

A Sociological Reading of a New Cultural Scene

Jesus Forsaken in the 1940s

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This article presents the general assumptions of the sociology of knowledge, namely, the relationship between ideas and social context that inform recent social constructionist theories of authorship and authorship competencies. The author uses a case study format to examine the status of the idea of “Jesus forsaken” in the early years of the Focolare Movement. He explores how the idea came about, how it became a new and unique discourse, how it related to other discursive traditions, how it changed by discarding elements of some traditions and keeping elements of others and by dealing with social conditioning, and finally how it became a new, creative, and multilingual discourse in its own right.

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The Origins of a Concept

I intend to analyze the general relationship between social context and cultural production, more particularly the production of knowledge. Can we say that ideas, inspirations, lie at the root of the processes of social change? To put it simply: Are thoughts free or not? What influences can be singled out? Classical sociology responds by offering two ideal-typical positions. Classical and medieval thought, on the one hand, considered ideas to be free. Marxism and other similar perspectives, on the other, hold that ideas are completely determined. The two authors considered most important in the field, Max Scheler and Karl Mannheim, occupy different positions on this question, but both seek a synthesis between the two extreme positions. Essentially, contemporary sociologists cautiously reject the idea that thought is completely determined or dependent upon some social factor, but neither do they accept the notion of “complete freedom.”¹ No thought is completely determined by or dependent upon other thoughts and there is an element of freedom in the way thought is conceived. That said—and this is the position of Scheler in particular—ideas are weak and do not have strength to withstand the force of social conditioning if they fall into a social reality that opposes them.

In the context of an articulated reflection on the processes of cultural change, we might address this question about the freedom of thought to the collection of concrete, historical facts that attended the emergence of the Focolare Movement. Are we encountering here an original thought, a new inspiration? How

1. See Werner Stark, *Sociology of Knowledge: Towards a Deeper Understanding of the History of Ideas* (Piscataway, N.J.: Transaction Publishers, 1991).

much of it is really free, new, and how much expresses only the evolution of an entire system, a Catholic one in the case of the Focolare? And following the thought of Scheler, what is the genuine idea, the foundational inspiration, of the Focolare? During the early years, between 1940 and 1950, what process fulfills this inspiration? What brings about a real change? What is the nature of that change? And what is the social conditioning to which it is subjected? Does anything really change as a result of this inspiration?

The French sociologist Émile Poulat, an expert in Catholic culture, considers the concept of change too vague.² You must always contend with the relative character of each change; that is, to what end and for whom and at what period of concrete history are we faced with a change? In the case we are dealing with here, we will succinctly and schematically address a “cultural” change produced by the emergence of the Focolare. This approach will also draw on contributions from the current sociological research known as “social constructionism.”

Bakhtin and the Construction of Discourse

In the case of the construction of the discourse of the Focolare, we examine the evolution of the thought and words of young Chiara Lubich (1920–2008). From her initiative, the foundational nucleus of the Focolare Movement came into being in 1943. This group seemed to come from nowhere; everything seemed to start from scratch. What was new at the beginning was first of all the relationships that initiated a microsocial reality. We will focus on

2. See Émile Poulat, *Modernistica: Horizons, physionomies, débats* (Paris: Nouvelles Éditions Latines, 1982), 251–72.

those relationships and on the emerging social structure of the Focolare in its cultural aspect that came from them.

Is there some idea, some spark of inspiration in particular that emerges? Mikhail Bakhtin³ has developed a general approach to the question of how discourse is constructed and how one becomes the author of his or her own discourse. Bakhtin’s approach fits this case. In 1947, when church authorities urged Chiara Lubich to develop a small set of rules in order to give her group a canonical status, there appeared in text for the first time, in black and white, the term “spirituality.” It appeared that Chiara Lubich was the author of a new spirituality.

Bakhtin encourages us to question how a discourse comes about and how it becomes part of a collective discourse by bringing its own nuance. To this end, he developed the notions of “authorship” and “authorship competencies.” He notes, among other things, that the particular words of a new discourse already exist in the mouths of others, in other contexts, serving other people’s intentions.⁴ From others, Chiara Lubich borrowed words that articulated her new discourse, which in a few years would be called a “spirituality of unity.” What was cultural archive she often went to in those years? “The story of my life is always inherent (‘embedded’) in the stories of those communities from which I draw my identity,” writes MacIntyre.⁵ From which tradition did Chiara Lubich come? It is clear from the beginning that the Focolare Movement and Chiara Lubich in particular belonged to a specific

3. Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogical Imagination* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981).

