Entry into the Paradise of '49 and Biblical Revelation

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This article explores some texts in which Chiara Lubich speaks about the beginning of her mystical experience during the summer of 1949 that is known as "Paradise '49." This exploration seeks to understand these texts in the light of biblical revelation, in particular Pauline and Johannine theology. The author focuses on two aspects. The first of these concerns the role of living the Word of God leading up to this experience. The second concentrates on what Chiara wrote about the special circumstances in which the mystical experience began after a "Pact" made with Igino Giordani, a noted Catholic writer and politician.

Introduction

This study examines texts written by Chiara Lubich in response to a singular mystical experience that took place in the Dolomite Mountains during the summer of 1949. This period of illumination is known as "Paradise '49."[1] My intention is to come to an understanding of these texts based upon biblical revelation, particularly in the light of Pauline and Johannine theology. Since that time, thanks to the Second Vatican Council, the church has changed direction, and in a more precise way has renewed its awareness of the mystery of communion rooted in the mystery of the Blessed Trinity. Keeping in mind the date of Chiara's writings, her intuitions, whose prophetic riches even today have not been fully examined, can be seen as precursors to the insights of the Council.

As Chiara herself has noted, the experience of 1949 was preceded by and prepared for through an intense Christian life, nourished by the words of the gospel and lived with a group of her first companions. It was with a commitment like this that they went to the Dolomites for a period of rest. Writer and political figure, Igino Giordani—known familiarly to them as "Foco"—went with them as well.

This is how Chiara recalls the initial moment: "Foco, fascinated by St. Catherine of Siena, had always sought in his life a virgin like her whom he could follow. And now he had the impression that he had found such a figure in us." He proposed to Chiara, therefore, that he take a vow of obedience to her. Although she did not share his idea of a vow of obedience, Chiara accepted the proposal, modifying it in this fashion: "Very well, tomorrow we will go to church and to Jesus-Eucharist who will come into my heart, as

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1. A translation of a talk given by Chiara Lubich in 1961 about her mystical experiences that began in the summer of 1949 was published in the first issue of *Claritas*: Chiara Lubich, "Paradise '49," *Claritas: Journal of Dialogue and Culture* 1 (2012): 4–12. With this translation is an editorial essay that contextualizes the talk: "Editorial Essay: Contextualizing 'Paradise '49,'" *Claritas: Journal of Dialogue and Culture* 1 (2012): 13–23.

into an empty chalice, I will say, 'Upon the nothingness of me, you make a pact of unity with Jesus-Eucharist in the heart of Foco. And do things in such a way, Jesus, that there comes forth that bond between us that you know.' Then I added, 'And you, Foco, do likewise.'"[2]

They made this "pact of unity" and, as Chiara writes, "in that moment I found myself in the Bosom of the Father." It was the beginning of a mystical experience that lasted for months. Concerning it, we will examine in the light of biblical revelation two aspects: the role of the Word of God, and the entrance into "the Bosom of the Father."

The Word of Life

"For some time," recalled Chiara, referring to the period that led up to 1949, "we had been concentrating on the Word of Life, which we were living with a very particular intensity." We must not forget the originality of such an approach to the gospel in that place and time. Catholics were not in the habit of going directly to the "source" to nourish themselves with the words of Jesus. Religious formation and spiritual nourishment, given by priests, was based largely on hagiographies and upon the edifying thoughts proposed by authors who wished to cultivate souls in asceticism, virtue, and devotion. Certainly with biblical renewal and with the Second Vatican Council, within the Catholic Church there spread groups that engaged in biblical meditation and Bible study. Nevertheless, the first focolarine[3] were approaching the Word of God not primarily to meditate upon it or to study it but to put it into practice, to incarnate it in their lives.

The words of the Gospels were not only to be contemplated but to be put into action. Spontaneously, therefore, the first focolarine had assumed before the Word of God the attitude that the gospel itself requires of a believer. We recall the exhortation, expressed as a question, in Luke: "Why do you call me 'Lord, Lord,' and do not do what I tell you?" (Lk 6:46). In Matthew this appeal becomes a general rule: "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" (Mt 7:21). It is not enough, therefore, to proclaim the authority of Christ, to acknowledge his sovereignty. One must put into practice that which, in Matthew's Gospel, comes to be called "the will of the Father who is in heaven" and that is identified with the Word and with the requirements that Jesus lays out in the Sermon on the Mount, and of which the previous passage (7:21) forms the conclusion. To live completely in accordance with the choice of God, it is necessary, therefore, not only to know certain truths of the faith or nourish a relationship with the Lord by doing devotions, but to live the demands explicitly expressed in that choice. The experience of the first focolarine, then, follows the same line. They sought in the Gospels a way of loving God as God wants to be loved, and the Gospels replied: by doing God's will.

The written text of the Gospels offers the criterion of authentic discipleship: *hearing and doing*. Recognizing the sovereignty of Christ and fulfilling his words are inseparable. This bond between hearing and doing is described in the metaphor in Matthew's Gospel concerning the house built upon rock or sand: "Everyone then who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock" (7:24). Living the words of Jesus,

2. These passages are taken from unpublished texts written by Chiara about her experience of Paradise '49. If not otherwise noted, all quotations from Chiara Lubich are from these yet unpublished documents.
3. This term refers to women who live in focolare houses.

then, is the sign of *wise* persons who found their existence on what is solid, what does not crumble. For a biblical audience, the word "rock" brings to mind several psalms that speak of YHWH as the Rock (see Ps 18, 3:32, 31, 4, etc.). Putting into practice the words of Jesus means basing one's life upon God, the Faithful One. Those who do not live the words of God build on sand and demonstrate their foolishness. The trials come, the sufferings, the difficulties, the false teachings, but only those who listen to the gospel and put it into practice are able to resist. That same Word lived out will be for believers the rock that will save them. The wise demonstrate intelligence, good sense, and spiritual maturity, unlike the foolish, who show themselves to be shortsighted.

