

Inauguration of the First Course of the Institute of Higher Learning¹

Chiara Lubich

Abstract: *We publish the talk that Chiara Lubich gave in 2001 at the inauguration of the Istituto Superiore di Cultura, the historical forerunner of the Sophia University Institute. She recalls her mystical experience of 1949 and illustrates how this experience inspires a new vision of university studies for the renewal of culture in the spirit of unity.*

1. Chiara Lubich delivered this talk in Montet, Switzerland, on August 15, 2001. Montet is a center of formation of the Focolare Movement in Switzerland.

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My dear gen,² this day has arrived in which all the “gen world”—and not only those who are gen—are looking here to Montet, because we are inaugurating the first year of the university that we feel the Lord wants. It is a further concrete expression of one aspect of our movement, the aspect we call “Wisdom and Study.”

Why is it that you, gen, of all the eighteen branches of the Focolare Movement, are the ones present here today? One reason is, undoubtedly, that those your age are more apt to study. But also because, owing to an inscrutable design of the providence of God, who follows and guides even the small steps we take, you—after the focolarini, of course—have been shown the first pages of “Paradise ’49,”³ which is the wellspring, the origin, of our way of seeing and of knowing (as much as possible) what is created and what is the Uncreated.

This privilege is not related to your particular merits—you know this—nor is it aimed at giving you special spiritual delights

2. Gen, abbreviation for “New Generation,” names the young people who belong to the Focolare Movement. It has become clear that this talk is of interest not only to members of the Focolare Movement but also to many others interested in a culture of unity. It is recommended that this article be read with the comment by Piero Coda that follows.

3. This expression refers to a period of intense mystical light during the summer of 1949 when Chiara, through a special grace, was introduced to a particular experience of the life and intelligence of the Holy Trinity. Through this experience there were disclosed to her the divine roots of the “Work of Mary” (the Focolare Movement), which God would generate through her as a gift to the church and to the world. Some documents from that period, edited by Chiara, chronicle that event. Chiara wrote what she remembered of “Paradise ’49” in Oberiberg, Switzerland, on June 30, 1961. It was first published in *Nuova Umanità* 30, no. 177 (2008/3): 285–96. An English translation of that presentation was published in *Claritas: Journal of Dialogue and Culture* 1, no. 1, article 3 and is available at: <https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/claritas/vol1/iss1/3>.

by bringing you to the contemplation of beautiful things. The aim is another, but to explain it, I must renew in you that sense of awe over those pages of 1949, the recollection of that event that is always present and relevant. For this reason, I will begin by reading to you some fundamental, characteristic passages from that event. In 1949 I wrote:

Five years had gone by since the Movement began, and we had already understood and made our own several main points of its spirituality, such as God-Love, the will of God, seeing Jesus in our brothers and sisters, the New Commandment, Jesus forsaken, Jesus in the midst, unity . . .

Now, for some time, we had been focused upon the Word of Life, which we were living with special intensity. The Movement had no great structures then, nor had its activities begun, and so all our commitment consisted in living the gospel. The Word of God had entered so deeply into us that it changed our mind-set. The same thing also happened to those who had some kind of contact with us. This new mind-set that was taking shape showed itself as a true divine protest against the way of thinking, of wanting, of acting in the world. And in us it brought about a re-evangelization.

So far as I recall, the last Word we had been living in that period was “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Mk 15:34, Mt 27:46). And Jesus Forsaken appeared to us as the Word par excellence, the Word totally unfolded, the Word completely opened out. All that was needed, therefore, was to live him. In that way, everything was made simple. Living him meant living

the nothingness of ourselves in order to be all for God (in his will and for the others. We were immersed in these thoughts and experiences when we decided to step away from the Movement for a while and go to the mountains for a rest.

After we focolarine had arrived up there, something else emerged: I became aware that it was not all flame only within me but in some way, also, outside of me. I had the impression of seeing, perhaps through a special grace of God, the presence of God beneath things. So, if the pine trees were gilded by the sun, if the streams ran down in their glistening waterfalls, if the daisies and the other flowers and the sky were in celebration because of the summer, stronger yet was the vision of a sun that lay beneath what is created. I saw, in a certain way, I think, God who sustains, who upholds all things.

