

The “Yes” Under Every “No”

David L. Schindler

Pontifical John Paul II Institute for Studies on Marriage
and Family at The Catholic University of America

This article attempts a proposal regarding the center of the charism of Chiara Lubich and Focolare, drawing also from a retreat given by Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger. The proposal is that we must penetrate to the “yes” that is straining to come out into being in all those places and ways in which the world, at least on its surfaces, appears to be saying “no.”

The charism of the Focolare is one of love. Of course in today’s culture reference to love can seem vague and unrealistic. But as noted by Maria Voce, Focolare recuperates love in a new key: it recapitulates love in its wholeness—in its radicality and comprehensiveness—in a way that goes to the heart of the peculiar problems of our time. Indeed, the wholeness of love is just the point. We live in a time characterized above all by a new—indeed, one might say unprecedented—brokenness and

fragmentation. To quote the words of Chiara: “The groaning of creation, of which St. Paul speaks (Rm 8:22), seems no longer to be heard. It has been covered by what Heidegger called the ‘idle chatter of existence’ and therefore of an ‘inauthentic culture.’”¹ In this regard, Chiara says:

We no longer understand how God can fill the world with himself. For people of Western societies, the world has gradually become empty of meaning. . . . Gone is the intelligence of love capable of grasping the truth and beauty of creation *from its origins*, from God who contains it and nourishes it with himself. Instead, it has been replaced by a skeptical and cold rationality that moves *among* things without penetrating into their deepest roots.²

Chiara’s statements here, of course, do not at all imply that the world of today does not contain an abundance of achievements signaling the greatness of the human spirit. Indeed, to linger in the negative would belie the very burden of her lifework. Thus, she goes on, following the statements just cited, to ask whether we are “up against an irreversible crisis,” or rather whether there is hope for the “slow coming to birth of a new world.”³ As we know, she directs us emphatically toward such hope. The ground for this hope lies hidden in the very words with which she describes the culture’s central problem, that is, in her reference to a “rationality that moves *among* things without penetrating into their deepest roots,” and that thus fragments itself, for example, in

1. Chiara Lubich, *Essential Writings* (New York: New City Press, 2007), p. 213.

2. *Ibid.*

3. *Ibid.*

the interests of power or endless bits of information or technical efficiency. What is needed, then, is a rationality that unifies—and hence integrates. We need a rationality that sees things from their origin and destiny in the God who sustains and, indeed, somehow contains all things, thereby establishing humanity and the whole of creation in a fundamental unity or community.⁴

An excellent way of framing the problem of an intelligence of love and depth and current cultural problems is indicated by Thomas Norris and the other authors of the introduction to Chiara's recently published *Essential Writings*, in which they cite the words of the twentieth-century American poet, Wallace Stevens:

in the imagination's new beginning,
In the yes of the realist spoken because he must
Say yes, spoken because under every no
Lay a passion for yes that had never been broken.⁵

These words seem to take us to the heart of Chiara: we must penetrate to the yes that is straining to come into being in all of those places and ways in which the world, at least on its surfaces, appears to be saying no. It is this penetration that enables us to recuperate the meaning and authentic human culture that otherwise can remain buried within the often idle and distracted chatter of the dominant culture. It is in terms of the realist passion noted by Stevens—and I emphasize *realist*—for recovering the yes that

4. Cf. in this connection Pope Benedict XVI's lecture at Regensburg, in which he urged, with respect to Western science and the Western academy, an opening up of reason to the *Logos* of God.

5. Lubich, *Essential Writings*, p. 28; from *Esthétique du mal*, in *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1954), p. 320.

is never completely broken, even in the uttering of the most desperate and would-be nihilistic no,⁶ on which I wish to focus the key to what Chiara and Focolare call “the spirituality of unity, or communion.”

Jesus Forsaken and Mary's *Fiat*

As is well known, this communion for Chiara begins and ends with the love of God revealed to us in Jesus Christ as a Trinity. Further, in the words of John Paul II cited by Chiara, Mary is “an integral part of the economy of communicating” this love. Let me say a brief word about how both Jesus and Mary each disclose the shape of this love—and thus the most radical way of bringing to light the yes hidden inside every no.