The nuance is a bit different in the parable in Luke (see Lk 6:47–49). The evangelist contrasts the one "listening to the word," that is, having an obedience that lasts, one who perseveres ("listening" is a present participle), to the one who "listens" (the verb is in the aorist form) for the moment only and therefore in a superficial sense. Moreover, the man in Luke demonstrates prudence in constructing a house with a foundation, therefore "digging deep": to build on rock requires strength and a commitment to a life lived according to the Word. This man is the opposite of someone who is lazy and does not dig. How could such a person resist when crises arise?

Concerning the importance of putting the words of the Gospels into practice, the letter of James is quite clear:

> Welcome with meekness the implanted word that has the power to save your souls. But be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves. For if any are hearers of the word and not doers, they are like those who look at themselves in a mirror; for they look at themselves and, upon going away, immediately forget what they were like. But those who look into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and persevere, being not hearers who forget but doers who act—they will be blessed in their doing (Jas 1:21–25).

The comparison with the mirror may be surprising. The writer criticizes the superficiality of those who content themselves with hearing the words of the Gospels without allowing them to bud into life. Listening to the Word without putting it into practice is an illusion. Certainly, it is easy to glace at oneself quickly in a mirror, but listening to the Word demands a bending down, a submission to it, a careful examination of it, and a lasting commitment. The Word indeed requires action, decision. It is a constant theme in biblical thought: the Word, an expression of the will of God, is communicated in order to be done. Following this line of thought, James distinguishes the steps—hearing the Word, making it one's own, and putting it into practice. This is "the perfect law," that is, the realized expression (with Jesus) of the divine will.

The experience of the first focolarine, expressed in the following comment of Chiara, corresponds closely to the positive part of James's text. We find the dual attitude required as one faces the Word: listening and doing. Listening is fundamental. It signifies openness to God who takes the initiative, who comes close to believers and communicates his will to them. It is an essential dimension of biblical faith. Such openness to God who speaks allows God to penetrate a person's life effectively and transform it. In Chiara's words: "The Word of God entered so deeply into us that it changed our way of thinking . . . it called forth in us a re-evangelization."

For the first focolarine, the words of the Gospels no longer conveyed only a notional understanding of truth, or of a certain number of laws to be observed, but a living encounter with God who speaks and whose Word is divine self-communication. The Word lived out became an "event" in them, in accord with the meaning of the Hebrew word *dabar*, which does mean "word" but can also convey the sense of "something done, an event, an episode" insofar as it always maintains to some extent the aspect of activity as expressed by the voice of the verb in Hebrew.[4]

Listening to the words of God is therefore fundamental, but as the words of God constantly remind us, listening cannot be separated from putting into practice. Listening certainly suggests that the initiative is left to God, but this does not reduce it to a merely passive acceptance of what God is doing. A Christian's behavior must be in accordance with the gospel. "Doing" is therefore necessary, but a doing characterized by "letting oneself be determined by the will of God"—therefore, an active passivity, an active attitude of receptivity typical of a "Marian" style of faith. Listening is inseparable from "doing" and therefore from fulfilling the will of God. Not by chance, in scripture, "to listen" can be synonymous with "to obey," understood as openness to the Word in the sense of putting it into practice. Only then is God's protective presence guaranteed to the people. In the covenant theology that runs through the Old Testament, "listening" means observing the divine commandments, being able to live in the presence of YHWH, and to rejoice in his love and under his protection.[5] The same line is followed by Jesus's statement in John 14:21: "They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me; and those who love me will be loved by my Father, and I will love them and reveal myself to them." This passage gives rise to further reflection.

Obedience to the words of the Gospels does not consist only in attention turned toward an outer word but corresponds to listening to a "voice" already present in the believer's heart. Chiara suggests this when she says:

> Since God is Love, every word is Charity. . . . This charity amplified, furthermore, within us what we called "the voice." The Word lived out made it effective as a loudspeaker, so we could clearly distinguish it among the thousand noises of the world.

Listening actively to the words of the Gospel, as it were, awakens the Word, that is, the Holy Spirit, already present in the heart of the believer. Paul also presents the Holy Spirit, this great gift that is there at the beginning of the new life of the believer, as the "Law" placed deep in the Christian (see Rom 8:2). Such a person, then, has received into his or her very being an inner law, the Holy Spirit, able to give life. The new Law that is the Holy Spirit that

4. See "DABAR," in Ernst Jenni and Claus Westedmann, eds., *Dizionario teologico dell' Antico Testamento* (Turin: Matiett, 2000).

5. The covenant structure is characteristic of the relationship that God established with the Chosen People when the Israelites were brought out of slavery in Egypt, forming them into a people and giving them the Law of Moses on Mt. Sinai. Israel made this relationship with God effective through the characteristic formulation of a pact or treaty. The covenant structure is as follows: the proclamation of an action by God on behalf of the people—the gift of the Law—the promise of obedience as a condition for remaining in God's presence—blessings or curses. For further reference, see Gérard Rossé, "L'esperienza di Israele con Dio alla luce dell-alleanza sinaitica," *Nuova Umanità* IX (1987): 9ff; by the same author, "Relazioni tra l'amore di Dio e l'amore del prossimo alla luce dell'alleanza: Spunti biblici de una spiritualita de communione," *Nuova Umanità* XVII (1995): 101ff.

works within the heart of the believer is not to be understood as a series of precepts to be observed but as the strength of God internalized and made to work effectively, capable of opening up the human person to love—*agape*—as a personal imperative. Love, the fullness of the Law, is precisely the Spirit's gift, as Paul teaches (see Rom 5:5). James also points out to his readers the truth that has been communicated to them in baptism: "the word sown in you."

This teaching runs through the entire New Testament. The applications of the parable of the sower call attention to the various dangers that threaten believers who accept badly "the seed sown in them" (Mk 4:15). Its usefulness can be neutralized by the actions of Satan, who plucks the words of the Gospels from a heart full of things that alienate human beings from God. Also, the words of God accepted with joy runs the risk of being canceled out by the lack of perseverance—the trials of life can make the Christian crumble, just like that house built upon sand. Finally, the parable mentions another obstacle to the development of the words sown in the heart of the believer—preoccupations, riches, the pleasures of life that smother the Word. These dangers smother also the authenticity of the believer.

