

A Spirituality that Inspires Ontology

The Discovery of God-Love and the Renewal of Ontology

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Charisms lie at the root of great spiritualities, and great spiritualities not only provide ways of living the gospel in harmony with the tradition of the church but also inspire and renew cultures. Chiara Lubich and her companions discovered God-Love under the bombs pulverizing Trent between 1943 and 1945, the pearl of the gospel in the new commandment, and the reality of Jesus present among those united in his name. This article reflects on the insights emerging from those discoveries for philosophy, in particular, for ontology. The result is a Trinitarian ontology that highlights the centrality of relationship.

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Catholic priests will readily admit that the Sunday which most challenges them is Trinity Sunday. Most dread the preparation and the delivery of the homily on that day. The paradox is that the Trinity is the central mystery of our faith. St. Thomas Aquinas stresses the point and explains: “The Son of God came and he caused the hidden rivers to gush forth, making known the hidden name of the Trinity.”¹ Yes, it is true that Augustine required sixteen years to write his famous work on the Trinity. It is also the case that he wrote that there is no comparable subject “in which study is more arduous, discovery more valuable, and error more dangerous.”² He knew well what he was talking about, and he knew it from experience. Yet, like St. Benedict Joseph Labre many centuries later, he felt drawn into the mystery that the church in the *New Catechism* calls the summit and foundation of all faith.

The paradox of the central mystery of faith being the one most dreaded by the pastors of the church stands out even more strikingly when one looks at the liturgy of Holy Week, itself the summit of the whole liturgical year. The mystery of the cross on Good Friday and the resurrection on Easter Sunday are clearly events involving the three divine Persons. This is what the scriptures say and what the liturgy of that week insinuates. The liturgy aims at doing so in a most explicit manner. A quick look is enough to remind ourselves of this fact.

As to Good Friday, there is the fact that “the Father did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all” (Rom 8:32), that “the Son loved me and gave himself up for me” (Gal 2:20), and that

1. Thomas Aquinas, *In Sententias*, I, Prologue.
2. Augustine, *De Trinitate*, I, 2, 5.

“Jesus bowed his head and handed over the Spirit” (Jn 19:30).³ The Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit are the three actors in the drama of Good Friday where to a non-Christian it seems that it is a case of Jesus of Nazareth being the victim of betrayal by the Twelve, of intrigue on the part of Caiaphas, and of the cruel temporizing of a Roman governor. But God the Holy Trinity writes straight on the crooked lines of humanity. The three divine protagonists on Calvary act together and they do so “for us.” They conspire, it could be said, in our favor. The cross, or rather the Crucified One, is the living icon of the Triune God who saves us. And as Jean-Luc Marion observes, icons function by drawing us by means of what is visible toward what is invisible and mysterious, which then sheds its light and splendor on the beholder.⁴

As to the resurrection, a similar pattern is clearly observable. It is the Father who “will not let his holy One see corruption” (Acts 2:27) but who “raised him up, having freed him from death” (Acts 2:24, 32). The crucified and dead Christ “rose again on the third day” (1 Cor 15:3), while the Holy Spirit acts as the agent of the Father in raising and in glorifying the crucified Lord of glory (1 Cor 2:8). Good Friday and Easter Sunday focus on the divine three who conspire together in a divine project on behalf of humanity. Watching this drama shown to us on the stage of the church’s summit liturgical celebrations might have coaxed us closer, as it were, enabling us in the process to “perceive what is revealed” (Eph 1:17), making the mystery of the Trinity fascinating and intriguing, even if always more mysterious. In the words of Augustine: “*Si comprehendis non est Deus*” (If you understand, it

3. In each case, the Greek text employs the same verb, *paradidonai*.

4. Jean-Luc Marion, *God without Being* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), *passim*.

is not God that you have understood).⁵ Still, the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ together with the Holy Spirit advance toward us as eternal truth and true love and loving eternity.⁶ “God is love” (1 Jn 4:8, 16), writes John; but he immediately describes the kind of love he is naming: “This is the love I mean, not our love for God, but God’s love for us when he sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins” (1 Jn 4:10). God is love and God is Trinity. Here we encounter the first point of the spirituality manifested to Chiara Lubich as described by Maria Voce.