4. *Ibid.*, 293–94.

5. *Ibid.*, 205.

cultural community, namely, the Italian-speaking part of the Trentino-Alto Adige region, a faith community of the Austro-Hungarian Catholic world with precise characteristics.⁶

But the question is, what do we make of the words that the early community received from the traditions that formed it? Did the local discourse of Trent continue simply as it was when Chiara Lubich and her companions began to put the gospel into their lives? Chiara Lubich at first favored the dominant Catholic discourse in circulation at that time and place, the one she learned from the nuns who taught her in school, from the Catholic Action, from the Italian Catholic Federation of University Students to which she belonged between 1935 and 1943, and from the Capuchin Franciscan world within which the group was organized in the very first years of the Focolare. But, as we shall see, there were new elements to Lubich's spirituality that modified and even discarded the usual local discourse.

Bakhtin argues, "Language is (super-) populated with the intentions of others. Appropriating them, forcing them to submit to their own intentions and accents, is a difficult and complicated process."⁷ What kind of "authorship" does Chiara Lubich develop? More precisely, from whom does she borrow, what does she select, and what does she discard in the production of her own discourse?

We take for granted that the development of a particular discourse is a work of appropriation and selection in a process that often continues to participate in a certain reproduction, what John

Shotter⁸ calls a process of creative re-interpretation. Regarding Chiara Lubich and the spirituality of unity, are we in the presence of a creative re-interpretation, a new style, and new emergent skills? To speak about this process, the authors mentioned here suggest that we look to the notion of difference. Kenneth J. Gergen writes, "We find that the construction of one's own discourse requires a difference."⁹ He makes it clear that precisely from the matrix of difference does new discourse come into existence: "Without contrasting traditions, the significance of one's own becomes pallid."¹⁰ Do we discover in the case of Chiara Lubich's emerging discourse a tradition that is different, that stands in contrast to the others that had an early influence on her?

The Difference

Gergen's final step concerns the notion of difference. In the elaboration of discourse, he emphasizes what he calls the creation of new amalgams. For him, these are "forms of religious practice that draw from otherwise conflicting traditions."¹¹ Gergen points out that the strength of Christianity lies in its multilingual tradition, which brings together elements of Jewish, Greek, and Roman traditions. What kind of multilingualism does Focolare discourse

8. "People mutually and reciprocally negotiate sustainable conversation and associated contexts of meaning, at once allowing for constantly accumulating richness and appearance of continuity and order, and for creative reinterpretation of categories and styles so that competencies and new meanings can emerge" (John Shotter, *Social Accountability and Selfhood* [Oxford: Blackwell, 1984], 52–53).

9. "We find that the movement into meaning requires difference," quoted in Kenneth J. Gergen, *An Invitation to Social Construction* (London: Sage, 2002), 19.

10. *Ibid.*, 19.

11. "Moreover, we may specially prize the emergence of new amalgams, forms of religious practice that draw from otherwise conflicting traditions." *Ibid.*, 20.

6. See Callebaut, *Tradition, charisme and prophétie dans le Mouvement des international Focolari: Analyse sociologique* (Paris: Nouvelle Cité, 2010), 122–68. Hereafter, TCP.

7. Bakhtin, 293–94.

display? Along the way, we must address the social conditioning of the inspiration that is the subject of our brief investigation.

We are fortunate to have in the historical records of the Focolare a central point in the “elaborated discourse” that is considered central to what is truly “new,” according to the Focolare Movement. The discourse that the founder of the Focolare holds as new concerns “Jesus forsaken,” a term that refers to the well-known passage concerning Jesus on the cross when he cries out: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me” (see Mk 15:34 and Mt 27:45).¹² It is not only Chiara Lubich who has the impression that this is a new discourse, but today theologians and Focolare scholars as well. And sociologists? Their methodology is to accept the term “Jesus forsaken” as a “definition of the situation” produced by the social actors themselves, and then submit it to investigation, since in their professional practice things are not to be accepted “at face value.”

We can articulate the questions that will help us “at every twist and turn in the process of reflecting.”¹³ How did Chiara Lubich’s idea, her main inspiration, come about? How was it articulated and transmitted? How did it become a discourse unto itself? Did

the words that it uses exist already? From what tradition does it draw its lifeblood? What does it produce from that source? Does it change it or remake it? What does it discard, keep, or appropriate? Can we call the result a re-creative interpretation? In producing a discourse marked by difference, do we find contrasting traditions? What type of multilingualism is practiced in this discourse? What social conditioning has this discourse undergone over time? Let us look at these questions now.