There are also certain conditions by which the sown Word can bear fruit, can develop its power of salvation. Luke speaks of:

- "an honest and good heart," one that is open and therefore ready to accept the Word;
- the effort to "hold fast," to not let the Word of God slip away;
- and finally the "endurance" typical of the true disciple, in the inevitable trials of Christian existence (see Lk 8:11–15).

There is no lack of texts that underscore the positive effects of the "word of God living and eternal," that "undying seed" that regenerates (see 1 Pt 1:23), that makes one "born of God" (see 1 Jn 3:9). John also speaks about the "anointing" received by Christ (see 1 Jn 2:20–27), which is the strength of sanctification. It is the Word of God that dwells in believers: making them strong, able to conquer the Evil One (see 1 Jn 2:14); illuminates them, making them penetrate the understanding of the divine reality (see 1 Jn 4:2); creates a connaturality with the divine Persons (see 1 Jn 2:24, 4:6).

There exists, in fact, a close link between the Word and the Holy Spirit. It is precisely the task of the Spirit to internalize God's words in believers: "When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth" (Jn 16:13; see Jn 16:13–15; 14:26). This is a process of internalization that transforms a believer more and more into a being-who-loves (see Jn 15:9–10). As already pointed out, it is the same Spirit of God who becomes the new Law that acts in the hearts of believers. The Spirit is the complete divine will placed in the deepest parts of the human being who makes believers able to understand this divine will—that is, to love—as a *personal imperative*.

Living God's words, therefore, made the latent potential in every believer spring forth in the first focolarine; that is, the power of the Holy Spirit, the life placed by the same Spirit in the hearts of Christians and identified with *agape*. There exists, therefore, an intimate bond between God's Word, the Holy Spirit, and love as the inner reality of Christians who live such faith, drawing out its full potential through contact with the words of the Gospels. Living the Word, therefore, becomes a truly mystical experience of communion with God, source of light and love. Chiara describes its effect:

> We realized that putting into practice any one of the Words of God, the effects, in the end, were the same. . . . The fact is that every Word, although expressed in human terms and in different ways, is Word of God. But, since God is Love, every word is Charity. . . . And when one of these Words fell into our soul, it seemed to us that it was transformed into fire, into flames, it was transformed into love. It could be affirmed that our inner life was all love.

We can understand, then, what Chiara meant when she writes, "every Word is charity." It might seem to be a logical deduction from the fact that God is love; thus every word is an expression of God's love for human beings. This would be correct but too weak. Another possibility: certainly the New Testament throughout affirms that, for Jesus and the Christian tradition, love of neighbor is the soul of the whole of the Law. Paul said that love is the fullness of the Law (see Gal 5:14; Rom 13:8–10); in John, there is significance in going from the plural ("my commandments") to the singular ("my commandment"), which then is made specific: "that you love one another as I have loved you" (Jn 15:10–12).

The experience that Chiara records in this text, however, does not refer so much to the fact that love sums up the content of the precepts of the Law, but more deeply that the Word lived out leads to an experience with God in the reality of God as Love. Putting into practice the words of the Gospels, so to speak, moves the Holy Spirit who lives in the depths of the believer; and the Spirit makes the believer experience love as an experience of God-Love, as an imperative of life. God who dwells in every human heart gives, in the Word lived out, the experience of who God is in God's very being, that is, Love. It is clear that this includes the experience of a Word that, as Chiara writes, is transformed into fire, into flames—into love in our souls. Here one can think of the experience of the disciples of Emmaus: opening the scriptures, the risen Jesus had made "their hearts burn" within them. "Opening the scriptures" becomes a source of light and love.

Pauline Theology

To appreciate this deeper understanding, it is necessary to go to theological thought such as that of Paul or of John, and translate the twofold expression "listen-do" into "believe-love." Turning to Paul's theology, he never fails to refer to the sayings of Jesus or to the tradition concerning Jesus in order to specify a certain behavior to his communities (see 1 Cor 7:10, 11, 23ff; and 1 Cor 15:3ff). But above all for the great apostle, the Word par excellence is Jesus crucified, that is, Jesus in the act of his greatest love (and not so much Jesus as the teacher who speaks words). He, in his obedience even unto death on the wood of condemnation, is the criterion of every way of acting. What Paul paradoxically calls "the law of Christ" (Gal 6:2) is not a rule given by Jesus but the behavior of Jesus taken as the norm of Christian life, which is love understood and lived out in the light and to the measure of the cross. For Chiara, too, Jesus forsaken "appeared as the Word par excellence, the Word totally explained, the Word completely open. It is enough, then, to live Him."

Consequently Paul, more than giving a specified number of precepts to follow, presents to believers a principle that must give shape to the entire Christian existence. Believers then do not find themselves subject to a system of precepts to observe but are placed into the possibility of seeking out and living God's will that presents itself to them moment by moment. They know that they

ought to love, but *how* to love they must discover one instance after another. God leaves to every believer the task of discovering in his or her own particular life the way of behaving according to a particular principle—love to the measure of Jesus crucified. The apostle thus can sum up Christian ethics: "In Christ Jesus . . . the only thing that counts is faith working through love [*agape*]" (Gal 5:6).[6] Faith seen as openness to God who communicates God's own self is alive in love. Faith, therefore, uses love to be active and thus lead to unity.

Therefore, the principle received by Christians that ought to direct and animate their behavior is not an external criterion but is divine love—that love revealed by Jesus crucified—placed in believers' hearts together with the gift of the Holy Spirit: "God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us" (Rom 5:5). Paul is thinking of the love that comes from God, closely related to the activity of the Holy Spirit in believers. Love then has its origin in the very life of God: it is the gift of *divine life* that should circulate among the believers, a sign of being inserted intimately within the Trinity. And because it has been placed within the hearts of Christians, they can love as a personal imperative, and not because they are subject to an obligation imposed from without. Love, therefore, as the "fullness of the Law" becomes an imperative of life and at the same time an experience of God-Love.

