

Spirituality and Trinitarian Theology in the Thought and Life of Chiara Lubich

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The author presents and describes four essential traits of the new spirituality of communion that is a fruit of the charism received by Chiara Lubich, and the theology that is being developed from this charism. She does so in the context of telling the personal story of Chiara's experience, especially during a period of illumination referred to as "Paradise '49." That experience of the mystery of the Trinity illumined the theological depth of the Focolare's life of communion on earth as a reflection of the Trinity in heaven. The author concludes with comments on the effects of this life of unity, and its academic expressions in the Abba School and the Sophia University Institute.

During his recent visit to the International Center of the Focolare at Castel Gandolfo, Italy, Stanislaw Cardinal Rylko, president of the Pontifical Council of the Laity,

emphasized the importance of the "spirituality of communion" in the church today. He highlighted how speaking of communion to the focolarini was something that "touches the very core of their vocation, their mission, their charism."¹

The Focolare's spirituality of communion is the mature fruit of the charism of unity that God gave to Chiara Lubich. Thus, God implanted a new spirituality, the "spirituality of unity," in the garden of the church almost as a response of love to the deep longings of the world in the dramatic era of World War II. While the war raged, Chiara found in Jesus's Testament "May they all be one" (Jn 17:21) the heart and summation of her message and life. She felt called, together with her first companions, to be a living response and witness to these words for today's moment in history.

Deeply rooted in the tradition of the church, Chiara intuited, through a special gift of light which God gave her at only twenty-three years of age, that we can draw closer to God together with our brothers and sisters. The key to what is new in the Focolare's communitarian spirituality is found right here: in the role that the human person, our brother or sister, assumes on this journey. In Chiara's words: "We go to God *together* with our neighbor." Indeed, as Chiara says: "We go to God *through* our neighbor."² In order to outline the salient traits of this communitarian spirituality, and the cardinal points of the theology that is born from the charism that grounds it, we must review the most significant stages in Chiara's personal story for the symbolic value that they have acquired. I will only mention four of these points.

1. Stanislaw Cardinal Rylko, Talk given during the meeting of the focolarini from the countries of central Europe and central Italy, January 5, 2011.

2. Chiara Lubich, "Costruiamo insieme il 'castello esteriore,'" *Gen's 2* (1996): 37.

The Discovery of God-as-Love

Chiara was a young school teacher when a priest asked her to offer one hour of her day for his intentions. Without hesitation, she offered the entire day. Struck by her youthful generosity, the priest blessed her saying: “Remember that God loves you immensely!” It was a moment of illumination. This led to a significant event. Chiara felt that God’s personal love was not only for her (because of her simple gesture of love) but that it was for every person on earth. God loves everyone. “God loves us immensely! God loves you immensely!” she immediately wrote to her first companions and shared with all those she met.

Chiara experienced God as a “Father.” Therefore, nothing escapes God’s loving glance, not even the mistakes we make. God’s love envelopes not only Christians, not only the church, but the whole world, the universe. This discovery of God-as-Love was the “first inspiring spark” of a new spirituality that has a strong communitarian profile.³ In reality, “God is love” is the confession of faith contained in the first letter of John (1 Jn 4:8). But to Chiara and her companions who shared this experience, this truth of faith was grasped as an “absolute novelty” that “made us realize that God was no longer distant, inaccessible, foreign to our life [but] as the most real and true of all realities.”⁴ This realization urged Chiara and all those who in following her also made this “discovery” to choose God as the ideal of their lives, responding to God’s Love with their love. Pope Benedict XVI would later write at the beginning of his pontificate in his encyclical *Deus caritas est*:

He has loved us first and he continues to do so; we too, then, can respond with love. God does not demand of us a feeling which we ourselves are incapable of producing. He loves us, he makes us see and experience his love, and since he has “loved us first,” love can also blossom as a response within us (n17).

Love of Neighbor

All the cardinal points of our spirituality came from the Gospels. When Chiara and her companions read “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Mt 19:19), they asked themselves: “Who is my neighbor?” And here is the discovery they made: our neighbor is not far from us, “It is the brother or sister who is next to us at this present moment in life.”⁵ It is *this* neighbor we are to love, and not with a general or abstract love, but with a love that is made of deeds “in a concrete and effective way, right now.”⁶

This is the kind of love that Chiara and her first companions lived in the early days during the war. They loved the most needy in the city of Trent: the old lady who could not run to the air-raid shelter, the sick persons who were housebound and needed care, people living in poverty. This was the same commitment to loving that urged Chiara to reach out later on to every neighbor that she passed by in the present moments of her life, to every people, to every culture. Her words still ring out within me: “Our brothers and sisters are our great opportunity. Let’s not miss any in the course of the day.”⁷

3. An expression used by John Paul II during his visit at the Center of the Focolare Movement at Rocca di Papa, Italy, 1984.

