

Traveling Paradise

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Abstract: *This article presents an overview of Chiara Lubich's mystical text of Paradise '49 in twelve stages. Using the image of a journey by airplane, it presents some of the main themes and movements within Lubich's text, highlighting the aesthetic qualities of the text and the fresh vision of humanity in God that it offers. Each of the twelve parts of this article concludes with a quotation and a brief comment intended to give the reader a taste of Lubich's Paradise. The translation is by Conrad R. Sciberras.*

Chiara Lubich's 1949 Experience

“All these pages are worth nothing if the soul who reads them does not love, is not in God. They have value if it is God who reads them in that soul.” Chiara wrote these words on

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July 25, 1949, and they constitute the interpretative key of one of her books, titled *Paradise '49*, in which she narrates her illuminating experience, which started about ten days before and continued for a couple of years. Indeed, it is the elementary law for understanding all works: to be on the same level. To understand *Paradise '49* adequately, it is essential to share the author's experience and accompany her as she enters that “Paradise” witnessed in the book.

Personally, my first impression on reading this book was aesthetic in nature: The language used was beautiful and modern, simple and attractive, without superfluous words. Even in its form, *Paradise '49* allows us to intuit that God is Beauty and thus his Paradise is beautiful too. The text, however, is not an easy read owing to the density of its contents as well as the multiple literary genres it employs: letters, intimate writings as in a spiritual diary, notes in preparation for an address, a newspaper article and comments on the “Word of Life,” autobiographical and speculative entries, even a fable. Nevertheless, the experience proceeds as if on a golden thread: The author, in the successive illuminating phases and the ensuing experiences, discerns a divine pedagogy, “a revealing of mysteries, easy and light like Paradise, logical and progressively unfolding like life.” The work does not follow a pre-established plan; rather, it was guided by events as they happened, sometimes in an unexpected way. God made available to one of his creatures his own mystery, almost contemplation, an understanding and a new implementation of the great salvation history, of which Jesus Christ is the culmination and conclusion.

Reading *Paradise '49*, I get the feeling I have when an airplane takes off. At first, the surrounding scenery moves fast and we watch the control tower, the runways, the city apartments, and the mountains. However, as the airplane moves higher, the scenery becomes

more indistinct. Once a high altitude is reached, one feels as if the airplane is stationary, and below everything seems to move slowly, and yet, the airplane is moving much faster than during take-off. Analogically, this is the journey described in the book: At first, the succession of numerous and ever-new passages are quite easily understood. Reading the first paragraphs (1–48, 384–403), which were published in the book *Il Patto del '49 nell'esperienza di Chiara Lubich* (Città Nuova), one is immediately taken by the rare natural beauty offered by the Dolomites in the Trent region of Northern Italy. This serves as a background to the great experience, a good example of which is the spectacular sunset on July 17, 1949, the second day of the “journey.” That sunset drew their attention to the manifestation of the Word, which took place during meditation in the church of Tonadico at 6 p.m.: “I remember, a little later, looking from a hill as the rays of the sun, which had just set behind a mountain before us, were shooting up toward the sky. I said to my companions: ‘That is the Word: the beauty, the splendor of the Father.’”

As I read, and the days and months in Chiara’s narrative passed, my flight went ever higher, penetrating the realities of God, of creation, and of history, from a particular perspective: that of One, of the Trinity, almost an inside knowledge.

My slow descent started when Chiara’s narrative reached the beginning of September 1949. Chiara moved away from the Dolomites, the Tabor, to return “to earth” and look, with the light she had up there, at everyday realities. The journey, however, continued as she faced contradictions, resistances, and humanity’s pains. In heaven, she had experienced the “already” of eternity—the fullness of light and joy. As she immersed herself in the city, she became aware of the “not yet.”

It is no coincidence that the word which opens Chiara Lubich’s book is “Abba,” meaning “Father.” Indeed, we are in the Father’s

bosom, in “Paradise”: It is the take-off, the beginning of a great journey. And the word that concludes the book is “man.” Indeed, at the end, we are on earth, with the whole “Paradise” within us: We have landed. Only one passion remains within us: to bring heaven into earth, earth into heaven, to overcome the dichotomy between “already” and “not yet.”

These pages are a little map of the “journey” that Chiara took during those two years. I hope to offer a brief guide to reading *Paradise '49*. Each of the twelve parts of this presentation ends with “Enjoying Paradise '49,” featuring a phrase from Chiara’s writings that is, in itself, an invitation to live out immediately the illuminating message contained therein.