Before moving on to the teaching of John that will serve as an introduction to the entry into the bosom of the Father, I would like to emphasize once again certain characteristics of the Word lived out, demonstrated in the text of Chiara (and in line with Paul): "When one of these Words fell into our soul, it seemed to us that it was transformed into fire, into flames, it was transformed into love. It could be affirmed that our inner life was all love." The experience of the Word lived out was manifested as a genuine experience of the Spirit; and precisely because it was so, the experience was not identified with sentimental feelings or a sense of exaltation. The experience of the Word as an experience of the Spirit is simultaneously one of divine Love and openness to relationship, to communion.

Being nourishing by the Word of God gives life to the activity of the Holy Spirit present within believers. It gives rise to that dynamic of the Spirit which urges them toward unity within the group and to spread it to others. When Chiara asserts that the Word of God changed "our mentality" and "brought about a re-evangelization," we can conclude the focolarine did not limit the demands of the Word to their personal religious space, but it permeated all of their existence, hence also what is "profane." It is the discovery of the "non-religiosity" of the Word of God, of a God who wants to reveal the divine presence in all human situations. This is to say that genuine communion with God does not need a special environment but can develop anywhere, in all sectors of secular life. It is the discovery that holiness is not reserved to martyrs, virgins, celibates, and bishops but is open to all. It is found in

6. To be sure, the apostle does not intend to say that the commandments, the Decalogue in particular, no longer have value; on the contrary, they are the thousand faces of love that gives them life. "If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have *agape*, I gain nothing" (1 Cor 13:3). The new life expressed thanks to the inner gift of the Holy Spirit does not take away the commandments but situates the life of believers on a higher level of relationship with God and neighbor, where the commandments are, so to speak, sublimated; believers not only do not steal but are ready to place their goods in common; not only do they not kill, but they are ready to give their lives; not only do they not covet, but they "see Christ" in their neighbors, and so forth.

simply living the ordinary things of daily life, with its problems, its joys, and its sorrows.

Chiara and her companions, understanding that the words of the Gospels had to shape human behavior in *everyday life*, saw that the practice of the gospel had to be not just in convents and monasteries but along the streets, in the towns, in families. The gospel was not only something to do with the individual and private religious sphere, as a certain mentality thought or still thinks, but with life in society. As a consequence, the logic of the gospel incarnated into life will give life to the conviction that such logic should inspire every sector of existence and of human activity—the words of economics, culture, politics, science, education, the arts, and so on.

Another characteristic that comes to light in Chiara's text is that the words of the Gospels were lived out *as a group*, not only privately. This fact carries a certain importance: as will emerge, particularly in the teaching of John, the saving will of God—communion with God—achieves its true end in mutual love and therefore in the gospel lived out as an expression of fraternal communion. Communicating to one another the experience that one has lived does not mean only relating edifying stories but also giving to the other and receiving from the other one's personal relationship with God. It was, therefore, a growing together in the journey toward sanctity; in other words, it was living communion with God in fraternal love. Personal relationship with God emerged from the sphere of a private relationship in order to be lived out as a community. It gave value again to a spirituality of communion as lived in the early church, consistent with the ecclesiology of communion later proposed by the Second Vatican Council.

In this way, the first focolarine turned to the words of scripture following an eminently biblical pattern strongly present in the prophets as well as in Jesus, Paul, and John. It deals with the logic and the structure of covenant (in the terms Chiara habitually used: according to what has been called the "collective spirituality").[7] Believers live within communion with God (who takes the initiative) observing God's commandments that can be summed up in love for one's brothers and sisters. A genuine relationship with God, within the covenant, cannot take place other than through behavior that is moral and socially adequate. Only mutual love, as the lived expression of the divine will, guarantees the presence of God (of Jesus as "God-with-us") according to the logic of covenant, and that is according to how God, throughout the whole of salvation history, wants a relationship with God to be lived out.

It is upon the basis of this kind of logic that there came about the mystical experience of the entrance into the bosom of the Father. Before exploring these texts, however, it may be helpful to turn our attention to the teachings of John. Johannine mysticism, in fact, sheds light upon this experience. In greater detail than others, John presents the connection between observing the commandments (living the Word), communion with the Risen Jesus, and the entrance into the bosom of the Father.

Johannine Theology

Even if developed in different theological categories, John's thought corresponds closely with that of Paul; they are the two pillars of church theology. In practice, John's entire Gospel is based on the

7. See fn. 5.

theme "believe-love," the logical conclusion of "listen-do." "Believe," in fact, is one of the principal themes of the first part of his Gospel (chapters 1–12), just as "love" is the theme that comes into view in the second part (chapters 13–17). What becomes evident is the Fourth Gospel's overall structure: from the faith, to which all are called, to fraternal love, as obedience to God's will (and so an expression of love for Jesus). The call to believe (the first part of the Gospel) is made concrete in the communion of the disciples around Jesus (the second part), an expression of the new people of God, a prefiguring of the *perichoresis* (mutual indwelling) that comes to be among the Risen One and believers, in the church.

Like Paul, John can then summarize God's command to human beings as *believe and love*: "And this is his commandment, that we should believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he has commanded us" (1 Jn 3:23). There is an intrinsic link between "believing" and observing the commandment of Jesus. Believing in Jesus expressed the actual will of God for human beings. This is not about—as it also is throughout scripture—a generic belief in the existence of God but precisely about a belief in *Jesus.* To the Jews who asked what they should do so as to perform "the works of God," Jesus replies, "This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent" (Jn 6:29). Believing replaces zeal for the Law of Moses (in the Jewish sense of performing the works of God) not because it stands in opposition but because Jesus fulfills and overcomes it: "The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ" (Jn 1:17).

