it is a grace of God, special gifts of the Holy Spirit, that are not usually spoken of until the person who received them has gone to heaven. . . . We always considered them as being reserved, confidential” (Chiara Lubich, Talk at Castel Gandolfo, February 23, 2001).

Nuova Umanità, the Italian journal of the Focolare, publishes select papers written by members of the Abba School. Some of these articles have been translated into English and published in *New Humanity Review* by the Focolare in the United States. In 2002, *An Introduction to the Abba School: Conversations from the Focolare’s Interdisciplinary Study Center* was published.⁶ After the passing of Klaus Hemmerle and Chiara Lubich, the Abba School continues to meet in Rome and its members continue to publish their works in *Nuova Umanità*. We have chosen to publish in this first issue of *Claritas* an English translation of a private talk about Paradise ’49 given by Lubich in 1961 that was originally published in *Nuova Umanità* only after her death.⁷ The first part of the text describes the first few days of Paradise ’49 during which her mystical experiences gave her and her companions a more complete understanding of the Trinitarian life, of the charism of unity and of the Movement that would be born from it. The second part goes on to present a few “pictures” from experiences Lubich had during the rest of the two months. We will focus in this essay on the first part since it deals more directly with her experience of the life of the Trinity.

In order to contextualize this important text, we will first discuss an article by Piero Coda, a noted Italian theologian and member of the Abba School, that situates Chiara Lubich’s mystical experiences of the Trinity in the history of Christian spirituality. Next, drawing on the scholarship of Judith Povilus, who is another member of the Abba School, we will present Lubich’s early writings about unity dated from 1944 to 1949. Given this background,

6. New York: New City Press (hereafter referred to as *Abba School*).

7. Chiara Lubich, “Paradiso ’49,” *Nuova Umanità* 177 (2008): 285–96. The translation for *Claritas* is by Callan Slipper.

we will then present clarifying remarks on the text itself. It is important to note, however, that since the full text of notes on Paradise '49 has yet to be published, and the present work of the Abba School is precisely to clarify its substance and implications, we can only make limited contextualizing remarks in this essay.

Chiara Lubich and the Church's Developing Experience of the Trinity

In a recent article, Piero Coda traces the history of Christian mystical experiences of the Trinity from Augustine to Chiara Lubich.⁸ He notes that in *De Trinitate*, Augustine looks for a “place” where the Trinity can be experienced. Augustine first discusses the place of love drawing on 1 John 4:16: “God is Love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them.” In love, according to Augustine, there is the lover, the beloved and the love in which they abide. This love is greater than one's own creation and therefore is itself a relational place where the triune God can be experienced. In a moment of confession, however, Augustine says that he could not find the Trinity in love: “But when we came to love . . . the glimmerings of a Trinity began to appear, namely, that lover and what is loved, and love. However, that inexpressible light beat back our gaze and somehow convinced us that the weakness of our mind could not yet be attuned to it.”⁹ Given this “inexpressible light” that blocked his gaze into the place of love, Augustine turned to a place with which he was more familiar, namely, the inner life of the soul.

8. Piero Coda, “L'esperienza e l'intelligenza della fede in dio trinità da sant'Agostino a Chiara Lubich,” *Nuova Umanità* 167 (2006): 527–52.

9. Augustine, *De Trinitate*, XV, 6, 10.

According to Coda, for centuries this interior step from a relational place to an internal place would determine where contemplatives searched for the Trinity. Coda mentions that Dionysius the Areopagite described the triune God as an ineffable fountain of being found only by an inner journey through darkness, silence, and “unknowing” into what is inconceivable and unspeakable mystery. Coda also describes how two new places for experiencing the Trinity were later found by the mendicant orders. St. Thomas Aquinas describes creation as based on the relational dimension of the Trinity. For Thomas, it is in the Word that God the Father knows creatures and through the Word that creation takes place. The Holy Spirit is the breath of God's love both within the Trinity and within creation through the Word. Therefore, creation is seen as a place where the Trinity can be found. According to Coda, St. Francis of Assisi discovered another place where one can find access to the Trinity, namely, in Jesus crucified. As Bonaventure commented: “To God there is no access except through the Crucified.”¹⁰

Coda then turns to the Carmelite mysticism of John of the Cross. For John, one reaches the inner place where the Trinity is found through the dark nights of ascetic and graced *kenosis*.¹¹ In describing this union with God, John says that “it seems to [the person] that the entire universe is a sea of love in which it is engulfed, for, conscious of the living point or center of love within itself, it is unable to catch sight of the boundaries of this love.”¹² In other words, one discovers in his or her inner center the Trinitarian love of God penetrating all creation. Coda concludes that Carmelite