Enjoying Paradise '49

“I felt coming spontaneously from my lips the word: ‘Father.’ And in that moment, I found myself within the bosom of the Father.” Our “strolling in Paradise” starts when the Holy Spirit places the word “Father” on our lips. This is the way Jesus taught us to pray. It is not a mere formula but a discovery of being loved by God to the point of being really his children. And where may children live if not in their Father’s home?

“Do you know where we are?”

The Pact between Chiara Lubich and Igino Giordani

As soon as she saw him coming out of the friars’ convent, she invited him to follow her along a short path that led to the stream Canali. She stopped and sat on a red bench on the bank and signaled to him to sit beside her. She asked him: “Do you know where we are?” Igino Giordani could have answered that they were at Tonadico, on the Dolomites, sitting on a red bench enjoying the early

morning sun. Instead, he intuited that she was about to tell him something important. Something must have happened during the Mass at which both had taken part in the church of St. Anthony, just a few meters away. Only the previous day, he had confided to her his desire that had been slowly maturing in him since he had met her for the first time when she arrived at his office in parliament and listened to her evangelical experience and heard about the group that was growing around her in Trent.

Until then, Giordani had envied the “merry brigade,” that is, the men and women from all walks of life who, in the fourteenth century, decided to become followers of St. Catherine of Siena. He would have loved to have been born in that era and to have been one of them. Now, in parliament, of all places, he had at last found the person for whom he had waited so long. On July 15, 1949, only a few months following that first meeting, he asked to “be bound closely to her,” as the followers of St. Catherine used to do. He proposed to do this through a vow of obedience so that she might guide him along the way of perfection. For her part, Chiara Lubich suggested that they leave it up to God to indicate the kind of bond he wanted between them. She was proposing to leave it in the hands of Jesus in the Eucharist, whom they were to receive the following day, to stipulate between them a “pact of unity.” Jesus, coming into her as in an empty chalice, would have sealed the pact with Jesus in Giordani, who had to be in the same attitude of total openness and willingness. This is exactly what happened: upon her “nothingness,” as she became an “emptiness of love” to welcome Jesus-Love, and upon his “nothingness,” like her, what remained was Jesus only. The two of them had become the sole Jesus. The Eucharist had fully produced what it was instituted for. At the end of the Mass, both went out of the church: Chiara to her home and Giordani to the convent to

give a conference. However, Chiara felt the urge to go back into the church. Once again, she would have wanted to call Jesus by name, but she found it impossible to pronounce that word. She was having the same experience as that of the Apostle Paul: “I no longer live, but Christ lives in me” (Gal 2:20). She was Jesus, one with him, and Jesus cannot call himself. Therefore, Chiara uttered the word with which Jesus prayed: “Abba, Father”. That was not just a word but a reality. It was the Spirit who had put *that* name on her lips (Romans 8:15). Thus she found herself in another dimension, in the “Father’s bosom,” as she herself narrates: “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. . . . It was infinite, but I felt at home.”

Once seated on the red bench, before narrating to Igino Giordani the extraordinary fact she had experienced, she asked him: “Do you know where we are?” Someone else might have said: “Do you know where I am?” and would have spoken about his or her personal perception of being in the Father’s bosom. Instead Chiara used the plural, “Do you know where we are?” because that event took place after the pact of unity sealed with Giordani. Their two souls had become one Soul, that of Christ, and it was this one Soul that entered within the Father’s bosom.

By the working of a grace of a charismatic nature, she then “knew” where they were; he still did not know. Nevertheless, Chiara, right on that bench, made him aware of the new place they occupied. The day after, she involved her companions in the same pact of unity and communicated to them, as she had done to Giordani, the new contemplations. She noted: “I described each thing so precisely to the focaline that they too ‘saw’ in the

same way”; thus they were made participants of the realities of heaven that were being revealed day after day. That mystical experience belonged not to only one person but to a group, as Chiara, again, narrated: “I had the impression of seeing in the Bosom of the Father a small company: it was us.” At Tonadico, on July 16, 1949, the “we” was made up of a very small group of persons. Even today, anyone may become part of that “we.” That special way of “seeing” and “knowing” the life of Paradise was given to Chiara so that, through a mystical grace, she may introduce many others to the same reality, allowing them to be aware of “where we are.”

Enjoying Paradise '49

“And we were no longer ourselves, but he in us: he the divine fire who consummated our two very different souls in a third soul: his own: all Fire.” This is the wonder that the Eucharist performs, even today, when it enters persons willing to live among them the commandment of mutual love. Each one makes space for the other, through total self-donation—as Jesus did in his forsakenness on the Cross—and this space is filled by Jesus who, with his love, the Fire, transforms everyone into Him, into the only Jesus: He lives our life and operates in us.