Believing is also more than a store of truth to which one adheres intellectually. The act of total and personal attachment to the person of Christ, then, implies the gift of self to God, openness to God's word, and the duty to fulfill God's will. For John, believing involves listening, conversion, seeing and contemplating, understanding and knowing, and doing. It is relational, something living and dynamic that takes up the entire person. It is no accident that in his Gospel, John uses the verb "believe" ninety-six times, but never uses the noun "faith"! Believing, therefore, is seen as adherence to Jesus; it is welcoming and accepting and so knowing his divine origin, the reality of his being the Son sent by the Father and, as a consequence, opening oneself to the inner life of the divine Persons. Believing creates a living bond with Christ, develops a knowledge that is communion with Jesus, and in him with the Father.

Consequently, the evangelist can use phrases that are synonymous with "believe in Jesus," such as "go/come to Jesus" (Jn 5:40, 6:35–37, and so forth); "receive/accept Jesus" (Jn 1:23, 5:43, 13:20); "follow Jesus" (Jn 1:37f, 4:44, and so forth); "love Jesus" (Jn 8:42, 14:15, 21, 23, 28; 16:27). Believing thus implies both "loving Jesus" and "observing his word." This bond is expressed in Jn 14:15: "If you love me, you will keep my commandments." Believing—that is, "loving Jesus"—does not remain as a sentiment but requires total adherence to his person that comes about by living faithfully according to his requirements. Believing, then, involves two things that are intimately linked: entering into a deep perichoretic relationship with Christ and observing his commandments. The first requires the second as a response.

John uses the word "commandments" in the plural without defining or listing them. As with Paul, he does not discuss a catalogue of precepts to be observed, but "the commandments" are the completed expression of the Will of the Father (and of the Son) that must be carried out in the concrete details of life. The

commandments are God's words oriented completely toward the commandment par excellence, mutual love, a commandment that brings to life, penetrates, and gives direction to the total behavior of believers (see Jn 15:10–12).

Such a connection between "believing" and observing the commandments demonstrates by itself that welcoming God's words is not limited to the initial act of openness to the Gospels through which human beings welcome the Word and adhere to Jesus. It implies a relationship that lasts throughout their existence. And this relationship, in turn, cannot be reduced to the formal observance of a particular number of precepts; it is lived as a perichoretic relationship between the Word that is communicated (in the Gospels) and believers through a process of internalization that the evangelist expresses with formulations like these: "My words abide in you" (Jn 15:7); the word has a "place" in human beings (see Jn 8:37), in particular, "abide in my word/my words abide in you" (Jn 8:31 [KJV]; 15:1ff). "Abiding" or "dwelling" convey the notion of habitation, of permanence, of faithfulness. It is necessary, then, to persevere in the relationship with Christ created by the Word. Observing his commandments, therefore, is the necessary condition for "abiding in Jesus," for realizing this bond that is so deep that there is a mutual indwelling of Christ and the believer (the other bond, as we shall see, is in the Eucharist: Jn 6:53ff).

Characteristic of John's language in speaking of a deep communion between believers and Jesus is the use of the expression "I in them, they in me." The phraseology of abiding within or mutual indwelling is used often in the allegory of the vine and the branches to express the relationship between the disciples and Jesus. We can note the evangelist's theological consistence. John uses the same phraseology for the relationship of Jesus with the Father and for the relationship between Jesus and the disciples, but never for that between the Father and believers or for the disciples among themselves, not to deny such a relationship but because the relationship is mediated through Christ.[8] This mediation is the meeting place between the Father and the disciples, as it is among the believers themselves. Jesus is the Mediator in each case. Jesus explains it to Thomas at the Last Supper: the one who sees Christ sees the Father (see Jn 14:5–11).

Because Jesus, in his humanity, is the Revelation of the Father—that is, the Truth—and he possesses fully the Life of the Father, he is the Way that leads to the Father (see Jn 14:6). Jesus is the one Mediator in a dual sense: as Revelation of the Father and as Way to the Father. Communion with him, then, is fundamental: united to him at the point of receiving his relationship as Son, the disciple becomes one with the Father, as Jesus is, and thus is brought into the life of the Trinity. Believers are "children of God" (Jn 1:12; 11:52; 1 Jn 3:1, 2:10, 5:2); they live out the same relationship that the only-begotten Son sustains with the Father. Obviously, John always safeguards the distinction, as shown by his use of the words "*teknon*" (solely for the disciples, meaning "child") and "*hyios*" (only for Jesus, meaning "son").

One can see what sort of "divine adventure" comes from observing the commandments—that is to say, living the Word. Believers find themselves in a current of love, something like Jacob's ladder that links heaven and earth. Everything comes from the Father and returns to the Father, mediated by the incarnate Son:

8. Except in 1 Jn 3:24, 4:13–16: "All who obey his commandments abide in him, and he abides in them"; "Those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them." These speak of God (not of the Father) perhaps in reference to an indwelling that has already come about. Christ as mediator is implicit.

"As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love" (Jn 15:9–10).

The everlasting and generative love of the Father for the Son is poured upon me personally, mediated by the personal love of Jesus for me, to become the source and imperative of love for my neighbor; in turn, it is the condition for abiding in the love of Christ and thus for participating in the love with which the Father loves the Son. Mutual love, the heart of Jesus' commandment, makes the Father's love attain its purpose: the life of unity of the human community in the life of unity among the divine Persons (see 1 Jn 4:11–13; Jn 17).

In the light of the Johannine vision, we can understand how the intense experience of the Word of Life called forth in the focolarine a kind of inner theophany: "When one of these Words fell into our soul, it seemed to us that it was transformed into fire, into flames, it was transformed into love. It could be affirmed that our inner life was all love." And so we come back to what, in the New Testament, constitutes the core, the fullness of the commandments: love.

It becomes clear that for John, love could not be reduced to one precept among many others. Love has a divine origin; it is the love of the Father that generates, that transforms disciples into children of God, that raises them to the life of God, that makes them "be." The first letter of John contains some weighty statements: "God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them" (1 Jn 4:16). In believers, divine love becomes the source of permanent love toward their brothers and sisters, a love that consequently becomes the sign and guarantee of communion with God. "No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us" (1 Jn 4:12ff). The sacred author emphasizes anew the tight link between love for God and concrete love for one's brothers and sisters. Genuine Christian mysticism is summed up in these words. To see God directly is not possible on this earth, a certainty often stated in the Bible. Communion with God, however, is possible even now. It is attained not through ascetic practices, but it is God who is self-revealing and reaches us; God comes to live in our midst when we love one another. John remains faithful to the logic of revelation; it is not love among believers that calls forth the presence of God, but mutual love is the proof and the sign that the divine *agape*, which has always dwelt in the church, lies at the source of our love: "Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God" (1 Jn 4:7).