How Did the Original Inspiration Come About?

By January 24, 1944, Chiara had gathered around her in the course of a few months a group of girls, even though all of them still lived at home with their parents. She met with them daily to share their experiences with trying to live certain phrases from the gospels. Moreover, Lubich, a young schoolteacher, also had responsibility for a larger group of girls connected with the young women’s section of the Capuchin Fathers’ Franciscan Third Order, in Trent. Then, a scene unfolded in the bedroom of one of the young women, Dori, who had taken sick while working with the poor people that the group was assisting out of the gospel duty to serve Jesus in the poor. One of the Capuchin fathers, the group’s clerical assistant, brought Holy Communion to her, with Chiara Lubich present. Wishing to have a spiritual thought to accompany this moment, he asked Chiara Lubich which moment, in her opinion, was the one in which Jesus suffered the most. Chiara drew her response from the tradition she knew at the time: Christ’s suffering in the Garden of Gethsemane. But the priest replied, “I think instead, that it was that moment on the cross when he cried out, ‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’” (Mt 27: 46). The anecdote continues as written by Dori:

12. For the reflections of Chiara Lubich, see: *Unity and Jesus Forsaken* (New York: New City Press, 1985), and *The Cry: Of Jesus Crucified and Forsaken* (New York: New City Press, 2001), and *Essential Writings* (New York: New City Press, 2001). For an exegetical reflection, see Gérard Rossé, *Il grido di Gesù in croce: Una panoramica esegetica e teologica* (Rome: Città Nuova, 1984). For theological works, see Stefan Tobler, *Tutto il Vangelo in quel grido: Gesù abbandonato nei testi di Chiara Lubich* [from the German original] (Rome: Città Nuova, 2009); and Florence Gillet, *La scelta di Gesù abbandonato: Nella prospettiva teologica di Chiara Lubich* (Rome: Città Nuova, 2009).

13. James Beckford, *Social Theory and Religion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 12.

As soon as the priest left, I turned to Chiara for an explanation of the answer she had given to him. Instead she replied: “If Jesus’ greatest suffering was his being forsaken by the Father, we will choose him as our Ideal; that is the way we will follow him.”¹⁴

Decades later, Dori Zamboni told me on two separate occasions that Chiara had added immediately, “If this is where he has suffered the most, it is there that he has loved the most.”

This second version is confirmed indirectly by Chiara Lubich herself, who wrote not more than six days later to her sister Liliana something that she repeated many times: “We immediately contemplated in him *the height of his love because it was the height of his suffering*.”¹⁵ Dori’s second version is confirmed by the word “immediately.” We need to observe here that its origin is not an inspiration that comes from Chiara but from the priest. He did not make much of it in particular, but Chiara, upon hearing his comment, made it the Ideal of her life. In terms of the question of social conditioning, while a large part of the Trentine clerical world would for a while doubt the value of developments based on that episode of the “cry” of Jesus, the Focolare Movement would say that they had received the original inspiration from the “church.” It is nevertheless clear that it was Chiara Lubich who made it the center of her life, and of her new spirituality.

How Did it Develop?

Dori Zamboni notes in her recollection, “Since that day, Chiara often, actually always, spoke to me of Jesus forsaken. He was *the*

14. Lubich, *Essential Writings*, 20–21.

15. *Ibid.*, 22.

living personality in our lives.”¹⁶ The letters and other evidence from the 1940s essentially confirm this story. The heart of Chiara Lubich’s discourse in those years lay in deepening her experience of that particular moment of Christ’s passion: “The choice of God, which had characterized the first step of our new life, became clearer: to choose God for us meant to choose Jesus forsaken. . . . Jesus forsaken was the only book we read.”¹⁷ In a letter from June 7, 1944, Chiara writes: “This is where it all lies. This is all the love of a God.”¹⁸ These words more or less sum up the general impression of the early days of the Focolare and, statistically speaking, reflect the frequency of references to him. Therefore, there is no reason to doubt Chiara’s affirmation that he is the personality that filled her life and that of her first companions, both men and women. And this was something new for Chiara and her companions, and, as we shall see, for the church.