First of all, love, says Chiara, is not merely an attribute of God, but God's very being, One and Triune at the same time: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This unity of God that is thus revealed to us as a communion of persons indicates the ultimate nature and measure of the love to which we are called. In the words of Jesus's prayer as recorded in the Gospel of John: “As you, Father, are in me and I in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you sent me” (Jn 17:21). What does this prayer of Jesus reveal about the nature of God's love?

Chiara says that in his abandonment Jesus made himself “sin” (2 Cor 5:21), “cursed” (Gal 3:13), in order to make himself one with those who were far from God. Jesus's separation from the Father on our behalf is the way to our unity with him in the Father. What this abandonment—suffering, crucifixion, and death—of Jesus

6. In the metaphysical terms of Thomism, the truth of these assertions is rooted in the understanding of evil as a privation of the good. Thus, even the strongest negations remain in their depths affirming passions for the good, however badly distorted.

means is beautifully expressed by Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger in his Lenten retreat of several years ago to John Paul II and the papal household. I would like to draw on his profound words that seem to me very appropriate for the present context:

It becomes clear that the abasement of the Incarnation . . . is in profound inner correspondence with the mystery of the Son: *the Son by his essence is the gift and giving back of himself: this is what is meant by “being son”* [emphasis added]. The Incarnation of the Son means from the beginning: “he became obedient unto death” (Phil. 2:8).⁷

The significance of Ratzinger’s emphasis on sonship becomes clearer when he points out that the sin of Adam lay not in wanting to become like God but in Adam’s casting off of the childhood-like character proper to his being *as a creature*. That is, we image God, according to Ratzinger, not when we set ourselves up as self-sufficient (and, so to speak, adult-like), but “by sharing in the action of the Son, . . . and thus in the measure that we become children.”⁸ “It is only by preserving the innermost heart of infancy, the existence of Son as lived by Jesus, that humanity enters with the Son into divinity.”⁹ It is as gifts—and thus as *receivers*—that we image the generous creative activity—the *giving*—of God the Father.

It is important to see here the entire arc and richness of Ratzinger’s idea of the creature’s participation *in the sonship* of Jesus,

and thus as it were in the *divine childlikeness*. There is in the child an original “letting be” of the other—a childlike *fiat* that takes the form of wonder before the other. Ratzinger mentions the ancient Greeks who stood at the origins of Western civilization, who, he says, wanted “to be a people of philosophers and not technocrats, that is, eternal children, apt to wonder in amazement” at reality in all its depths and openness to the transcendent.¹⁰ This *fiat* that takes the form of wonder before the other is completed only in the giving of oneself entirely to the other, to the point of being willing to die for the other. Jesus shows us the divine and human depth of this *fiat*—this original yes before the Father and all of creation—that goes to the end for the sake of the Father and of all creation.

Second, regarding Mary, Ratzinger says that this childlike yes of Jesus is in a significant sense learned from his mother’s yes, her yes that, as Ratzinger says, “*goes on always without wearying*” [emphasis added].¹¹ And thus we come to the important further meaning of Focolare as the “Work of Mary,” indeed to what Chiara (and Ratzinger and John Paul II) understand as the “Marian profile” of the church.

The key to understanding Mary lies in her *fiat*, expressed in her *magnificat* and in turn in her reality as *Theotokos*, as God-bearer, the bearer of Jesus in and all the way through his forsakenness:

- *Fiat*: Letting be, humble wonder before the Lord, making space for the reality of the other inside oneself. The fiat that goes on without wearying, remaining with the other to the end.

7. Joseph Ratzinger, *Journey towards Easter* (New York: Crossroads, 1987), p. 69.

8. Ibid.

9. Ibid., p. 72.

10. Ibid., p. 73.

11. Ibid., p. 74.

- *Magnificat*: Through the *fiat*, Mary magnifies the Lord, and also herself now as Mother of the Lord, becoming creative with the power of God. Letting the other be inside me enables me to magnify the other, to extend the power of the other—and myself—through our unity.
- *Theotokos*: This creativity becomes fruitful in bearing God into existence, in and with the power of God. In the letting be that enables unity between myself and the other, I am able to bear the other into a new form of existence: I liberate the other into a new fruitfulness.