10. Bonaventure, *Itinerarum mentis in Deum*, 3.

11. See Donald W. Mitchell, “Christian Kenosis,” *Pro Dialogo* 100 (1999): 148–51.

12. John of the Cross, *The Living Flame of Love*, 2, 10.

mysticism brings to a kind of fulfillment the interior spiritual journey to the center of the soul by adding the two other places where the Trinity can be found, namely, creation and Jesus crucified. Coda then raises the question about the first place Augustine looked for the Trinity. Coda asks: “[W]hat happens with the other intuition of Augustine: that of the mutual love ‘as the place’ from which we can fly up to the contemplation of the Trinity?”¹³

Coda answers this question by proposing that Chiara Lubich’s mystical experiences of the Trinity came from two unions. First was an inner personal union with Jesus forsaken, seen as the apex of the kenotic love of Jesus crucified. Second was a union with the Risen Christ within the collective unity of mutual love between her and her companions. It was these two unions that enabled Lubich’s companions to share in her experiences. That unity of kenotic mutual love lived with Jesus forsaken within each of them and the Risen Christ among them became the collective place of love wherein Lubich and her companions communally experienced the Trinity. This communal experience of the Trinity also embraced a new awareness of the Trinity in creation. It is important to note that Lubich and her companions were prepared for this collective discovery of the Trinity during the five previous years of living their spirituality of unity.

Chiara Lubich’s Early Experience of Unity: Writings from 1943 to 1948

By 1943, a group of young women had joined with Chiara Lubich in the city of Trent as war raged around them. When they went

into the bomb shelters, they took only a book of the Gospels with them. Lubich writes,

One day I found myself with my new companions in a dark, candle-lit cellar, a book of the gospels in my hand. I opened it. There was Jesus’ prayer before he died: “Father may they all be one” (John 17:11, 21). It was not an easy text to start with but one by one those words seemed to come to life, giving us the conviction that we were born for that page of the gospel. On the feast of Christ the King, we gathered around an altar. We said to Jesus: “You know the way to achieve unity. Here we are. If you so desire, use us.”¹⁴

Following this prayer, Lubich experienced God showing her and her companions the way to achieve unity.

In the middle of destruction and death caused by the war, Lubich and her companions felt that everything is passing, so they chose God as the one thing that does not pass away to be the Ideal of their lives. God responded by manifesting himself as Love, as “God-Love.” They were deeply moved by this love of God for each one of them and desired to respond in some way. The following verse of the Gospel gave them the way to respond: “Not everyone who says to me ‘Lord, Lord’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in Heaven” (Matthew 7:21). Another verse from Matthew gave them a particular will of the Father to do: “Love your neighbor as yourself” (Matthew 19:19). This path of love that opened up to Lubich and her

13. Coda, p. 33.

14. Lubich, *Essential Writings*, p. 4.

companions would lead to the unity for which they felt they were born.

Lubich and her companions put into practice the passages of the Gospels that they read together. She gives examples of how they loved their neighbors during the war:

Where is my neighbor? There beside us. In that old lady barely able to drag herself each time to the shelter. We must love her as ourselves; we must help her each time and then support her. The neighbor was there in those five frightened children alongside their mother. We must take them in our arms and help them home. The neighbor was there in that sick person confined to home, unable to go to the shelter, but in need of care. We must go there and get him medicine. . . . People around us were in terrible conditions—hungry, thirsty, injured, without clothing, without shelter. So we cooked big pots of soup and distributed it to them.¹⁵

At one point, another question came to Lubich and her companions. As they were facing death each day, they asked: “Is there a will of God especially pleasing to him?”¹⁶ The Gospels gave them the answer in a commandment that is Jesus’: “This is my commandment, that you 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” (John 15:12–13). So, they declared that they were ready to give their lives for each other. Lubich says that when they began to love with this intensity, “We saw our lives take a qualitative leap forward.