The comment that Chiara Lubich would make years later, as she rereads those early writings, is quite moving;

Looking through these writings that we have kept from that time, we have the impression that this love for Jesus forsaken has entered, penetrated, and swept through our hearts like a fire that consumes everything, saving nothing; like a divine passion that overwhelms and completely engages our heart, mind, strength; like a bolt of lightning that illuminates everything. We saw. We understood. They were rivers of light.¹⁹

16. *Ibid.*, 21.

17. *Ibid.*

18. *Ibid.*, 22.

19. *Ibid.*, 21.

At the end of September 1949, Chiara Lubich wrote one of the most famous texts that ever came from her pen: “I have only one Spouse on earth, Jesus forsaken. I have no God but him.”²⁰ This spousal relationship, an element found in Christian spiritual literature down through the centuries, is the culmination of the new inspiration translated into the foundation of a life’s journey.

A Particular Discourse: Original, New?

An oral history I received relates that when the Franciscan priest who was the source of this inspiration met Chiara Lubich a few days afterward and she made him aware of the developments that had followed from those words of his, he was frightened. He explained that his was only a pious thought, to meditate upon, not to live as they had interpreted it. As a matter of fact, no one talked like Chiara and her companions. Later, the priest regretted his reaction, and he allowed them to go ahead. But soon they realized that “Some understood, and some did not. Those who were touched and enlightened felt morally committed to the ideal ‘may they all be one.’”²¹

The evidence suggests that we are dealing here with an idea, thought, and discourse that is new. Although in her private letters she speaks almost always of Jesus forsaken, who is defined as the “secret” of unity, in the first official document presenting the history of the Focolare Movement, Chiara devotes to the concept of Jesus forsaken only two lines at the end of the twelve-page manuscript as it has come down to us: *A bit of history*.²² But the last

line that follows immediately and concludes the manuscript reads: “It is the perennial meditation for all of us and the only model offered us in this one life that we have.” The text does not mention Jesus forsaken directly and instead uses biblical citations more prudently. This clearly shows that the “something new” did not fit the traditional pious culture of the time.

We have here a clear example of social conditioning, or in this case ecclesiastical conditioning. The criticisms that built up in the city induced them to prudence. Without denying the inspiration, of course, here we see an example of Jean Séguy’s “prudent management” of a new inspiration.²³ Clear proof that this very central point caused difficulty because it was new can be found in a bishop’s comment when in 1960 the Italian Episcopal Conference had to give its opinion concerning the Focolare Movement in view of the Vatican’s approval at that time. He said that it esteemed a “doctrine unknown to the church.”²⁴

When Chiara Lubich finally published *The Cry* in 2001, her charism was widely recognized within the church as authentic and original. In this book, she states clearly that it was not she who initiated this “different” discourse, but God. She writes, “God focused our souls on Jesus’ forsakenness right from the start of our Movement.”²⁵ Throughout the book she returns to the fact that the initiative, the inspiration, truly came from on High. But we are still at the level of personal conviction. This would not entirely convince a sociologist of the inspiration’s true originality.

hast thou forsaken me!” See Chiara Lubich, *A Bit of History of the “Movement for Unity,”* (Trento: AOR, 1950), 12.

23. Jean Séguy, “Charisme, sacerdoce, fondation: Autour de L.M. Grignion de Montfort,” *Social Compass* (1982): 21–22.

24. For a review of the episode, see Callebaut, TCP, 401–6.

25. Lubich, *The Cry*, 35.

20. Ibid.

21. Ibid., 26.

22. “Truly these souls can say like St. Paul: Who did not know Christ Crucified! And love him especially when in maximum agony he cried out, ‘My God, my God, why

However, now even theological research increasingly confirms the substantial difference between the previous approaches of the great figures of Christian reflection and that of Chiara Lubich, which imparts new meaning to these words from Christ's Passion. Piero Coda points out the differences between, on the one hand, the writings of Augustine, Francis of Assisi, Thomas Aquinas, and John of the Cross and, on the other, the yet-to-be published mystical documents of Chiara Lubich.²⁶ Here, we are clearly operating at the level of theological conviction, strengthened by the process of reasoning of theologians who examine the workings of the Holy Spirit. They note that the Holy Spirit would not repeat the same idea in order to give the same inspiration. Obviously, if theologians carefully scrutinizing texts produced over two millennia of Christian thought do not find evidence of such a repetition, we are dealing with objective elements that sociology must accept and in turn interpret.

Did the Words Already Exist?