4. Chiara Lubich, *A New Way* (New York: New City Press, 2006), p. 40.

5. Chiara Lubich, *The Art of Loving* (New York: New City Press, 2010), p. 35.

6. Ibid.

7. Ibid., p. 38.

It is not a matter of having some kind of generic charity but of drawing from the very root of love, from God who is Love. Right from the beginning, it was clear that we need “to aim our gaze always at the one Father of many children.” In this way, we can then look at every person as a child of God, as our brother or sister. This is why we work for universal brotherhood. We all have one Father and we are all brothers and sisters. This is the teaching that Jesus left us, and this vision of humanity is the fertile ground on which our communitarian spirituality blossoms.

Mutual Love to the Point of Unity

Love of neighbor by “making ourselves one with him or her,” as Chiara has taught us, brings about another cardinal point of our communitarian spirituality, namely, mutual love that is at the very heart of the gospel message: “Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another” (Jn 13:34). This “as” indicates the measure of the mutual love Jesus is asking us to have for each other. We must be ready to give our life for the other, to give up everything for our brothers and sisters, as Jesus himself did to the point of experiencing God-forsakenness. Mutual love is the typical commandment of a collective spirituality because it contains within it the “something more” it needs: love for one another to the point of unity.

In putting mutual love into practice, Chiara’s life and that of her first companions took a qualitative leap. They experienced a conviction, joy, and peace never experienced before, a fullness of life and an abundance of light. And they saw Jesus’ words fulfilled among them: “For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them” (Mt 18:20). It is the same experience that has been repeated and continues to be repeated every day in the Movement.

Another passage of the Gospels that more than all others struck them was the one that narrates Jesus’ prayer to the Father: “May they all be one, just as, Father, you are in me and I am in you, so that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe it was you who sent me” (Jn 17:21). In their hearts, Chiara and her companions felt certain that they had been born to fulfill that sentence, almost as though it was the Founding Charter of the Movement. They felt that they were born to contribute to bringing unity between human beings and God and unity among all human beings, to contribute to seeing the dream of universal brotherhood fulfilled on earth. This was the desire that right from the early days made Chiara say: “Let’s make unity among ourselves the springboard we start to run from . . . to where there is no unity and then bring it there!”⁸

Jesus Forsaken

Jesus himself indicated the way to unity when on the cross he experienced being abandoned by his Father and cried out: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Mt 27:46). In this moment when he suffered the greatest pain possible Jesus revealed the measure of his love for all humankind. Out of love he made himself nothing, thus giving us, as Chiara wrote: “the most luminous explanation of the meaning of love: to empty oneself, to ‘not be,’ to disappear, so as to be love in action. This is the truest, fullest, most authentic love.”⁹

Jesus forsaken, precisely in the moment when he experienced humankind’s separation from God, and felt the Father distant

8. Chiara Lubich, *Unity and Jesus Forsaken* (New York: New City Press, 1985), p. 37.

9. Chiara Lubich, “The Spirituality of Unity and Trinitarian Life,” *New Humanity Review* 9 (2004): 8. This is the acceptance speech given at the conferral of an honorary doctorate in theology by the University of Trnava, Slovakia, on June 23, 2003.

from him, was recognized by Chiara and her first companions as the model to live out. They discovered Jesus forsaken hidden not only in their personal pains but in the pain of others, who are often alone, abandoned, forgotten. They also found him in all the divisions, traumas, mutual indifferences, of whatever size, in families, between generations, between the rich and poor, within the church, between the churches, among religions, and between those who have religious convictions and those who do not.

In our communitarian spirituality, all these afflictions that could be obstacles to reaching communion take on meaning. They attract us out of love for Jesus forsaken. Indeed, he showed himself as the real way to resolve every disunity, as the key to every unity, in that moment when he placed his spirit back into the Father's hands and cried out: "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit" (Lk 23:46). Jesus forsaken thus taught us how to face these afflictions, how to live them, and how to help overcome them.¹⁰

Individual Spirituality and Communitarian Spirituality

The way to reach God in a communitarian spirituality passes through our neighbor. Sometimes this way is like a dark and shadowy passage, like a tunnel. All the same, it is precisely through this passageway that we arrive to the light, to God. "Making ourselves one with other people . . . [is] a cross which is pre-eminently ours," Chiara would often say. But she would also add that "for us, and for the people we love, it's our life, and if it is mutual, it is Life itself among us. It is Jesus."¹¹

10. This special understanding of the mystery of Jesus's forsakenness also opens up new avenues in theological reflection today that examine with particular attention the problem of the world's suffering.