Someone came into our group, silently, an invisible Friend, giving us security, a more experiential joy, a new peace, a fullness of life, an inextinguishable light.”¹⁷

Unity and Jesus in the Midst

Judith M. Povilus has written a groundbreaking work on Lubich’s writings concerning unity.¹⁸ Povilus says that in putting the New Commandment into practice, they discovered that when their love was mutual they experienced a oneness or unity that was new to them and totally out of proportion to their own efforts. She goes on to say that this unity involved a divine presence of light, peace, joy and a fullness of life. In January 1945, Lubich wrote a letter about their experience of the presence of God among them when they lived mutual love: “Then God will live among you. You will sense it, you will enjoy his presence; he will give you his light; he will enflame you with his love.”¹⁹ In a note from 1946, she writes:

Persons who want to be a channel for unity must maintain themselves constantly in an abyss of humility so that they lose their own soul for the benefit and service of God in their neighbor. . . . [I]f our neighbor is loved this way, mutual love (unity) is achieved and the Testament of Jesus [that all be one] will be fulfilled. . . . That is the goal for which we were born, the purpose for which He raised us up.²⁰

17. Ibid.

18. Judith M. Povilus, *United in his Name: Jesus in Our Midst in the Experience and Thought of Chiara Lubich* (New York: New City Press, 1992).

19. Ibid., p. 14.

20. Ibid., pp. 27, 28, 29.

15. Ibid., p. 5.

16. Ibid., p. 6.

In notes from 1946, Lubich writes the following about the difficulty of loving to the degree that contributes to unity:

Feeling in ourselves what our neighbors feel. Dealing with their feelings as if they were our own, making them our own through our concern. *Be them*, doing this for the love of Jesus in our neighbor. . . . To be able to love our neighbors [in this way], we've got to undo the strings around this hard and stony heart of ours and get a heart of flesh.²¹

She would later comment about this difficulty: "It's no easy thing. We have to be empty in ourselves: chase our own ideas out of our heads, our own affections out of our hearts, everything out of our wills, to identify ourselves with the other person."²² Her statement reveals a kind of asceticism contributing to a "co-penetration," as she puts it, between two or more persons who love one another in this way. However in another letter from 1946, she points out that while an individual's efforts contribute to the goal of unity, it is really Christ who causes it: "Only Christ can make two into one; it is because his love is the emptying of self . . . that allows us to reach the depths of others' hearts."²³

Povilus explains the importance of Lubich's discovery of the Gospel passage, "For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am in the midst of them" (Matthew 18:21). This, for Lubich, was a fuller explanation of what they were experiencing. When she and her companions were together loving one another as Jesus loved them, that is, being willing to give their lives for each other, Jesus was in their midst giving them the grace to reach that oneness

or unity for which he had prayed. Povilus notes that only in 1947 does Lubich begin to refer to what she calls "Jesus in the midst" when discussing unity. In a letter from 1948, she rejoices over this discovery:

Unity . . . who could dare speak about it? It is as ineffable as God. You can sense it, see it, enjoy it; but it is ineffable! All enjoy its presence, all suffer its absence. It is peace, joy, love, ardor, an atmosphere of heroism and unlimited generosity. It is Jesus among us!²⁴

Here, Lubich affirms that unity is ultimately a gift of Jesus in their midst understood to be the Risen Christ. She sees this gift as part of the charism given to her and her companions as well as to those who choose to follow in their footsteps. Discussing this gift of the presence of the Risen Christ, she says that it is not as if Jesus occupies a space among persons uniting them with his love. Rather, she writes in 1948: "When two persons meet in the name of Christ, Christ is born among them; that is, *in them*. In maintaining this unity, they can sincerely say: 'It is no longer I who live but Christ who lives in me.'"²⁵ Jesus in the midst means to Lubich the Risen Christ uniting people by his inner presence and bringing them together united in himself, in his new life of light and love.

Unity and Jesus Forsaken

Chiara Lubich writes: "What happiness, new discoveries, graces and victories! That is the gospel. But from the beginning we understood that it had another side too, that the tree has its roots

21. Ibid., pp. 25, 60.

22. Ibid., p. 32.

23. Ibid., p. 15.

24. Ibid., p. 18.

25. Ibid., p. 51.

Loving Christ crucified in every suffering is another focus of this spirituality.”²⁶ Coda comments about this focus:

So Chiara was guided to discover and to choose, among the sufferings of Jesus, the one most hidden and interior, yet the deepest and most tragic. . . . It is the cry of the ninth hour: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Mt 27:46). . . . Chiara Lubich’s spirituality springs from the free, exclusive choice of Jesus forsaken that allows Jesus himself to pour into her heart those streams of living water and light that, as the Word of the Father made man, he brings down from heaven to earth to communicate in their fullness to all.²⁷