We know relatively little about what Chiara Lubich had drawn together from her cultural experience before starting the group that gave rise to the Focolare Movement. Her parents came from a working-class background. According to her elder brother, Gino Lubich, the thirst for reading and culture was much stronger in their generation. "We read avant-garde Catholic authors,"²⁷ he

26. Piero Coda, "Gesù Abbandonato e l'unità: Per una lettura teologica del charisma dell'unità," in *Comunione e innovazione sociale: Il contributo di Chiara Lubich*, ed. Antonio Leonardi (Rome: Città Nuova, 2012), 213–23. *Claritas: Journal of Dialogue and Culture* has published a part of the mystical documents of Chiara Lubich, as well as articles that quote passages from them. See especially *Claritas* 1, no. 1 (2012): 4–45.

27. Bernhard Callebaut, *Unpublished Interview with Gino Lubich*, March 12, 1987, 8.

recalled, something Chiara confirmed when she listed in order of importance the influences on her formation—her mother, her brother, books, and finally Catholic Action, with which she became involved at age fifteen. She certainly read authors such as Augustine, Francis and Clare of Assisi, Catherine of Siena, and of course Dante, and she read about the lives of the saints. But especially notable was the knowledge she accrued from reading scriptural texts in the daily missal, which she quoted with great facility throughout her life. In an interview she told me about the importance of scripture to her:

They paved the way for me to welcome the new charism of the Movement. Then the inner impulses of the charism itself, highlighted by the scriptures, especially the Gospels, and approved by the church, were decisive.²⁸

The discourse that came to be elaborated and ultimately constituted the spirituality of the Focolare Movement contains some new words, although some of these emerged from preexisting words that came to have a new content. Both processes seem to be present in the development of the Focolare. But if we focus on the key term "Jesus forsaken," which is sometimes written also with a capital "F," we see that it is an invented word, a true neologism. Piero Coda has defined it as one "in which the adjective 'forsaken' is written with a capital letter, as if it were a proper name."²⁹ Chiara's awareness of being before something new came about almost immediately. In a letter dated December 8, 1944,

28. Callebaut, TCP, LV.

29. Coda, 221.

Chiara wrote, “As God he made that cry the norm of a new life, according to a new ideal.”³⁰ Years later, Chiara commented, “It was a new spirituality, therefore, that the Holy Spirit was showering upon earth. It was a new ideal; he was calling us to be among the first to live it.”³¹

What to Choose; What to Discard?

It seems to me more difficult to investigate the process of selection at work in the development of the new ideas in Lubich’s discourse. When the problem of locating an inspiration in the tradition of the church arose, to situate her new spirituality Chiara used the image of a new bloom in the canopy of the tree of the church, an image that obviously presupposes a complete tree and its roots. She preferred speaking about something “new” not in terms of contrast but in terms of continuity. While she never hesitated to speak of revelations or even re-revelations when touching on the theme of the Forsaken One, she clearly selected from preexisting ideas. But she also then used a given selected idea as a single focal point for her new understanding of Jesus’s message. To understand the founder of the Focolare Movement, we would do well to understand that while she tried to take into account the whole legacy of the gospel message, she read it constantly from the viewpoint of the mystery of the Forsaken One.

But does this selection also mean that something has been discarded? In a sense, yes. We find evidence in the life of the young Chiara, even before the episode of January 1944, of this capacity to choose and discard. There is a single incident that might

be applied to other situations as we investigate more widely the legacy of episodes in the Focolare Movement. This incident can help us understand where something has been discarded in order to identify accents, nuances, that are more in tune with the great tradition of the church than with the smaller traditions that have come to life through the centuries. Before the Focolare came to be, in 1938–39 Chiara was teaching in a little mountain village in the Val di Sole, in Trentino. Oreste Paliotti, one of the first men to join Lubich’s group, reports the incident as follows:

At a certain moment, during the first meeting outside school as part of Catholic Action, Elena [a young woman who became a friend of her teacher, Chiara Lubich] could not help but blurt out: “Why do you, Miss, receive daily Communion?” And Silvia [she changed her name to Chiara when she joined the Franciscan Third Order] replied: “You can do it also.” “Really,” the girl replied, “our parents taught us that God, from heaven, punishes the wicked and rewards the good. We are sinners, and there is no need to make a joke of taking Communion and then disobeying, responding badly.” Surely Elena did not expect to see her teacher break out in laughter that spread to the others. “But what do you think?” the schoolteacher said. “Jesus is like a mother. We go to him and he comes to us and makes us become like him. A mother does not use the same method with every child. Each one takes it their own way. That’s how Jesus does it with us.”³²

30. Lubich, *Essential Writings*, 24.

31. *Ibid.*

32. Oreste Paliotti, *Un anno a Castello: Quando Chiara era Silvia, maestrina nella Val di Sole* (Rome: Self-published, 2002), 6.