And God beneath things made it so that they were not as we see them; they were all linked among themselves by love, all, so to speak, in love with one another. So, if the stream emptied into the lake it was for love. If a pine tree rose up next to another, it was for love. And the vision of God beneath things, which gave unity to what is created, was stronger than the things themselves; the unity of the whole was stronger than the distinction among the things.

We were living these experiences when Foco—the one whose cause for beatification has begun—came to the mountains. Foco, who had a deep love for Saint Catherine, throughout his life had sought a virgin he could follow. And now he had the impression of having found her among us. One day, therefore, he suggested something: to make a vow of obedience to me (as the followers of St. Catherine had made to her), believing that in doing so, he would be obeying God. He added that like this we could become

saints as did Saint Francis de Sales and Saint Jane Frances de Chantal.

I did not understand at that moment either the reason for obedience or this two-person unity. The Opera did not yet exist and there was not much talk among us of vows (such as the vow of obedience, and so on). And I did not understand a two-person unity because I felt called to live “May they *all* be one” (Jn 17:21). At the same time, however, it seemed to me that Foco was moved by a grace that should not be lost.

And so I said something like this: “It may really be that what you feel comes from God. Therefore we ought to consider it. I, however, don’t feel this two-person unity because all should be one.” And I added: “You know my life: I am nothing (because I was living Jesus Forsaken). I want to live, indeed, like Jesus Forsaken who annihilated himself completely. You too are nothing because you live in the same way.

“So then, we will go to church tomorrow and I will say to Jesus-Eucharist who will come into my heart, as into an empty chalice (because I was nothing), I will say to him (so there was nothing but an empty chalice and the Eucharist): ‘On the nothingness of me please make unity with Jesus-Eucharist in Foco’s heart. And, Jesus, make it such that there come between us that bond that you know.’” Then I added: “And you, Foco, do the same.”

We did so, and we went out of the church. Foco had to go to the sacristy to give a talk to the friars. I felt the urge to go back into church. I entered and went before the tabernacle. And there I was about to pray to Jesus-Eucharist and say to him: “Jesus.” But I could not. That Jesus who was in the tabernacle was also here in me, was me too, was me, identified with him. Therefore, I could not call to myself. And there I discovered coming spontaneously

from my mouth the word: “Father.” And in that moment, I found myself within the bosom of the Father.

I had, therefore, entered into the bosom of the Father, which appeared to the eyes of my soul (but it was as if I saw it with my physical eyes) as an abyss that was immense, cosmic. And it was all gold and flames above, below, to the right and to the left. Outside of us remained what is created. We had entered into the Uncreated. I could not distinguish what was in Paradise, but that did not disturb me. It was infinite, but I felt at home.

I seemed to understand that the one who had put upon my mouth the word “Father” (I had invoked the Father instead of Jesus because I was another Jesus) was the Holy Spirit (See Rm 8:15–17, Gal 4:6). And that Jesus-Eucharist had acted truly as a bond of unity between me and Foco, because upon our two nothings only He remained. Foco, meanwhile, had come out of the friary and I invited him to sit with me on a bench next to a stream. And I said to him: “Do you know where we are?” And I explained to him what had happened to me.

Then I went home where I met the focolarine, whom I loved so much, and I felt the urge to bring them up to date on everything. I then invited them to come with us to church on the next day and to ask Jesus, who entered their hearts, to make the same pact with Jesus who entered ours. And they did so. After that I had the impression of seeing in the Bosom of the Father a small troop: it was we. I communicated this to the focolarine, who made such a great unity with me that they too had the impression of seeing each thing. And today, all of you must enter and be present in that small troop.

Now, let’s speak about the school. The school that is about to begin has a task: to teach you wisdom. But what is wisdom? Here

is a beautiful passage that explains it well, I think, and which we reread from time to time. It also outlines in a few words the task of the school. It begins like this:

The gift of wisdom puts the soul in contact with eternal realities. . . . It scrutinizes the depths of God and discerns his radiant beauty. It sees what it cannot repeat and drinks from that inexhaustible spring, without ever being satisfied, with an ever-growing desire—as a deer longs for flowing streams.