11. Lubich, *Unity and Jesus Forsaken*, p. 33.

Chiara lived through a period of light during the summer of 1949. It was a time of particular graces characterized by a special penetration of the mystery of the Trinity. Chiara writes about this time: "We had the impression that the Lord had opened to the eyes of the soul the kingdom of God that was among us: the Trinity that dwelt in a cell of the mystical body."¹² In a beautiful page taken from a collection of writings that go back to that luminous period of intuitions, better known to us as "Paradise '49," Chiara expressed this typical dimension of a communitarian spirituality, a reflection on earth of the life of the Trinity, by using the metaphor of a garden all in bloom:

The faithful, who strive for perfection, generally seek union with God present in their hearts. It is as if they were in a great garden full of flowers observing and admiring a single flower. . . .

God—because of the collective spirituality he has given us—asks us to look at all the flowers, because he is in them all. . . .

God who is in me, who has shaped my soul, who lives there as Trinity, is also in the heart of my brothers and sisters.

Thus it is not enough that I love him only in me. If I do, in my love there is still something personal and,

12. Chiara Lubich, *May They All Be One* (London: New City Press, 1977), p. 44. The illuminations Chiara experienced were very similar to those of another founder, St. Ignatius of Loyola. At Manresa, he understood realities regarding the afterlife, the Trinity, heaven and hell, the created and Uncreated, etc. For more about this period, see *Claritas: Journal of Dialogue and Culture* 1, no. 1 (2012).

considering the spirituality that I am called to live, potentially self-centered: I love God in me, and not God in God. . . .

Therefore, my cell, as the souls intimate with God would say, and my heaven, as we would say, is within me and, just as it is within me, it is in the soul of my brothers and sisters. And just as I love him in me, recollecting myself in this heaven—when I am alone—I love him in my brother or sister when he or she is close to me.

And so I no longer love only silence, but also the word: the communication between God in me with God in my brother or sister. And if these two heavens meet, a single Trinity comes to be, where the two are like Father and Son and among them is the Holy Spirit.

Yes, you should always recollect yourself also in the presence of a brother or sister, but not avoiding the person, rather recollecting him or her within your own heaven and recollecting yourself in the heaven of the other.

And, since this Trinity dwells in human bodies, Jesus is there: the God-Man.

And among the two there is unity, where they are one, but not alone. This is the miracle of the Trinity and the beauty of God who is not alone because he is Love.¹³

This passage carries within it a doctrine that comes from life. The same experience of 1949 was lived, so to say, *collectively*. With Chiara during that period was also Iginio Giordani (a married focolarino) and a small group of men and women focolarini. It was

13. Chiara Lubich, *Essential Writings* (New York: New City Press, 2007), pp. 33–34.

a “cluster,” a little group that was so united, so fused into one by mutual love, “by the fire of the Trinity,” as Chiara said, that right from the start she called it “the Soul.” She writes:

This is the new reality, this “Soul,” which began there. Through it God, who is One and Three, was able to share himself, allowing them to experience and therefore “know” him in a new way in his very essence, in his intra-Trinitarian life and in his action in the world.¹⁴

One can deduce from this that a new spirituality had already come to life in the church, a spirituality in which it is not enough only to love, since love arouses a response: it awaits love in return; the giving awaits a receiving. The life of the Trinity is no longer lived only within the inner life of the individual person but circulates freely among “two or more.”

We read in the apostolic letter *Novo Millennio Ineunte*: “A spirituality of communion indicates above all the heart’s contemplation of the mystery of the Trinity dwelling in us, and whose light we must also be able to see shining on the face of the brothers and sisters around us” (n43). Reading through this document, we find a deep consonance with that “spirituality of unity” that God brought forth in the heart of the church when he gave the charism of unity.¹⁵ Chiara writes:

14. Marisa Cerini, *La scuola abbà* (Rome: Citta Nuova, 1999), p. 580. It was an extraordinary grace, new and audacious, even if it was not unique. Many saints have had mystical experiences, but these experiences generally involve a single person.