The Neoplatonic One, Not the Trinitarian One

What amazes us, then, is that we should arrive into the twentieth century and find ourselves more monotheists than Trinitarian theists. Karl Rahner was of the view that if the doctrine of the Trinity were deleted from the Creed that deletion would have little or no bearing on the way in which Christians thought about God. Other great theologians such as Hans Urs von Balthasar wrote along these very lines. The Italian theologian Bruno Forte wonders if “the God of Christians is a Christian God.”⁷

And yet, in spite of this state of affairs, the Trinity has made an amazing return to center stage. In fact, it is now center stage where it belonged. An Italian theologian, Nicola Ciolo, is of the view that the Blessed Trinity is now the grammar of all theology.⁸ A rapid recovery has happened. Many factors are responsible for this happy *ressourcement*. One of these factors has to be the

5. St. Augustine, *Sermon 52*, 16.

6. See St. Augustine, *Confessions*, 7, 10.

7. Bruno Forte, *Trinita come storia* (Milano: San Paolo, 1988), p. 13.

8. Nicola Ciolo, “L’avanzare di nuovi orizzonti,” in *Teologia trinitari: Storia—metodo—prospettive* (Bologna: EDB, 1996), pp. 157–97.

biblical, patristic, liturgical, and theological renewals that began in the nineteenth century and flowered in the last century. The Second Vatican Council saw the final flowering of these sources of faith and of faith-life. Another factor, however, has to be the emergence of spiritualities such as that of Chiara Lubich and the Focolare. That contention does require a little teasing out and perhaps some justification.

Chiara Lubich's Discovery of God-Love

As soon as Chiara Lubich and her first companions discovered that God is love, they quickly went on to discover further gospel truths such as Jesus dwelling in each person we meet, mutual love between people to the point of that unity for which Jesus suffered and prayed, and Jesus crucified and forsaken as the measure and the method of the love required. One might see in all of these points the presence, the dynamic, and the laws of New Testament love, or *agape*. Maria Voce notes that by living these points all drawn from the pages of the Gospels, Chiara and her companions discovered a spirituality flowing from the pure wellspring of divine revelation. However, what was particularly striking was the immediate link that Chiara observed from the beginning between the emerging spirituality and the mystery of the Trinity. In her words: "Whenever this spirituality is put into practice, it generates and fosters a life modeled on the life of the Holy Trinity, the life Jesus brought on earth."⁹

The lifestyle inspired by the spirituality, however, provided a ready and, let it be said, accessible entry to discoveries relating to the first mystery of the faith. We understand by living. "God is

Love" is the first point of the spirituality of unity. Because God *is* love, love is much more than an attribute of God. Rather, love is God's very being, it is his life. Now this makes us think at once of God's reality as consisting in the life of loving. However, there cannot be love without someone who loves, someone who is loved, the beloved, and the love uniting the lover and the beloved.

Now this is precisely the way Augustine accessed the Trinity in Book VIII of his great study. Whoever reads this masterpiece will immediately notice that Augustine had been seeking like a competent mountaineer for a firm foothold in order to climb toward some understanding of the God of Jesus Christ. He found that foothold in the experience of *caritas* in the church into which he had entered. Augustine found a point of access to the great mystery precisely in the church's practice of *caritas*. A phenomenology of love then enabled him to grasp something of the great mystery, something that drew him and fascinated him. Augustine could then write these words:

In truth, you see the Trinity if you see love. . . . They are three: the lover, the loved, and the love. . . . And not more than three: one who loves the one who comes from him, one who loves the one from whom he came, and love itself.¹⁰

At this point I remember vividly the experience of a young German priest who attended a Mariapolis of the Focolare in his native country.¹¹ Initially very suspicious as to what he saw going on around him, he asked a young girl, "What are you doing here?" only

10. St. Augustine, *De Trinitate*, VIII, 8, 12; VIII, 10, 14; VI, 5, 7.

11. A Mariapolis ("City of Mary") is a gathering where the emphasis is placed upon mutual love as the pearl of the gospel.

9. Chiara Lubich, "The Spirituality of Unity and Trinitarian Life," *New Humanity Review* 9 (2004): 6.

to receive the answer, “We’re living the Trinity.” The name of that priest was Klaus Hemmerle, later to become the bishop of Aachen as well as a renowned theologian and philosopher. “Chiara,” he wrote many decades later, “has conveyed to us a school of life. This school of life, however, is also a school for theology. The result is not so much an improvement of theology, as a living theology that originates from revelation.”¹²

Love of Neighbor in Each Present Moment

The second point of the spirituality presented by Maria Voce is that of love for each brother and the sister. This love is not generic in character but specific. It does not remain on the level of a vague benevolence but descends to action and concrete help. Chiara and her companions always tried to recall that the neighbor is the person you or I am with in the present moment. Relationships based on concrete loving of each neighbor became their very lifestyle, and all that under the bombs falling daily on their city. In the unfolding discovery of the gospel as the most practical of all spiritual guides, they put a central emphasis on their own relationships and on relationships with each brother and sister they encountered on the streets and in the air-raid shelters of Trent.