We need to go back to the beginnings of the Focolare during World War II in order to understand this fundamental role of Jesus forsaken. The date given for the founding of the Focolare was the day of Chiara Lubich’s personal consecration to God, namely, December 7, 1943. Just six weeks later, on January, 24, 1944, a Capuchin priest had brought communion to one of Lubich’s first companions who had fallen ill. He asked Lubich when she thought that Jesus suffered the most. She answered that perhaps it was in the Garden of Gethsemane. But the priest responded that he thought it was when Jesus cried: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me.”²⁸ Hearing these words, Lubich and her companions were moved to choose Jesus crucified at the moment of his forsakenness as their spouse. By “spouse,” they meant that Jesus

forsaken would be not only their model for loving others through self-giving, but would be, in Lubich’s words, “*the* living personality in our lives.”²⁹

From her letters written during 1944 and 1945, Lubich seems completely taken by her new relation to Jesus forsaken. Just one week after discovering him, she writes: “You will be the recipient of joys . . . if you will make an effort to see Jesus in the way I have presented Him to you . . . at the culmination of His pain, that is the culmination of His love.”³⁰ Five months later, she writes that nothing “gives my soul such strength and above all so much love as Jesus Crucified. . . .”³¹ Then she suggests to “Forget everything . . . even the most sublime things: let yourself be ruled by a single Ideal, by God, who must penetrate every fiber of your being: Jesus Crucified.”³² She writes in a profound piece from 1944:

He who has told me—from the height of His cross: “I have given up everything that is mine . . . everything. I am not beautiful any more; I am no longer strong; I have no peace here; up here, justice is dead; I am ignorant of science; what was truth for me has vanished. All I have left is my Love, this love that wanted *for your sake* to empty all the riches I possessed *as God*. . . .”³³

A question arises here about the relationship between Jesus in the midst as the Risen Christ on the one hand, and Jesus forsaken

29. Ibid., p. 46.

30. Lubich, *Unity and Jesus Forsaken*, p. 51.

31. Ibid., p. 48.

32. Ibid., p. 47.

33. Ibid., p. 53.

26. Lubich, *Essential Writings*, pp. 7–8.

27. Ibid., p. xviii.

28. Lubich, *Unity and Jesus Forsaken*, p. 45.

as the spouse of souls on the other. Lubich describes her experience in the following way: “We began to understand how dynamically divine the Christian life is, in that . . . it gives us a taste of life in its fullness, that is to say: the experience of resurrection, light and hope, even in the midst of tribulation.”³⁴ In other words, by embracing Jesus forsaken, their sufferings were transformed such that Jesus was not only sharing the burden of suffering but sharing the love of his suffering and its fruits, namely, the life of the resurrection. Lubich discovered that Jesus forsaken was not only the “key” to union with God but also to unity with others: “We must *be nothing* (Jesus forsaken) in the presence of each of our neighbors in order to embrace Jesus in him or her.”³⁵ With Jesus in oneself embracing Jesus in others, one finds the Risen Christ among them.

In addressing this point, Lubich wrote in 1948: “The book of light that God is writing in my soul has two aspects: a luminous page of mysterious love: Unity. A luminous page of mysterious suffering: Jesus forsaken. They are two faces of the same coin.”³⁶ Elsewhere Lubich explains: “It is Jesus in his deepest suffering! Infinite disunity . . . to give us perfect unity that we will reach only relatively here on earth, and then perfectly in heaven. . . .”³⁷ She clarifies later: “As Jesus in his abandonment has redeemed humanity, in the sense that he reunited us his children to the Father (he was the means that brought about unity), so too Jesus forsaken, when loved, brings about Jesus in our midst.”³⁸ Thus, Chiara and

34. Lubich, *May They all be One*, pp. 62–63.

35. Povilus, p. 73.

36. Lubich, *Essential Writings*, p. 25.

37. *Ibid.*, p. 24.

38. Povilus, p. 74.

her companions embraced Jesus forsaken within and in others and found the Risen Christ among them bringing about the unity for which they had given their lives.

We find in Lubich’s writings just before 1949 descriptions of her experiences of Jesus forsaken, unity, love, light, the Risen Christ, and the Father. For example, a letter from 1948 states:

This presence [Jesus forsaken] . . . very soon becomes *felt*, so that throwing ourselves into a sea of suffering we discover ourselves in a sea of love, of complete joy. . . . and the soul feels itself refilled with the Holy Spirit, who is joy, peace, serenity.³⁹

She describes this dynamic of being filled by the Holy Spirit as “a sort of Easter,” a “Passover” that to her resembled “the triumphal entry of God into the soul.”⁴⁰

Another letter refers to this dynamic as a movement “beyond his wound:”

[H]aving embraced Jesus forsaken totally, so that we found ourselves beyond pain, in love we felt like we were contemplating the immense love that God has poured out over the world . . . we were merged with love and shared in its light: the light of Love.⁴¹

And after 1949, Lubich would write even more clearly:

39. Lubich, *Unity and Jesus Forsaken*, p. 67.

40. *Ibid.*, p. 69.