The Word Marries the Soul

The Originality of the “Mystical Marriage” in Chiara

On July 16, 1949, after having asked Jesus in the Eucharist to “make a pact of unity” upon her nothingness of love and that of Igino Giordani, Chiara Lubich found herself in the Father’s bosom, with “the clear impression of being immersed in the sun. It [the “Soul,” the “small company” she envisioned in the Bosom of the Father]

saw sun everywhere: “beneath, above, about, and it awaited new illuminations to accustom its eye to discern all who were living there.” To her, it seemed “as an abyss that was immense, cosmic. And it was all gold and flames above, below, to the right and to the left.” It was an infinite reality, and yet she did not feel lost. She had the impression of being at home.

The following day, July 17, she understood the beauty of the Word, the expression of the Father within Himself. When she went out of the church, the sun had just gone down and its rays flashed from behind a mountain. She exclaimed: That’s the Word, the splendor of the Father!

While she was receiving this revelation from heaven, an unexpected event took place: “The Word wedded the Soul in mystical marriage.” This was the same experience that other women had had before her: Gertrude of Helfta, Hildegard of Bingen, Catherine of Siena, Catherine de’ Ricci, and Maria Maddalena de’ Pazzi. Among other things, they speak about angels and saints who acted as witnesses as the Bridegroom put the ring on the bride’s finger.

One day, while we were reading the texts regarding that period [in the Abba School], I asked Chiara: “How was it in your case?” She simply repeated what we had just read: “The Word wedded the Soul in mystical marriage.” Is that all? Yes, that was all. It was an essential and succinct response, just what Teresa of Avila wrote about her experience, which was similar: “One may only say this: that the soul, or rather its spirit, becomes one thing with God.” Chiara, too, became one thing with the Word, her Bridegroom.

Her experience was similar to that of other mystics, but it had an important peculiarity: The Word married the Soul, with a capital *S*. Chiara’s experience was an ecclesial one; she felt that she was the expression of the entire group, and she became aware of being

Church. She wrote in an explicit manner: “The Word, having wed the Soul clothed as Church.” It is a throwback to the biblical idea of God marrying his people, of Christ marrying the church. The great tradition had understood this quite well; for example, St Bernard wrote, “God did and suffered many things not for just one soul, but to gather many in a single Church, to form an only bride” (“Sermon LXVIII on the Canticle of Canticles”).

Whereas in the history of Christian spirituality, the mystical marriages are often experienced individually, with Chiara it was the experience of a whole group of souls fused in unity, made Church. In the one married Soul, the individual souls may consider themselves as being personally married too. Indeed, this is baptism carried to its full expression, where the marriage image speaks about the full transformation in Christ.

In the days which followed that July 17, Chiara gradually became aware that, by virtue of that profound union, the Bridegroom allowed his bride to share in his heritage. The “dowry” he brought as a gift was no less than the “whole of Paradise.” That is how Chiara’s “honeymoon” started. For months, the Bridegroom showed his bride all that she now possessed; he allowed her to see Paradise through his own eyes. This is what she wrote: “The bride loves, sees, desires what the spouse loves, sees, desires.” We may imagine her crying out: “My sweetest Spouse, Heaven is too beautiful and You, as a divine Lover, after the Mystical Marriage. . . . show me your possessions which are mine.” This reminds us of what John of the Cross wrote:

The heavens and the earth are mine; humanity is mine, the just and the sinners are mine. The Angels and the Mother of God are mine; all things are mine. Even God is mine and he is there for me, because Christ is mine and he is everything for me. Therefore, my soul, what are you asking and

yearning for? Everything is yours and everything is for you (Prayer of the Soul in Love).

Even the bride, however, must bring her Bridegroom a dowry. Since Chiara’s “mystical marriage” had an ecclesial dimension, the dowry could not have been something personal or intimate (her abilities or her own holiness). The Bridegroom demanded no less than the entire creation. Only a whole group is able to bring as dowry (to be expression of) the entire creation: It was an invitation to enter the fields of labor, of politics, of social and family life and to be fully part of them in their daily realities. This was exactly the contrary of a spiritualistic evasion. Indeed, toward the end of her life, we heard Chiara using the words of Jacques Leclercq to express her profound desire as bride: “I shall come to you, my God . . . with my wildest dream: to bring you the world in my arms.”