Now it is fascinating to notice that Augustine in Book V of his treatise on the Trinity made the “discovery” that each of the divine Persons is a relationship: “At times one speaks of God according to relation. Thus the Father bespeaks a relation to the Son, and the Son to the Father. Now this relation is not accidental, since the one is always the Father, the other always the Son.”¹³ This discovery

opened the way for him to advance his understanding of the great mystery of the Trinity. Of this discovery, Joseph Ratzinger writes in his now famous *Introduction to Christianity*:

In this simple affirmation [each divine Person is a relation] there is evident a genuine revolution in the form of the world: the absolute supremacy of a thinking focused on substance is displaced in as much as relation is discovered to be an equal and original modality of the real . . . and a new thinking about being emerges in reaction.¹⁴

Walter Kasper sees in this breakthrough of Augustine a veritable “revolution in the understanding of being . . . the ultimate and highest reality is not substance but relation.”¹⁵

However, in the history of theology there was an entirely opposite idea of the person that was destined to gain the ascendancy, the person, namely, as individual. The definition of Boethius from the eighth century omitted entirely the dimension of relation, replacing it with that of individual: “The person is the individual substance of rational nature.”¹⁶ Perhaps this notion or definition of person is what has most contributed to the anxiety of people in recent centuries to even think about the first mystery of the faith. The reason is obvious: if person is individual and not relation, then all mention of three Persons in the one God threatens the believer

14. Joseph Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1990), pp. 135–36.

15. Walter Kasper, *The God of Jesus Christ* (New York: Crossroads Publishing Company, 1986), p. 154.

16. Boethius, *Liber de persona et duabus naturis*, 3: PL 64, 1343; see St. Thomas, *Summa theologiae*, I, q. 29, a.1.

12. Klaus Hemmerle, “Tell Me about Your God,” *Being One* 1 (1996): 20.

13. St Augustine, *De Trinitate*, VIII, 5, 6.

with three divine Individuals, and that is the very definition of Tritheism. Three distinct divine centers of consciousness and action must entail three distinct beings. And believers are obliged to shy away from any such insinuation.

Mutual Love to the Point of Unity

The third major point of the spirituality of the Focolare that Maria Voce explores is that of mutual love to the point of unity. Pope John Paul II calls the new commandment (Jn 13:34; 15:12) the “pearl of the Gospel.” It is the necessary prelude to the unity for which Jesus prayed on the night before he died (Jn 17:21f) and which is a summit chapter of John’s Gospel, perhaps the summit of the whole of sacred scripture. When we live this way, the church becomes, both effectively and affectively, “a people made one from the unity of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.”¹⁷ The fruit of living this mutual love at this measure (note the “as” in the text of the new commandment) is also the gift of Jesus coming to live in our midst (Mt 18:20).

Now this experience of gospel living, particularly of living out the mutual relationship of the new commandment in the measure of the love that went all the way to the cross and the abandonment, is a fountainhead of insight. It led Chiara and her companions to a vivid realization of the classical language of Trinitarian theology. She writes:

The Father generates the Son out of love. Going completely out of himself, so to speak, he makes himself, in a certain sense, “non-being” out of love and for this reason he is

17. *Lumen Gentium*, 4.

Father. The Son, in turn, as an echo of the Father, returns to the Father out of love, making himself, too, in a certain sense, “non-being” out of love and for this reason he is Son. The Holy Spirit who is the mutual love between the Father and the Son, their bond of unity, also makes himself, in a certain sense, “non-being” out of love—that “non-being” and “emptiness of love” in which the Father and the Son meet and are one. And for this very reason he is Holy Spirit.¹⁸

This explanation not only does not damage the unity of God, it actually enhances that very unity. In a passage of exceptional ontological clarity, Chiara explains:

If we consider the Son in the Father, we must think of the Son as a nothingness (a nothingness of love) in order to think of God as One. And if we consider the Father in the Son, we must think of the Father as nothing (a nothingness of love) in order to think of God as One. There are three Persons in the Most Holy Trinity and yet they are One because Love *is not* and *is* at the same time. . . . In the relationship of the three divine Persons, therefore, each one is Love, each one *is* completely by not being, because each one is wholly by indwelling in the other Person, in an eternal self-giving.¹⁹

Chiara’s was a theology following upon life, and never otherwise. This explains her concern, particularly during the first decades of the movement, lest Paris would destroy Assisi.

18. Lubich, “Spirituality of Unity and Trinitarian Life,” p. 9.

19. *Ibid.*, pp. 9–10.