41. *Ibid.*, pp. 70–71.

Unity among us is achieved if each of us is well united to God, following our charism. It is written in fact, “As you, Father, are in me, and I in you that they also may be in us.” (John 17: 21). . . . by loving Jesus forsaken and going faster and faster “beyond the wound”. . . . It is the Risen Lord who lives within us and in our midst and He gives us the Holy Spirit.⁴²

These passages prepare the way for our understanding the experiences of Paradise '49. It seems as if she too was being prepared for a fuller understanding of the immense love, light, and oneness of God.

Chiara Lubich's Trinitarian Experience: Paradise '49

Chiara Lubich's 1961 talk begins with a description of what led to what she titles “Entrance into the Father.” For the five years, she and her companions had been living the fundamental principles of their spirituality with emphasis on the Gospels lived in each present moment, on mutual love and on receiving Jesus in the Eucharist. In doing so, they were living what she calls three “communions” with the Word of God, with their neighbor and with Jesus in the Eucharist. They realized that the communion with the Word that they experienced in actually living each of the words of the Gospels always had the same effect, namely, growth in love. Lubich would later say that each word entered them and became a “flame” of love that burned away their old life, bringing the new life of the kingdom of God.⁴³ She compares this five-year

42. Chiara Lubich, Talk to the Secretariats for the Men Religious, January 30, 1990.

43. Chiara Lubich, Talk on Paradise '49 given in 1969.

process to a kind of novitiate at the end of which it seemed that the love found in Jesus forsaken was the pinnacle of the love they had found piece-by-piece in the words of Jesus. It was as if all the words of God were, so to speak, in substance summarized in this one cry of the abandonment. As they went on vacation in the Dolomites during the summer of 1949, they were living the Gospel passage: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

Their first experience before entering Paradise was of a supernatural sun that saturated nature, linking all created things in a “bond of love” so that nature seemed to be all love. Lubich writes that in this “red-hot atmosphere,” it seemed as if within her the words of God were fused in Jesus forsaken. This “red-hot atmosphere” of love brings to mind the reason for Augustine's failure to contemplate the Trinity in love, namely, that its “inexpressible light beat back our gaze.” How could Lubich and her companions penetrate this overwhelming supernatural sun?

Igino Giordani, a noted politician and Catholic scholar, proved to be a key figure in the Entrance into the Father. Lubich describes how she and Giordani, whom she called Foco meaning “Fire,” prayed to Jesus in the Eucharist asking him in each of them to make a pact of unity between them. When Lubich went back into the church to pray before the Blessed Sacrament, she was unable to say the word “Jesus” because she experienced Jesus as being one with her. In the next moment, she had the impression of finding herself “on the peak of a very high mountain” without love. In that instant, the word “Father” came to her lips and she found communion again. Lubich then entered into the bosom of the Father which she experienced “as the inside of a sun.” Lubich tells of how she asked her companions to join Foco and herself in the pact. When they did so, she saw a “little company in the sun”

to which she gave the name “Soul.” In this collective Soul, Lubich and her companions had together entered the oneness for which they had prayed “May they all be one.”

In the bosom of the Father, they went on to discover a series of what Lubich calls “Realities” that they both “felt” and “lived” together. It seemed that a special grace enabled them to live by participation the relationality of the Trinity, as much as it was possible for them as human beings, and to experience the realities therein. John of the Cross said that in union with God a person becomes God by participation. But unlike John’s, this was a communal participation in the life of the Trinity. For Lubich and her companions the Trinitarian indwelling in love became a lived experience of unity. Thus, they came more fully to understand the unity they had been experiencing for years.

Lubich goes on to describe visions⁴⁴ and impressions of the Son as the Word that is all Love of the Father, splendor of the Father. She also describes how they experienced creation in light of the Word in the bosom of the Father. Their previous experience just prior to entering Paradise was of a bond of love uniting creation. Now they experienced the luminous Word, the one divine Wisdom, bringing about order and harmony in ever new scenarios of creation.