Obviously, Lubich is coming from a completely different spiritual-theological school of thought than the Jansenism that influenced, we can surmise, Elena's question. Elena obviously had a much gloomier image of God, as is often sensed when analyzing certain spiritualities in fashion at the beginning of the twentieth century.

A Creative Re-interpretation as a Result?

With Jesus forsaken as its source of unity, can the spirituality of the Focolare be described as a creative re-interpretation of the mystery of Christ's cross and resurrection?³³ Two episodes support this case of re-interpretation. The first, from a time before the "discovery" of Jesus forsaken, is presented in Lubich's memoir, *The Cry*. Chiara was invited to speak to a group of young women, probably in the spring of 1943. Here, we see how love is tied up with her understanding of suffering. The Capuchin who was leading the group asked her, "What will you speak about?" "Love," Chiara Lubich responded. "And what is love?" he asked. "Jesus crucified," Chiara answered. Reflecting on that event in 2000, she wrote:

In those days, even in traditionally religious environments like the ones we came from, it was uncommon to hear anyone speaking about love; and even less, to believe that the Crucified One, who draws all to himself, was a valid means for the apostolate of our times. Nevertheless, I admit that to

33. "Time made everything clearer: God was calling us to Unity . . . and Jesus forsaken as its secret: he was this condition to fulfill Jesus' final testament: 'May they all be one.'" Lubich, *Essential Writings*, 24.

this day I do not know who put on my lips that definition of love.³⁴

The second crucial episode in the development of the Focolare Movement is described in the passage from January 24, 1944 quoted above, wherein the priest declares Jesus's suffering was greatest on the cross. I would draw attention to the fact that it was a Capuchin priest who spoke of Jesus's greatest suffering. Traditionally, the Capuchins are well known for their asceticism. In fact, during those early days of the Movement the priest, recognizing the zeal of that first group of girls, guided them toward the ascetical practices that the friars used (fasting, coarse undergarments, and things like that). But soon Lubich and her companions would leave these behind because they realized that loving the sister or brother near them would in itself be ascetical practice enough. But in the January 24 episode the young Chiara Lubich understood right away what the priest, who had already left, had said and she commented to her young friend Dori that if this was the moment of Jesus's greatest suffering, then it was also the moment of his greatest love. The priest's reasoning had pushed her in a direction in which she felt called to act always with the measure of this love. For Chiara Lubich, gospel love was never merely a concept. Her creative interpretation of this episode of the Forsaken One seemed to apply particularly to *social relationships*, while for authors like John of the Cross, love was understood to have a spiritual benefit that obtained primarily between the soul and God. Piero Coda sums up this difference in these words:

34. Lubich, *The Cry*, 36–37.

If John of the Cross says that being empty of everything, as Jesus was in his forsakenness, is the way by which we can make ourselves one with God, Chiara, reaffirming this, emphasizes that Jesus Forsaken is at the same time the way to rediscover God in relationship with one's brothers and sisters.³⁵

Contrasting Tradition?

We see already that the story of Chiara's relationship with Jesus forsaken provides an example of contrasting traditions. When she first came across the biblical passage describing Jesus's cry of forsakenness, the young Chiara Lubich identifies Christ's greatest suffering as the episode in the Garden of Gethsemane. The overwhelming majority of believers at that time would have made the same identification. The priest's response was different, and it is in this sense that Chiara, accepting the new definition, takes up a contrasting tradition. Indeed, the same priest did not recall where this observation of his came from. One of his fellow friars at the monastery in Trent, Fr. Bonaventura di Malè, thought that it was connected to something being read in those days at the monastery from a classic author of French spirituality from the 1600s, the Dominican Louis Chardon. He actually speaks of forsakenness.³⁶ But the passage does not confirm one meaning or the other (social or personal). The work of the biblical scholar Gérard Rossé, on the other hand, confirms that the theme of Jesus forsaken was not

35. Coda, 221.

36. "When (the Father), without the mediation of his creatures . . . applies himself to be not so much the principle of the cross, as the cross itself of his Son . . . he hides the quality of his Fatherhood. . . . God in his appearance shifts the streams of the sweetness of his goodness, so then Jesus is not calling only for his Father, but his God." See Louis Chardon, *La croix de Jésus*, vol. I (Paris: CERF, 1985), 256–57.

absent from the reflections of great figures of theology.³⁷ So there actually was a precedent for the development that Chiara Lubich brought about. In the context of the 1940s in Trent, the contrast becomes clear: The conclusions and practices that the Focolare Movement drew from that discourse stand against the sensibilities of militant Catholicism in those days.