The *fiat* that goes on without wearying, creativity, fruitfulness: these together indicate the unique way toward, and true nature of, unity. It is in Mary's *fiat*, *magnificat*, and *Theotokos* that we find the archetypal meaning, supernatural and natural, of this way.

As all of this clearly indicates, the *fiat* is not passivity or inactivity. On the contrary, the *fiat* presupposes the interior silence that alone permits the depths of the presence of the other. "Be still and know that I am God," says the Psalmist (Ps. 46:10). Without this interior stillness enabling true presence, we can, in the words of Job, know God—and the other—"only by hearsay" (42:1–6).

Indeed, the resonance of this truth disclosed in Mary, of the truth that the *fiat* is not uncreative activity nor a matter of an unrealistic Christian piety, can be confirmed by statements by two thinkers who can scarcely be accused of lacking in creative energy or of too much Christian piety: Friedrich Nietzsche and Jacques Derrida. Nietzsche states:

Is there a more sacred state than pregnancy? . . . Our child must be born from all that is best and gentlest. . . .

"Something greater than we are is growing here"—such is our most secret hope; we prepare everything with a view to his birth and prosperity—not merely everything that is useful, but also the noblest gifts of our souls.

We should, and can, live under the influence of such a blessed inspiration! Whether what we are looking forward to is a thought or a deed, our relationship to every essential achievement is none other than that of pregnancy, and all our vainglorious boasting about "willing" and "creating" should be cast to the winds! True and ideal selfishness consists in always watching over and restraining the soul, so that our productiveness may come to a beautiful termination.¹²

And in the words of Derrida:

[A]ffirmation [is] anterior to any question and more proper to thought than any question. . . . The remnant of the *Aufklärung* [Enlightenment] . . . slumber[s] in the privilege of the question. . . . The question is . . . not the last word in language. First, because it is not the first word. At any rate, before the word, there is this sometimes wordless word which we name the "yes." A sort of pre-ordinary pledge [*gage*] which precedes any other engagement in language or action.¹³

12. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Daybreak: Thoughts on the Prejudices of Morality*, edited by Maudemarie Clark and Brian Leiter, translated by R. J. Hallingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 522.

13. Jacques Derrida, *Of Spirit: Heidegger and the Question*, translated by Geoffrey Bennington and Rachel Bowlby (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), pp. 130–31.

The summary point here, then, is that, in the thought of Chiara and the “spirituality of unity, or communion,” the privilege of the question, or of the “no,” bequeathed to modernity by the Enlightenment is taken over and transformed by Jesus’s forsakenness and Mary’s unwearying *fiat*: by the affirmations of Jesus and Mary that bear death into life, and thereby all “noes” into “yeses.”

The Abba School

The Focolare’s Abba School is an important expression of Chiara’s “spirituality of unity” as sketched by Maria Voce. It is described in the words of Piero Coda as a “group of academics and scholars . . . in a variety of disciplines [who] have gathered around Chiara with the idea of making explicit the cultural dimensions of Jesus forsaken and of unity.”¹⁴ The new life and experience indicated in the spirituality of unity, in other words, is tied to a new doctrine, giving rise to a new theology and a new philosophy, and opening up a new sense of unity and integration among the disciplines. The key to this unity lies in the very term “Abba.” Abba, the prayer of Jesus to the Father in the garden of Gethsemane: the prayer of Jesus, that is, which is the inmost expression of the reality of Jesus as *Son*. It is in the reality of creation in Jesus as the Son of God, and thus in the image of his divine childlikeness, that we discover reality, the reality of humanity and of all that is, as a gift-meant-for-giving-back. Here we should cite the well-known text of *Gaudium et Spes*, 22: “Christ the Lord, Christ the new Adam, in the very revelation of the mystery of the Father and of his love, fully reveals man to himself and brings to light his most high calling.” We should also

say, he thereby fully reveals, in and through man, the meaning of all “flesh,” of the entire cosmos.¹⁵