One cannot affirm more forcefully the kinship that exists between God and those who live the Word. It becomes clear that love for one's brothers and sisters is, so to speak, an imperative of nature, given the "connaturality" with God that we have received. Since they are generated by God, the life of disciples comes from the divine *agape* that makes them "lovers." They love as a personal imperative. Professing to love God without loving one's brothers and sisters is simply a contradiction in nature. In fact, one cannot separate cause and effect; one cannot separate mutual love from its source: divine *agape.* Consequently, a "collective" spirituality is not only one possible way among others, but is the true way because it corresponds to a necessity of nature. The "ascent of the mountain," the union with God of classical mysticism, takes place in mutual love—only it is God who descends and dwells among the disciples.

We ought to bear in mind that the love of the Son communicated to believers is not just that of the preexistent Logos turned toward the bosom of the Father (see Jn 1:1) but of a love lived and revealed by Jesus crucified and forsaken. And therefore the Crucified One is the way of the divine *agape* toward human beings; therefore he is the way to the Father. On the other hand, precisely for this reason, love for one's brothers and sisters has the characteristic of radicality ("We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us—and we ought to lay down our lives for one another" [1 Jn 5:16]); as well as the characteristic of concreteness ("Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action" [1 Jn 3:18]).

The entire spirituality of John carries a forceful thrust to loving our brothers and sisters, and therefore lies far from an individualistic or sentimentally inward spirituality. Certainly, to live the Word is to obey a word communicated from without, but such openness allows the Spirit to place in the heart love as the fulfillment of the Law. Moreover, such love urges a turn toward the other, brings about an exodus that develops a constantly deepening internalization and a growth toward the source of love. Having become children of God, believers turn their filial love toward the Father. But on the other hand, they cannot do other than love as does the Father and, consequently, cannot but love all those whom the Father—in the Son—has generated as children and who thereby are their brothers and sisters: "Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ has been born of God, and everyone who loves the parent loves the child" (1 Jn 5:1).

And the Holy Spirit? In John's work, too, the Spirit's presence is discreet and silent (although certainly not in the life this work gives rise to) because it often is not mentioned explicitly. The Spirit is called the Paraclete in the Farewell Discourses, which emphasize the role of the Spirit in enlightening the disciples after Easter. Given the task to "guide you [the disciples] into all the truth" (Jn 16:13), the Spirit conveys the post-Easter understanding of redemption, of the mystery of Jesus as Son, and therefore of the life of communion between the Father and the Son. This understanding is not only intellectual but living, putting believers into contact with the richness of life hidden in Christ, a richness that is everything Jesus as Son has received from the Father and that he communicates to the disciples (see Jn 16:15)—the experience of the Father's generative love lived out in the experience of Jesus' love for his own.

The first letter of John mentions the Holy Spirit in relationship to the indwelling of God in believers who love: "All who obey his commandments abide in him, and he abides in them. And by this we know that he abides in us, by the Spirit that he has given us" (1 Jn 3:24; 4:13). Those who observe God's commandments, and who therefore live the Word that directs the whole of their existence to the fulfillment of mutual love, live in perfect communion with God. This is not a logical deduction but an inner certainty that comes from the Holy Spirit.

Revelation, John's writings in particular, discloses the quality of intimacy with God given by living the words of Jesus. The experience of the Word of Life practiced intensely by the first focolarine can be considered an ideal example because it involves the elements that John emphasizes: opening oneself to the words of Jesus, putting into effect his commandment of mutual love, and the experience of love as a divine experience. The mystical experience of the entrance into the bosom of the Father makes manifest our standing before the Father through Christ in the Holy Spirit.

The Pact: The Entrance into the Bosom of the Father

The core of the text concerning the entrance into the bosom of the Father can be read in the words of the Pact between Chiara and Igino Giordani:

> "On the nothingness of me, you yourself make a pact of unity with Jesus-Eucharist in the heart of Foco. And do this in such a way, Jesus, that there come forth the bond between us that you know." Then I added, "And you, Foco, do the same."

I believe that the request Chiara addresses to Jesus is significant: "you yourself make a pact of unity." Jesus himself is asked to bring about the unity for which he prayed to the Father. What will follow is, as it were, a tangible experience of what, in fact, unity brings about, the fulfillment of the prayer of unity: being carried within the life of the divine Persons, being able to live in God, in the way God does, the law of the Persons' communal being. On "the nothingness" as the perfect expression of mutual love, Jesus can bring about unity not only between the two but also as a being brought into God, as an entering into that divine space which is the bosom of the Father, where Jesus lives his filial relationship—"I in them and you in me"—making them find their relationship with Jesus in a new way: "I made your name known to them, and I will make it known, so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and *I in them*" (Jn 17:26).

The Eucharist

In the earlier passage by Chiara, the founding elements of the entrance into the bosom of the Father come into light immediately, and the first among these is *the Eucharist*. Chiara's mystical experience regularly came about on the basis of this sacrament: a concentrated moment of church, a moment that in itself already says that the gift of God is prior, and it is mediated within the church. This gift is none other than Christ himself at the height of his love (crucified and risen), who makes himself present in the community and in each individual, present as a gift from the Father to humankind.

In the Eucharist is signified (actualized) the love of the Father for the Son communicated by the Son in the moment of his greatest offering. The Eucharist is a sign that everything comes from God who takes the initiative. And Chiara respects such a priority because she asks Jesus himself to "make a pact of unity," to bring about, therefore, the reality of which the Eucharist is the efficacious sign. The mystical experience that comes from the Eucharist at the same time speaks of the divine origin of such an experience and its presence within the church that makes the Eucharist.