For example, Focolare members learned from the beginning to treat communists as brothers and sisters to be loved. Catholic Action, like other Catholic organizations, considered them much more as enemies to be fought against ideologically. The political struggle was hard enough during the years just after the war, so they wanted a virile, strong Catholicism that did not give way before the "communist enemy." Because Focolare members spoke so easily of love, particularly gospel love—even of one's enemy—they came to be accused of spreading a soft, sentimental Catholicism.³⁸ In an environment where love was interpreted only in terms of male-female relationships, in church settings "love" clashed with prevailing sentiments of the Catholic laity. Because Christian spiritual discourses about love pertained to mysticism and to the closed world of convents and monasteries, a world of high spirituality, it was thought to be completely beyond the grasp of laypeople.

For the young focolarini "love" dealt with gospel language as such; but that was not the usual way of speaking for most Catholics. The usual discourses concerned morality, the Ten Commandments, but Focolare members went directly to scripture and spoke of it daily with one another in a way that swiftly produced a

37. Rossé, *Il grido di Gesù in croce*.

38. See Bernhard Callebaut, interviews with Catholic militant activists of the 1940s: *Interview with Gianpaolo Andreatta*, May 27, 1998; and *Interview with Msgr. Cesconi*, February 1, 2000. Author's translation.

discourse quite different from that produced by the usual Catholic language. This gospel-based discourse convinced some that the focolarini were in some way becoming Protestants. Questioned fifty years later, one of the emblematic figures in Trent who opposed the Focolare Movement at that time, Monsignor Cesconi, related to me many details that were understood according the tradition of the diocese and of Catholic Action in the Trent area. For example, he said, “We didn’t really look beyond the boundaries of the parish.” This stood in sharp contrast with members of the Focolare Movement, who even at that point in time dreamed of bringing their ideal to every continent of the world.

But such contrasting traditions were not confined only to the area around Trent. I refer here to what is summed up by one of the most notable national figures connected to the Italian Catholic Action in the 1940s, Fr. Arturo Paoli, who later became a member of Charles de Foucauld’s Little Brothers of Jesus. He said of Italian lay spirituality: “It was essentially a monastic spirituality, a spirituality of disengagement, and asceticism based on spiritual practices. . . . In this, it was a spirituality of escape. The world is outside the limit of this spirituality, not a set of lungs that expanded it.”³⁹ At the beginning Focolare members were practicing a “tradition” quite different from this, a tradition of lay, communitarian spirituality that aimed to transform relationships, society, and the world.

The Multilingualism Typical of Lubich?

What about a Lubichian multilingualism? Let us start analyzing this aspect from a representative and at the same time astonishing

39. Cited in Gianfranco Poggi, *Il clero de riserva: Studio sociologico sull'azione cattolica italiano durante la presidenza Gedda* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1963), 204.

quote about the place Jesus forsaken took in the lives of members of the Focolare:

He fascinated us, and perhaps we fell in love with him because, from the very beginning, we started seeing him everywhere. He presented himself to us with the most different faces in all the painful aspects of life. They were nothing but him, only him. Though new every time, they were simply him.⁴⁰

This quotation alone would be enough to understand that in the discourse of the Focolare Movement, mystical yearning moved out from the monasteries and convents. It took on a social reality adapted to the lives of twentieth-century laypeople. But as a young woman, Lubich did not realize in the 1940s that developing her discourse would create bridges between a number of quite different traditions.

A specialist in church history, Igino Giordani, who met Chiara Lubich in September 1948, was touched by the affinity of her discourse with that of the Fathers of the Church. Later on, looking for allies in the tradition for her insights, Chiara often turned to these Fathers for their wisdom and related thoughts. And even as she detached herself from the Franciscan tradition to follow the way of inspiration that was given to her, she always maintained a strong affection for the great spiritual figures like Francis and Clare, as well as Catherine of Siena, Teresa of Avila, and Thérèse of Lisieux. It turned out that all through her long life, little by little, she encountered other masters of the spiritual life in different

40. Lubich, *The Cry*, 46.

Catholic traditions and mentioned them in and integrated them into her own discourses.