Jesus Crucified and Abandoned

We will recall that the fourth point presented by Maria Voce is that of Jesus crucified and abandoned. The cry of forsakenness is now recognized as a key moment of Jesus's passion and death. This recognition has led to a convergence of theologians from the churches: in the Orthodox Church one could mention Sergei Bulgakov; in the Lutheran Church, Jürgen Moltmann; and in the Catholic Church, Hans Urs von Balthasar. All focus very much on this dimension of the passion. The fruit of this happy convergence is an area of special growth in the dialogue between the theologians of the churches. In the magisterium of Pope John Paul II, the topic played a role that was profound, prominent, and proleptic. For Chiara, the cry of abandonment provides "the most luminous explanation of the meaning of love: to empty oneself, to 'not be,' to disappear, so as to be love in action."²⁰

At the beginning of the second century, Ignatius of Antioch described himself as "an imitator of the passion of my God."²¹ Perhaps the key reason why this cry was overlooked in the church since the early centuries when it was associated with the widespread and sustained phenomenon of martyrdom and persecution lay in the fact that it could be employed to suggest a denial of the divinity of the Lord. The discovery of the cry of abandonment in the Focolare spirituality far from threatening any heresy actually threw light on the mysterious and eternal loving that is the eternal event of the Blessed Trinity. In that way, it connects the redeeming Son's loss of his Father in his human soul at the summit moment of his loving us with the eternal self-emptying of the Son before the Father in the Trinity.

20. Ibid., p. 8.

21. St. Ignatius of Antioch, *Letter to the Romans*, 6.

The Christ who comes among us reveals and communicates to us the life of the Trinity. It is impossible to read the Gospels and not perceive that Jesus has one and only one mission in mind: to reveal the love of the God who had sent him: "Father, you have loved them as much as you have loved me" (Jn 17:23). His very existence is not only a pro-existence "for us" (Mk 10:45; Mt 26:28; 1 Cor 11:24), it is above all a pro-existence for his Father: "For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. . . . I have received this command from my Father" (Jn 10:17, 18). He makes himself a sacrifice for us, going to the cross. In that way he empties himself out totally. This *kenosis* is a form of non-being, but it is the non-being of love. The self-emptying redeeming Christ as Son of the eternal Father "lays down his life for us" and so he coaxes us toward a perception of his Trinitarian homeland where the Father and the Spirit and the Son live for and in each other.

This insinuates the great truth that each divine Person is a relationship of love for the others. Each person is when that person is not out of love for the others. In the words of Chiara:

In the light of the Trinity as revealed by Jesus forsaken, God who is Being reveals himself, we could say, as safe-keeping in his most inner recesses the non-being of self-giving: not the non-being which negates being, but the non-being which reveals Being as Love.²²

Theology in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries had arrived at a philosophy that was its instrument, its *ancilla*. That Christian

22. Lubich, "Spirituality of Unity and Trinitarian Life," p. 10; see Piero Coda, "L'unità e la trinità di Dio nel ritmo di una ontologia trinitaria," *Sophia: Ricerche su i fondamenti e la correlazione dei saperi*, 2 (2010): 174–89.

philosophy saw in the idea of the act of being, *esse*, that which is most profound in things. It then advanced further to see God as the pure act of Being. However, in the words of one of the founding members of the Abba School that Maria Voce discusses:

This act of being did not reach as far as being-love as God is Being-Love. *Philosophy*, in other words, did not reach as far as a *Trinitarian ontology*, which would be required by a being who is love. In fact, *it is only the Cross that could lead so far*.

But it must be the cross understood at the very heart of the Trinity and as the summit of humanity in its very thinking: *the Cross as a cultural event*.²³

This is perceptible only if the believer allows himself or herself “to be led into the night by Jesus forsaken, that is, by his life and *the thinking that radiates from it*, with its absolutely original categories.”²⁴ The truth is that “it depends on Christ whether we dare to address being as love, and thus all beings as worthy of love, an idea to which the face of the world would otherwise have hardly brought us.”²⁵

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23. Giuseppe Maria Zanghi, *Notte della cultura europea* (Roma: Citta Nuova, 2007), pp. 59–60.

24. *Ibid.*, p. 61.

25. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The von Balthasar Reader*, Medard Kehl and Werner Loeser, eds. (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1982), p. 113.

books are *Mary in the Mystery: The Woman in Whom Divinity and Humanity Rhyme* (2012); *Cardinal Newman for our Time* (2010); *A Fractured Relationship: Faith and the Crisis of Culture* (2010); *and The Trinity: Life of God and Hope for Humanity*, (2009).