Let us examine more closely the effects of the Eucharist made tangible in the entrance into the bosom of the Father. *The Eucharist is the sacrament that identifies us with Christ*. In John's Gospel, this "being Jesus" is affirmed through the language of mutual indwelling. It appears for the first time in his Gospel precisely at the moment of the discourse on the bread of life and does not appear elsewhere in the first part of the work (chapters 1–12). "Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them" (Jn 6:56). Chiara experienced this first effect of the Eucharist and expresses it in these words:

> I was about to pray to Jesus-Eucharist, to say to Him, "Jesus." But I could not. That Jesus, in fact, who was in the tabernacle,

> was also here in me, was me, was me myself, identified with Him. I could not therefore call out to myself.

Chiara was living, therefore, the relationship of identity of the Christian with Christ in a way that could be sensed. The Eucharist brings about, nourishes, and makes grow the baptismal reality. "As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ" (Gal 3:27). Being clothed in Christ has nothing exterior about it but signifies being determined entirely by that with which one is clothed. In other words, Jesus communicates what most characterizes him: his filial relationship with the Father.

To make of us true children of God at the same level as the only-begotten Son, God, as Paul says, sent into our hearts "the Spirit of his Son" (Gal 4:4ff). It is not a matter of the Spirit as sent by the Son, but of the Spirit insofar as the Spirit is characteristic of the Son as son, which constitutes the depth of the Son's being. And the presence of the Spirit of the Son deep within the baptized brings about the experience through "connaturality" with the Fatherhood of the Father. "Being Jesus" is the experience of identification with what constitutes the Son as son turned toward the bosom of the Father (see Jn 1:1). Therefore Chiara continues, "And there I noticed coming spontaneously from my mouth the word: Father."

Chiara, then, also had the experience of distinction from Jesus. The Christ-identity signified by the Eucharist does not, in fact, involve fusion:

> It seemed to me at that point that my religious life . . . should not consist so much in being turned toward Jesus, as in putting myself at His side, our Brother, turned toward the Father.

In this context, Jesus, "our Brother," does not suggest Jesus' solidarity with the human condition, but the elevation of believers to Jesus' divine filiation, which reaches its fulfillment in the bosom of the Father.

As a Eucharistic gift, therefore, "being Jesus" does not take away a personal relationship with Christ. John's Gospel proceeds in the same direction: "Those who love me will be loved by my Father, and I will love them and reveal myself to them" (Jn 14:21; see also Jn 17:26, and 1 Jn 1:3). Jesus, as Mediator, places the disciples, having become one with him, in direct communion with the Father. But once placed in the bosom of the Father, they also meet Jesus as a distinct You in a personal relationship, experiencing evermore his presence. This staying "at His side, our Brother, turned toward the Father" comprehends the whole of God's plan for humankind. In fact, Chiara suggests that this relationship with Jesus must not be lived out as a devotional concern for self but as a being sent on mission.

Another characteristic of the Eucharist that comes to light in Chiara's mystical experience is its ecclesial dimension as the sacrament of unity. This is clearly affirmed by Paul writing to the Corinthians:

> The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a sharing in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a sharing in the body of Christ? Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread (1 Cor 10:16–17).

Here the apostle begins by emphasizing the communion with Christ effected by the Eucharist. Drinking the Eucharistic wine is having a share in the blood of Christ, that is, having a part in the death of Jesus and in the salvation it brings about. In the same fashion, *koinonia* with Christ's body is entering into communion with the Lord who is present, and therefore partaking of the saving actions of the One who died on the cross for his own.

At this point Paul reverses the order of the Last Supper so as to insist upon the unity that such *koinonia* establishes among the participants (v. 17). Receiving the Eucharistic bread that is the body of Christ, the many become One, that is, Christ in his body. In the Eucharist, the apostle sees the everlasting source of *koinonia* among believers, giving it its Christological foundation: communion with the Crucified-Risen One. For Paul, unity conveys the true nature of the church that, as such, is identified with Christ, is the dwelling-place of His presence, prompting the realization in historical time of the eschatological goal already fulfilled in the paschal event: the unity of humanity in God. Here Chiara experiences the whole of this dimension of the church in its Christ-identity. She explains this further with this affirmation: "We became 'Church' when on the nothingness of ourselves (Jesus Forsaken) two Jesus-Eucharists made a pact of unity."

Before speaking of the Pact itself as a response of love, I would like to point out another characteristic of the Eucharist that comes into effect in Chiara's mystical experience: its *eschatological dimension*. The Eucharist brings participants into Christ crucified-risen, who is the final fullness, the One who brings about universal recapitulation. It roots the church, therefore, although continuing its journey through history, in the eschatological fulfillment of all things. The Christ who makes the many one is present also as the One from whom everything proceeds and to whom everything is directed as its end (see Col 1:15–17). He is present as the Alpha and the Omega of creation and of history. The eschatological dimension of Chiara's mystical experience must also be considered a fruit of the Eucharist: anchored in the final fullness, she ranges across the entire created universe.

Mutual Love

Another foundational element in the text of the entrance into the bosom of the Father is mutual love, fruit of the Eucharist and the ideal way of responding to it so as to enjoy its effects. Two things should be taken into consideration: love itself and the communitarian dimension of this love, and this in close relation with the Eucharist. Love is the gift of divine life, and the love of the Father for the Son communicated bestows this love upon his own, open to his Word.[9] Mutual love makes real in actual experience what Christ has already brought about in his gift of himself and is represented in the Eucharist: namely, the gathering into one of the scattered children of God (see Jn 12:51ff), the unity generated by communion in the one Body of Christ that is the church, the perfecting of the *agape* that comes from the Father (see 1 Jn 4:12).