15. Note 43 continues: “A spirituality of communion also means an ability to think of our brothers and sisters in faith within the profound unity of the Mystical Body, and therefore as ‘those who are a part of me.’ This makes us able to share their joys and sufferings. . . . A spirituality of communion implies also the ability to see what is positive

In effect, what the Movement, with its communitarian spirituality, offers to the Church is, we could say, the vision and praxis of a communion, of an ecclesial life . . . in which there is the reciprocity of the personal gift of self and the dimension of becoming “one.”¹⁶

This is perhaps one of those cases in which Chiara Lubich had “almost a prophetic capacity to intuit and actualize beforehand ‘the thought of the Pope.’”¹⁷

Effects of the Communitarian Spirituality *ad extra*

In this era of the global village, in which humanity feels increasingly called to be one family, the communitarian spirituality is a gift to humanity. The Second Vatican Council particularly underlined the importance of the ecclesiology of communion, orienting the church to fulfill its being in the image of the Trinity, and its mission of being a testimony of unity in the world. After more than sixty years of experience as a Movement, we can say that putting this spirituality at the basis of our personal and our social lives

in others, to welcome it and prize it as a gift from God: not only as a gift for the brother or sister who has received it directly, but also as a ‘gift for me.’ A spirituality of communion means, finally, to know how to ‘make room’ for our brothers and sisters, bearing ‘each other’s burdens’ (Gal 6:2) and resisting the selfish temptations which constantly beset us and provoke competition, careerism, distrust and jealousy. . . . Unless we follow this spiritual path, external structures of communion will serve very little purpose. They would become mechanisms without a soul, ‘masks’ of communion rather than its means of expression and growth.” If we look at the points identified by John Paul II it is immediately evident that these outline the main structure of the spirituality of unity from its origin.

16. Lubich, *Costruiamo insieme il “castello esteriore,”* p. 37.

17. Benedict XVI, *Letter to Cardinal Bertone for Chiara Lubich’s Funeral*, March 18, 2008, in *La Traccia* 3 (2008): 327–28.

brings about a notable renewal in the most varied environments of human endeavor: in politics, culture and the arts, medicine, education, economics, and the means of social communication.

Within the Roman Catholic Church, we have seen flourishing the various movements that enrich it—both its ancient and its new charisms. In addition, we have seen how a spirituality of communion contributes to building unity among Christians, and to opening up a dialogue with people of other religions. This dialogue represents one of the most urgent, challenging, and promising frontiers at the dawn of the third millennium. In this regard, we remember the extraordinary and fruitful dialogue between Christians and Muslims brought about by Chiara and W. D. Mohammed in the United States. Chiara’s talk, invited by W. D. Mohammed, in the historic Malcolm Shabazz Mosque in Harlem in 1997 became the time and place of their decision, sealed with a pact, to work together for peace and universal brotherhood. This could be considered “a prophetic sign” of how the spirituality of communion can contribute to rebuilding relationships not only between individuals but also between peoples in order to bring the human community in its most diverse expressions back into the bosom of the Trinity.

Abba School

The Abba School also finds its *raison d’être* in the particular mystical experiences lived by Chiara in 1949, into which the model of the communitarian spirituality has been grafted. It consists of a group of scholars from different disciplines brought together by Chiara to elaborate the doctrine implicit in the charism of unity. Chiara had long been aware that the life of unity experienced in the Movement ought to bring forth a doctrine. In fact, she saw

that this gospel-based life is like a school, like the source of a new doctrine that synthesizes and develops existing fields of knowledge. Chiara writes:

This doctrine will be a new synthesis, because the ideal of unity brings about the unity of opposites. In the theological field there are many schools: the ideal has the power, with Jesus in our midst, to bring about a synthesis and not a compromise.¹⁸

The principle task of the Abba School is to study Chiara's writings from 1949 and to extract from those texts, which contain mystical experiences, the intuitions that the Holy Spirit gave to Chiara in inundating her with wisdom. That wisdom allowed her to penetrate—in as much as is possible for a human being—into the abyss of God, enabling her not only to come to know but also to contemplate God's inner life. We therefore need to know how to extract doctrinal implications from these experiences.

The Abba School began this work through studying the documents, some still unpublished, and comparing them in the first place with sacred scripture and the great tradition of the church, and seeking a deeper understanding of those intuitions or illuminations that the Holy Spirit seems to have suggested to her. In doing so, it produces not only theological or philosophical reflections but also studies relative to other disciplines. When Chiara founded the school in December 1990, she wanted it to be made up

of professors from the most diverse disciplines who were formed in the communitarian spirituality and therefore capable above all of establishing the presence of Jesus in the midst.