What Chiara began in the “spirituality of unity,” and what she developed in the Abba School, and what is now taking concrete form in Sophia University in Italy can thus be seen both to anticipate and to express what, according to both John Paul II and Benedict XVI, indicates the central teaching of the Second Vatican Council as expressed in *Gaudium et Spes*. The task of the Abba School, in and through the lived experience of the love revealed in Jesus, the Son of God who loved to the end, is thus to show how the whole of reality is open to the logic of Jesus’s prayer as the Son. This task does not deny the legitimate autonomy of the academic disciplines. Rather, it shows how this autonomy is itself best understood in terms of the form and activity of filial love as revealed in Jesus (in both its supernatural and its natural meaning) in terms of a love that is first received as a gift. “In this is love, not that we have loved God, but that he has first loved us” (1 Jn 4:10).

The point is to see all things in light of their origin in God and, thus, as Chiara says, not as one perspective “side by side with other perspectives” but rather as the perspective that, in giving other perspectives their unity, opens “new horizons for them.”¹⁶ Rooted in Jesus, “in whom all realities are recapitulated, [this perspective] sheds light on the various sciences, making them truer and more genuine.”¹⁷ Again, the world has its own value in itself as creaturely, and its own autonomy, but, as Chiara says, the world from its origin is destined for “eschatological fulfillment in the Person

15. Cf. John Paul II, *Dominus Vivificantem*, p. 50.

16. Lubich, *Essential Writings*, p. 209.

17. *Ibid.*

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

of the Word Incarnate . . . , who recapitulates all in himself.”¹⁸ She adds:

Through the Holy Spirit we intuit the existence of a spousal relationship between the Uncreated and creation, because by becoming flesh, the Word aligned himself with creation thereby divinizing it and recapitulating it in himself. This wide and majestic vision makes us think of the entrance of all creation one day into the bosom of the Father. . . . Certainly, these new heavens and the new earth are still far from their full realization, but we can already see them developing in the heart of creation if we look at it with the eyes of the Risen One who lives in us and among us.¹⁹

Conclusion

I would like to conclude, then, simply by citing Chiara’s poem, “Give Me All Who Are Lonely,” as well as what she termed her “last wish,” which concretely express the depths and catholicity of her vision:

Lord, give me all who are lonely . . . I have felt in my heart
the passion that fills your heart for all the forsakenness in
which the whole world is drifting.
I love every being that is sick and alone.
Even the suffering of plants causes me pain . . . even the
animals that are alone.

18. *An Introduction to the Abba School: Conversations from the Focolare’s Interdisciplinary Study Group* (New York: New City Press, 2002), pp. 34–35.

19. *Ibid.*, pp. 36–37.

Who consoles their weeping?

Who mourns their slow death?

Who presses to their own heart, the heart in despair?

My God, let me be in this world the tangible sacrament
of your Love, of your being Love; let me be your arms
that press to themselves and consume in love all the
loneliness of the world.²⁰

And thus her “last wish” as she expresses it, using the words of Belgian theologian Jacques Leclercq: “On your day, my God, I shall come to you . . . , I shall come to you, my God . . . with my wildest dream: to bring you the world in my arms.”²¹

These words, I would say, harbor an ontological vision at the heart of which lies the Christ-like, Marian, and human truth of the words of Stevens, so necessary for the global culture of today, which I quote again:

in the imagination’s new beginning,
In the yes of the realist spoken because he must
Say yes, spoken because under every no
Lay a passion for yes that had never been broken.

It is in this passion for the yes hidden inside every no, the passion for yes that must never be broken, that we discover the testament of Chiara.

20. Lubich, *Essential Writings*, pp. 81–82.

21. *Ibid.*, p. 369 (cited by Chiara).

David L. Schindler is Dean Emeritus and Gagnon Professor of Fundamental Theology at the Pontifical John Paul II Institute for Studies on Marriage and Family at The Catholic University of America. He is also editor of Communio: International Catholic Review (American Edition). His most recent book is Ordering Love: Liberal Societies and the Memory of God (2011).