This section of Lubich’s talk concludes with two reflections about their experience of the Son. First, after seeing creation from the standpoint of the uncreated, they found that in the Trinity all

44. By “vision” Chiara Lubich means an “intellectual vision,” in the technical sense of the term, that imprinted her soul. She said that the images of what was revealed to her intellect were given to her so she could convey her experience to others. It is not that what she saw is exactly the way things are—but expressed in a human way what she experienced and then possessed in her soul.

that had been previously manifested remained just as it was. The transcendent Trinity subsisted as it always is even as the dynamic of the economic Trinity was at work in the drama of creation. Second, reflecting on the rays of the sun, they realized that before entering into the Trinity their lives had been an “ascent” in fulfilling God’s will each in his or her own ray. But with the graced fusion in Jesus, they had become the One Soul that enabled their collective entrance into the house of the Father.

On the following day, Lubich unexpectedly experienced Mary. About this surprise Lubich says that it seemed like the Word wanted to present the Soul to Mary before marrying it. In fact, Lubich says that after this they experienced a new relationship with the Word in which they felt the Soul was “Church.” Following this experience, as Lubich and her companions sat in meditation before a statue of Mary in the chapel where they would go each day, Lubich experienced the Holy Spirit. She characterized the Holy Spirit as the “atmosphere” in the bosom of the Father. Indeed, from this time on, Lubich would often speak of the Holy Spirit as the atmosphere of unity, of Jesus in the midst. Jesus in the midst brought on earth the very atmosphere of heaven, a taste of Paradise. In a later writing, Lubich says:

[This] atmosphere and its effects are the fruits of the Spirit of Jesus, which is the Holy Spirit himself. And the Spirit of the Risen Jesus in our midst makes us Jesus, that makes us appear to others as his continuation, the Body of Christ, the Church.⁴⁵

45. Lubich, *Essential Writings*, p. 147.

In the second part of her talk, Lubich presents what she calls “pictures” of a few of their 150 or so experiences that took place during the rest of the two months she and her companions were together in the mountains. Lubich says that it was as if the Soul-Church was led on the “divine honeymoon” to see the realities of heaven. After the consecration of the Soul to Mary, she understood that their destiny was to be “other Marys,” as it were. Many years later the Catholic Church would officially name the Focolare the Work of Mary. The infinite Sun also opened up into a “heavenly landscape” within the bosom of God. They had visions of the “new Heavens and new earths” and of hell, understood in terms of the cosmic reality of Jesus forsaken.⁴⁶ Finally, she refers to what it was like to leave the mountains after two months in “that Heaven,” and return to the ordinary world. One has the sense that she is here giving glimpses of different experiences that add theologically enriching dimensions to the fundamental Trinitarian experiences presented in the first part of the talk. We will not attempt to comment on these pictures, but look forward to future contributions in our journal and elsewhere for fuller explanations of these realities and others as well as their implications for theology and other fields of study.

Concluding Comments

In providing a short contextualization of Chiara Lubich’s 1961 talk on Paradise ’49, this essay can only scratch the surface of this fundamental event in her life and defining point for her thought.

46. For a discussion of Chiara Lubich’s experience of hell, see: Hubertus Blaumeiser, “Forever Toward Disunity: Reflections on Hell in the Thought of Chiara Lubich,” *Abba School*, pp. 72–88.

This is especially the case since the full text of Lubich’s notes on Paradise ’49 have yet to be published. At this time only pieces of the picture are available for examination.

Finally, we should note that Lubich’s experience of Paradise ’49 strengthened her conviction that in today’s world it is important to give primary emphasis to a collective spirituality where God is in oneself and also among persons generating a communal reflection of the Trinity in order to bring humanity to a civilization of love. In this way, all aspects of human life and culture can be transformed.⁴⁷ The Second Vatican Council stressed how the Holy Spirit sends charisms to guide and help the church and humanity on the journey of history. Given the emergence of multiculturalism, globalization, ecumenism, and interreligious dialogue in our times, one could expect a charism of unity that gives guidance and hope as humankind seeks to build a more united and peaceful world. This path forward must avoid any over-simplified uniformity on the one hand, or any relativizing multiplicity on the other. Chiara Lubich presents a life of unity that celebrates diversity, a communal contemplation that generates collective action, a oneness with the divine that embraces all persons as brothers and sisters and discovers a “golden thread” linking humankind with nature. This life of unity expresses itself through dialogue in many aspects of contemporary cultures and human endeavors. *Claritas* is committed to exploring the foundations, initiatives, and implications of this life at the beginning of the third millennium.

47. Lubich, *Essential Writings*, pp. 173–76.