The relationship between the Eucharist and mutual love as the visible expression of the unity represented by the sacrament

9. The Word of the Gospel lived out and communicated obviously remained the constant "rock" throughout those months of contemplation and was not only a preliminary step to the entrance into the bosom of the Father. Chiara recalls this in an unpublished document from 1986: "Three, then, were our communions: that with Jesus-Eucharist, the one with his Word, and the one among us."

has been emphasized from the very beginning in the tradition of the church because it has always been known as constitutive of the church itself. This link is present in Luke's Gospel, which to the institution of the Eucharist adds exhortations to love and to service within the community (see Lk 22:24ff), a theme then expanded upon in the Farewell Discourses in John's Gospel. The link is also present in the common meals that the first century Christian community shared in the context of the Eucharistic celebration, which not accidentally were called *Agape*, just as in the "fraternal kiss" that, in the Mass, precedes Communion. Who does not recall Paul's severe admonition to the Christians of Corinth in this regard? They were taking food and drink just for themselves (see 1 Cor 11:17ff), so the fraternal meal was doubly scorned. It became a sign of inequality and the poor were offended because of the nondivision of goods. They were sinning both against the unity of the church and against fraternal love, a complete contradiction to the meaning of the Eucharist.

The Pact and the Trinity

This link between the Eucharist and mutual love was lived out to the full in the Pact, on the threshold of this mystical experience, the entrance into the bosom of the Father. The Pact did not generate directly a charitable institution, nor did it deepen one particular virtue, but something was lived that is constitutive of the church. The Eucharist gives mutual love its theological-ecclesial value. It does not achieve solely interpersonal harmony in the community but raises this harmony to be within the divine intimacy, making it the Presence of God. Chiara's mystical experience has made tangible the deepest aspect of faith, which St. Athanasius summed up in these words:

> For since the Word is in the Father, and the Spirit is given from the Word, He wills that we should receive the Spirit, that, when we receive It, thus having the Spirit of the Word which is in the Father, we too may be found on account of the Spirit to become One in the Word, and through Him in the Father.[10]

In the text of the Pact, it is true, Chiara does not speak explicitly of "mutual love," but of *nothingness*—of a "nothingness," however, that expresses the quality of love. As a consequence, it is not about extreme mortification, nor is it an ascetic ideal, nor is it even the effort aimed at putting the ego to death. "Nothingness" characterizes the life of *agape* in its dynamic of not-being/being, where not-being—according to the logic of a "collective" spirituality and not of an individual asceticism—lies in *relationship* (to another) and becomes the space where God is present and can be manifested. It follows Paul's way of thinking: when I am weak, then I am strong; thus in the logic of the paschal reality of being dead together with Christ. A passage from Chiara puts this into evidence:

> The awareness of our nothingness has to be infinite so that God may dwell in us. We must be the nothingness of Jesus Forsaken who is infinite nothingness. Then in us will rest the Holy Spirit.

In the logic of a collective spirituality, "being nothing" is inherent in the very act of turning toward and opening oneself to the brother or sister; it is an act of self-dispossession possible for those

10. Athanasius, *Discourses against the Arians*, III, 25.

who know they are accepted totally by God. Chiara's originality, however, does not lie so much in "being nothing" because the dimension of "non-being" is part of the dynamic of every genuine love. Its originality lies in perceiving in this "nothingness" the face of Jesus forsaken, who is its quality and measure: losing God for God. It is therefore a love that rips the temple veil, overcomes the boundary between sacred and profane, gives space to God in the not-God, and therefore corresponds to the most genuine soteriology, as it is for Paul. In Jesus crucified, God saves sinful human beings . . . and opens them to the consequent ethics.

This "being nothing" as the highest expression of love is not in turn lived out individually as a private relationship with Jesus-Eucharist, but is realized in reciprocity. Love lived out in this way creates the space where the one Christ can come forth from the two made One. Chiara explains it in these words: "Here nothing, there nothing, then Jesus-Eucharist linking them. What remains? Zero plus zero plus Jesus: Jesus remains."

In the space of mutual nothingness, the Eucharist as effective sign has made explicit its potential as sacrament of unity; it makes actual our being "one in Christ Jesus" (Gal 3:28) in its Christological ("being Jesus") and ecclesial significance (the community as Body of Christ). In this being One, the self receives from Christ its own personality as "new man" through the mediation of the brother or sister; on the other hand, the self is enriched by the wealth of the brother or sister through Christ's mediation.

At this point Chiara is able to give full ecclesial value to the words of Paul: "It is no longer we who live; it is truly Christ who lives in us" (see Gal 2:20), giving to the adverb "truly" the full weight of authenticity and of fulfillment. The "nothingness" of the Pact reveals, in one cell of the church, the church itself in its mystery as Body of Christ, as Spouse of Christ, as Icon of the Trinity, as the fulfillment of creation and of humanity. God now makes visible all of the eschatological greatness of the church—expressed in Marian typology—in the form of mystical experience.

It is true that in the text itself about the Pact, Chiara does not mention the Holy Spirit, but the Spirit is present and at work in this experience as the God who comes forth in "mutual nothingness." This is evident in a later moment on November 9, 1949, where she mentions how the working of the Holy Spirit was spelled out to her explicitly: "'Why do you not live your Reality, that which I made in you through the tender care of the divine Spirit in the bosom of the Father? Why do you not live as daughter of God . . . ?'" The Spirit is manifested as "the Spirit of his Son" (Gal 4: 6) who has brought about filial identification with Jesus; she is daughter in the One who is Son. The Spirit made Chiara experience connaturality with Jesus to the point of no longer being able to speak to him. Hence it is the Holy Spirit who has placed Chiara (that is, the believer) "existentially" into the relationship of the Son with the Father.

On the following day, November 10, the Holy Spirit continued to reveal himself as the source of supernatural "understanding" of communion with God (see 1 Jn 3:24). Chiara writes, "When Jesus came into my nothingness I clearly heard the voice of the Spirit who spoke to my Soul: 'What? I have to make a pact with myself? *I* am in your nothingness.'"

The experience of the Pact is thus an experience of the Holy Spirit. It is fitting that the same Spirit recalls that the Eucharistic Christ's gift is the Holy Spirit who creates and nourishes connaturality with the Risen Lord, so making unity, the link that makes of two, One: Jesus. The mystical experience of the entrance into

the bosom of the Father was truly an experience of the Trinity, an experience of entering into the intimacy of the divine Persons.

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