In fact, as she underscored in receiving an honorary doctorate in 1998 from the University of Buenos Aires, what characterizes the Abba School is “that the various professors place the life of unity at the basis of their studies.”¹⁹ This means that every time they meet, they first renew among them their commitment to live mutual love by listening deeply to each other so that Jesus may always be in their midst. This renewal happens through reading together the formulation of a Pact by which each one of the members of the Abba School offers himself or herself to God so that God may cut, in mutual love, the cultural roots of each person. In this way, each of them can be “transplanted” into the “bosom of the Father,” of Abba-Father, and produce fruits that are at once human and divine.

Thanks to the presence of Jesus among the members of the Abba School, that from living out the Pact, we have often lived the experience of finding ourselves “*immersed as if in a light from on High.*”²⁰ This light seems almost an expression of that wisdom for which Jesus thanked the Father for having hidden it from the learned and having revealed it to the small ones. In Chiara's words:

A novelty that seems to emerge from this charism lived in this way is that it leads to a knowledge born not so much

18. Lubich, *A New Way*, p. 160. This doctrine in Chiara's mind is tightly connected with Mary: “A new theology will emerge, a theology of the Church, which is also a Marian theology because it is the theology of the Work of Mary” (ibid.).

19. Chiara Lubich, “Acceptance Speech at the Conferral of a Joint Honorary Doctorate from 13 Faculties,” University of Buenos Aires, April 6, 1998 (unpublished).

20. Chiara Lubich, “Acceptance Speech at the Conferral of an Honorary Doctorate in Theology,” Fu Jen University, January 25, 1997 (unpublished).

from “outside” as from “within” the mystery under consideration, that is, by participation, in faith and love, in the knowledge that Jesus has of the Father. Furthermore, since it is, in a certain sense, a theology of Jesus, in which, since He is man besides being God, all created things are recapitulated in Him, it seems to shed light also on the different sciences, making them more real, more authentic.²¹

The doctrine born from the charism first informs the Focolare Movement, which is the first to receive it. Then it goes out to the public through the tools that we have at our disposal: the so-called inundations that dialogue with the different expressions of contemporary culture, the courses of formation we run, symposia and conventions, the publication of articles both in our and other journals, the publication of books through our publishing houses, and the Sophia University Institute.

Sophia University Institute

The Sophia University Institute was inaugurated in November 2008 at Loppiano (near Florence). Sophia marks a stage that was particularly awaited for by the Focolare Movement because it sees the realization—even though embryonic—of a great dream that Chiara had held ardently in her heart since the 1960s. She was able to express this dream in a founding talk to a group of young university students in August 2001. She described the salient characteristics of a university that would come to life from the communitarian spirituality. In her words, it would be:

21. Lubich, “Acceptance Speech at the Conferral of a Joint Honorary Doctorate from 13 Faculties.”

a place of life and doctrine; a place where the only subject taught can and should be Wisdom—that is light, that is God—with which every discipline should be imbued; a place where there is only One Teacher: Jesus present among those united in his name (see Mt 18:20), present therefore among the professors, among the students, between the professors and students.²²

This is a daily challenge. In these three years of life, Sophia has tried to be a clear reflection of this paradigm so that its courses can truly give foundations and perspectives for a knowledge that is global, a culture born from the charism of unity, fruit of a communitarian spirituality deeply lived out. And this is the commitment not only of Sophia and the Abba School but also of the whole Focolare Movement, the Work of Mary, committed first of all to bear witness through life to what is new in this doctrine.

Maria Voce was elected president of the Focolare Movement on July 7, 2008. She is the first focolarina to succeed the founder, Chiara Lubich, who died on March the 14 of the same year. Voce studied law and became the first woman lawyer in her city’s court system. Later she studied theology and canon law. From 1972 to 1978, she belonged to Chiara Lubich’s personal secretariat. For the following ten years she lived in Istanbul where she established ecumenical and interreligious relationships, especially with the then Patriarch of Constantinople, Demetrius I, and with numerous metropolitans. From 1995 she was

22. Chiara Lubich, “For a Culture of Unity,” Talk to the Institute of Higher Learning, Montet, Switzerland, August 15, 2001 (unpublished).

a member of the Abba School; and from 2002 until their approval in 2007 she worked directly with Chiara Lubich in revising the general statutes of the Movement. In October 2008 she participated in the Synod of Bishops, delivering a speech titled, “The Word of God in the Life and Mission of the Church.” On November 24, 2009, Benedict XVI appointed her as a Consulter for the Pontifical Council for the Laity.