But, having discovered and almost savored God, with that light in my eyes I can now look at the world and see everything well . . . judging everything according to divine reasoning, almost projecting onto everything the light of God's infinite gaze.

In the mind of the wise Christian the ideal order in the mind of God is, as it were, reconstructed. The unfolding of eras and of ages, the succession and the interlocking of events, the flow of history, the development of one's own life, everything is seen in its relationship, one of dependence and of convergence, to a divine design . . . having the same mental synthesis as God, who sees each thing in the Word (his Son), who loves each thing in the Spirit, and who knows all by loving and loves all in the very act of his infinite contemplation.

But how can we acquire wisdom? We can obtain wisdom by asking God for it; or by loving God and our neighbor; or still

another way, by loving Jesus Forsaken; and finally, by putting Jesus in our midst. For example, when we have to speak in public we always ask for wisdom by praying together in unity. We call this way of praying a *consenserint*, inspired by the way Jesus taught us to pray: "If two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven" (Mt 18:19).

We also obtain wisdom by loving God and neighbor. It has always been our conviction and experience—for the past fifty, sixty years—that loving others brings light. Jesus says: "Those who love me will be loved by my Father, and I will love them and reveal myself to them" (Jn 14:21). This is the light. We also have wisdom by loving Jesus crucified and forsaken. Chapter 6 of the General Statutes of the Movement—so they are yours as well—states:

Those who are a part of the Work of Mary will seek first and foremost to possess true Christian wisdom "For there is nought God loves, be it not one who dwells with Wisdom." (Ws 7:28 [NAB])

"They will embrace his cross and abandonment," the statutes state, "so that the presence of the risen Lord may shine forth in their hearts, bringing with it the gifts of the Spirit" (art. 64).

One last way to have wisdom is to bring Jesus into our midst. According to the statutes, members of the Work of Mary "are to strive to be united among themselves, so that Christ who is present where there is mutual love may enlighten their thoughts and minds" (art. 64). In this school, this, above all, will be the way to obtain wisdom: with Jesus in your midst. And if you study other subjects such as philosophy, theology, economics, science, medicine, politics, and so on, they cannot but be imbued with wisdom.

The courses in this school, as in all other schools, will take place in a classroom, a hall. But what might be the true hall, the true, ideal classroom for a school of this kind? I have no doubts: The classroom that guarantees the wisdom we want is one alone: the bosom of our Father in heaven, where we must be worthy to enter and dwell. The charism that has been given to us makes this possible. And even when you leave the walls of this classroom, you must never go out of that hall, because I believe it would lead to the failure of this school. If you should happen to go out of that hall, you will have to return to it quickly.

Furthermore, this school will have only one teacher: Jesus in the midst of all of you, among you, among the professors, between you and the professors. But if the only teacher is Jesus among all, the lessons will not be given only by the professors. Certainly, they will give the lectures, but you will do your part too. It consists in the questions that the presence of Jesus in your midst will arouse in you and also in your specific contributions.

You might say: “Chiara, do you think we will have questions suggested by the Holy Spirit?” Certainly. I’ve had this experience in life. Certain questions that I myself ask, even in the Abba School, are aimed at receiving a specific answer. In other words, the Holy Spirit wants to tell us something, and so he prompts a question.

For example, one day—you know this—I entered a church and with a heart full of trust, I asked Jesus in the tabernacle: “Why did you choose to remain on earth, everywhere on earth, in the Eucharist, and yet you did not find a way to leave your Mother with us as well? We would need her in this life.” And from the tabernacle, he seemed to answer me: “I didn’t leave her here because I want to see her again in you, in all of you. Open your arms and embrace humanity, you in the place of Mary. Sing the

litanies and try to see your own reflection in them.” After a while, I understood: That question was prompted not by curiosity on my part but by the Holy Spirit, who had urged me to enter the church and to ask that question in order to receive that answer. And what was the answer? That all of us, beginning with Chiara, all of us must be another little Mary here on earth.