It was a great discovery in the early 1960s that, beyond the Catholic tradition, her discourse came to be accepted and welcomed by Anglicans, members of the Reformed Church, Lutherans, and other Protestants. Then in the 1970s, it was discovered that in some of her discourse were elements that had a particular affinity with the worlds of other religions, such as those of Buddhists, Hindus, Muslims, and Jews. These affinities were not apparent at the beginning, but immediately after the Second Vatican Council these discoveries provided interreligious bridges that the Focolare discourse would use.

But in the 1940s, the preconciliar Roman Catholic Church was oriented more toward conversion than to dialogue with other religions. Because of the social conditioning typical of the preconciliar church, particularly in Italy, Chiara's early writings, which began to be published in 1956 in the Focolare magazine and in 1959 in various books, did not carry the true signature of the founder. Her signature did not emerge until the Movement received definitive ecclesiastical approval in 1964. Previously, church authorities had many doubts and hesitations, even though Pope Pius XII fully supported the Movement and its founder. Its inspiration, what the Focolare was teaching, seemed too charismatic, "lacking a clear and organic spiritual doctrine," as Archbishop Enrico Nicodemo reported to the Italian Episcopal Conference in 1960, even though three years earlier Pius XII had found no difficulty with it.⁴¹

However, Jesus forsaken had prepared the Focolare Movement to develop new dialogical skills. During the 1950s, to give but

one example, they had the reputation within the Italian Catholic Church as being the only Catholics who were able to attract communists, even though everywhere else—especially among young people—the opposite was happening: Young Catholics were becoming communists. These skills were congruent with those perspectives the Council would later consider fundamental for the church. In a preconciliar church already marked by a discourse (a tradition two centuries old or more) that was defensive against the modern world, that stressed discourses of identity and contrast with other religions and ideologies, there appeared this different kind of discourse established upon the One who had finally broken down the walls between heaven and earth and between all human beings. Much later, it became clear how in a world without religious orientation Jesus forsaken seemed the perfect icon of a God for our times, through his own experience being able to capture the absence of God in human experience.

Over the last fifty years, the multilingualism typical of Lubich has been put into practice effectively through dialogue with all of these worlds. In *The Cry*, which seeks to synthesize the unity that "Jesus forsaken generates,"⁴² Chiara Lubich writes about the four dialogues with the world: "the first dialogue" (within the Catholic Church), "the second dialogue" (ecumenical), "the third dialogue" (interreligious), and "the fourth dialogue" (with persons without a religious conviction). Only a discourse that is multilingual can create dialogues that reach out to all humankind.

The Cry demonstrates the fact that in all the years since its first expression, the discourse of the Focolare spirituality has taken up the words and syntax of other experiences, other discourses, and

41. For the history of the Church's reaction to the emergence of the environment of the Focolare Movement in the 1950s, see Bernhard Callebaut, TCP, 376–531.

42. Lubich, *The Cry*, 53.

has integrated them and expressed them in its own discourse. It is not my intention here to speak of its successes, difficulties, and evolutions. But its discourse clearly follows the path that Bakhtin predicts. At the beginning it expresses a quite subtle difference; then it is elaborated as one that is new and adaptive, discarding and selecting its language and past experiences and folding them into its new experience and above all its new inspiration.

This newness is relative, since the Movement's core principles are obedient to the canons of the Catholic Church, which hold that revelation ended with the last book of the New Testament. Piero Coda recently summarized the *novum* (what is new) of Jesus forsaken as "the glowing nucleus of that which, in the two-thousand-year history of Christianity, is the irruption of an unprecedented experience and an interpretation, but at the same time is as ancient as the gospel."⁴³ We know today that those few words exchanged in a young woman's sickroom have generated not only a discourse with new accents, a discourse truly never before developed in the course of Christian history, but also a social reality that supports the discourse and makes more visible its social and religious consequences. It parallels the development of the foundations of the postconciliar church and expresses a spirituality that opens up the frontiers of the fraternal relationships that are possible across all social divisions and boundaries in the global contemporary world wherein the Focolare finds its spouse, Jesus

forsaken. And it pushes the world of Christianity toward a more communal church, made in the image of the Forsaken One who put back into relationship heaven and earth.

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43. Coda, 1. He continues: "It is a new perspective on the way of the Spirit who guides us to the whole truth (see John 16:13), a look of faith that opens to illuminate a panorama not already attended to, an original style of discipleship occurring in the Church, the consequences of which are much more extensive, involving the various areas of personal and community life, how much more profound and simple is the intuition from which they spring."