Besides asking questions, however, you must also give your own contribution. Most of you are university students pursuing in-depth studies in various fields of knowledge. Because of the presence of Jesus in the midst, it could happen that something the professor says sets off a light in you regarding a particular aspect of the discipline to which you are dedicated, and it will be helpful to share what you have understood. “Professor, I’ve understood. For example, concerning this point . . .” You tell what you’ve understood. This is your contribution, along with your questions.

Thus, you will find yourselves becoming, as Jesus desires, all equal, brothers and sisters in a trinitarian relationship through the mutual love between professors and students, the professors like the Father (in the Trinity you are forming) and you like the Son. Therefore, you will have to allow yourselves to be “generated” by them, but you must also respond with your love.

You can enter this hall only if you meet certain indispensable requirements. They are set out by Paradise ’49. First, you must wear the uniform of this school: It’s the Word, living the Word, allowing yourselves to be lived by the Word—it will be a different word each day—and you will have to share your experiences of living the Word. Only the Word has access to Paradise: Only the Word has access to the Bosom of the Father.

When we go to the next life and through God’s grace we enter the Bosom of the Father, of us what will enter is the word that

God pronounced when he created us, clothed with our humanity. There above, the Word alone lives, only the Word (the Son of God) in us lives. Living the Word, which is the only way to have access to heaven, in the Bosom of the Father, is your personal contribution.

But there is also a communitarian, collective contribution. Living Jesus Forsaken as the condition for achieving mutual love among yourselves, between you and the professors, and so on, will be your communitarian contribution. Why? Because to truly love one another, with the professors, you will have to make yourselves empty to take in all that they give you. You will have to receive perfectly what is said, also to ask questions and to give small contributions, small, small, big, here . . . all the contributions are from the Holy Spirit. To give them, you will have to empty yourselves and give. Don't be afraid, don't be timid, don't say: "Maybe this idea isn't right." You must have courage and do it. You'll understand from Jesus in the midst if you were in tune or not.

In summary, love Jesus Forsaken, making yourselves empty to receive what the professors say; love Jesus Forsaken, emptying yourselves to give what you have to the others; this is your way to love collectively together with the professors.

Something else that will be ultra-necessary for the school is nourishing yourselves with the Eucharist. The Eucharist, in fact, does not (listen carefully!) produce only beautiful and good fruits of sanctity and love. Nor is its aim solely that of increasing union with God and among us. Certainly, it is all of this too. But the aim of the Eucharist is to make us God (by participation). Because, through the Eucharist the flesh of Christ, vivified by the Spirit and life-giving, is mixed with our flesh. Consequently, the Eucharist divinizes us in soul and in body.

But God—also God by participation (as we will be)—can stay only in God. This is why the Eucharist places the person who has worthily received it in the Bosom of the Father; it places the person in the Trinity, in Jesus. At the same time the Eucharist does this not only with one person but also with many, and since they are all God, they are one. They are God individually and all together. These are the conditions for entering and remaining in this hall.

Finally, all of you (professors and students), before every lesson, every morning, will have to formulate the so-called pact of unity. We will conclude by saying it together:

Jesus, living in the Most Holy Eucharist, individually and all together, we promise you to be the fulfillment of your New Commandment, that is, to love one another as you have loved us, to the point of being forsaken by the Father. Having become one soul in this way, we ask that you yourself make the pact of unity on the nothingness of love in each of our hearts, so fusing us into one by your charity. Grant us through our constant mutual love, our daily nourishment on you through the Eucharist, the grace that you yourself may be born and reborn among us and in us, so that it is no longer we who live, but you in us. Amen.

Chiara Lubich (1920–2008) was the foundress of the Focolare Movement, and of the Sophia University Institute. In 1977 she received the Templeton Prize for Progress in Religion and Peace. In 1996 she received the UNESCO Peace Education Prize. Her wide-ranging

influence on various fields of academic research has been recognized in numerous honorary doctorates in various disciplines, including theology, philosophy, economics, social science, social communications. She is author of many books, articles and published letters. At present, the Congregation for the Cause of Saints is in the process of considering her cause for sainthood.