Enjoying Paradise '49

“Every instant I live the Word is a kiss upon the Lips of Jesus, those Lips which spoke only Words of Life.” The kiss is the most intimate expression of love. To put into practice the nuptial relationship with the Bridegroom, love must be concrete; it demands that the words that come out of his mouth are welcomed and lived out, almost as if they are inhaled with our mouth—the kiss!—because “And from Lips to lips passes the Word; he communicates himself (who is Word) to my Soul. And I am one with him! And Christ is born in me.”

illuminating Writings

How the Text of Paradise '49 Came About

“Once the Spouse had been revealed in a marvelous sunset, . . . I was touched anew by the Holy Spirit, whose kiss made me

feel a sharp pain in my heart. . . . And to me the Spirit revealed Mary. . . . If only I could send an angel to tell you everything! But you are me, aren't you?" Chiara wrote this on July 19, 1949. These were the opening words of her narration of what had happened the day before, just two days after the beginning of her experiencing being in the Father's bosom, in Paradise. At the very beginning, she was able to tell Iginio Giordani immediately what happened when they were seated on the red bench along the stream Canali. Soon after, however, he had to leave, and she kept communicating her new discoveries to her companions with whom she lived. But even Giordani had the right to know them because they also belonged to him; he too was living in the unity that had been established with Chiara. Therefore, she started to write to him on a regular basis. Sometimes the illumination was so intense that she recorded her intuitions in many pages, and she wrote them in note form, which later served for a talk, a letter, or even an article in a newspaper. Other times, it was simply a poem, an outburst of her heart, which could not contain the joy. She could not jealously keep the gift of God for herself. For Chiara, communicating was necessary and coherent with the choice she had made more than six years previously, that is, since the community of Trent had started practicing the communion of material and spiritual goods, as the first Christians in Jerusalem used to do. What was imperative was quite clear: "When we feel the whole of God in us . . . let us be multiplied in our brothers and sisters, all of us giving ourselves: giving the whole of ourselves: even God in us."

Chiara was different from certain mystics who wrote down their experiences against their will, eventually to obey their confessor. She was rather like Augustine, who in his *Confessions* bared his soul completely, or like Meister Eckhart, who handed mysticism

to the people with a delightful pastoral sense. Chiara's communication was not just a revelation of her experience of God but a way of involving others in that experience. She affirmed: "I described each thing so precisely to the focaline that they too 'saw' in the same way." They "saw" in the sense that they were transformed: "These mysteries took place in me, Chiara, but no sooner were they communicated to the rest of the Soul [the many souls made one] than we perceived them to be shared."

In her first letter to Iginio Giordani, she wrote: "If only I could send you an angel to tell you everything!" However, there was no need for an angel: the two were one thing and what one experienced, the other experienced, too: "But you are me, isn't that true?" Later, she explained: "We were one, even though distinct."

Iginio Giordani was the first to transcribe some of the writings of that period, especially those that he received. Several of Chiara's companions carefully kept some handwritten pages. Then, they produced typewritten texts to introduce members of the nascent Movement to the realities of Paradise. There were compilations of these. Then, one day, Chiara ordered all texts to be destroyed, first, so that no one became "attached"—as they used to say in those days—to those papers, and, second, so that they could not be misinterpreted. She was convinced that no texts existed, just as she was convinced that everything was stamped in their hearts.

Then, in 1961, she was asked to narrate what had happened in 1949, which, by that time, seemed ages away, and she yet described everything as if she had experienced it the day before. That talk was published in the magazine *Nuova Umanità*, and recently translated into English and published in the first issue of *Claritas*. However, in reality, the original papers had not been burned. They providentially reappeared in the 1970s. In the meantime, Klaus Hemmerle,

a German Bishop and theologian, intuited that the 1949 experience was not simply a “spiritual experience” but also contained a rich doctrine. He, therefore, proposed that people come together to read those texts so as to acquire new life and insights. Chiara liked the proposal. Besides Bishop Hemmerle and Fr. Pasquale Foresi, she gathered around her a small group, and together they started to deepen what had happened in 1949. That was how the “Abba School” came about. For almost thirty years, scholars from various fields came together to study those writings and to formulate the doctrine they contain, work that is still going on. Thanks to the Abba School (the name refers to the first word that Chiara uttered on July 16, 1949, and that introduced her into the bosom of Abba, of the Father) that the real and proper editing of what today is the literary work known as *Paradise '49* started. The writings of that period, between 1949 and 1951, are numerous; but which of them really witness the lived-out divine experience? In the years during which Chiara presided over the Abba School, new texts reappeared and she examined them, saying: “This text expresses what at that time I was given to understand, but not that one.” The texts were all beautiful, but she had a sense of discernment: She chose them and ordered them in a chronological and logical order. Thus, little by little, *Paradise '49* was composed. It is a book of light, perhaps the most precious gift Chiara Lubich has left us—a book that I believe is destined to become a classic of Christian literature.

Enjoying Paradise '49

“Look therefore upon every brother or sister with love, and to love is to give. But gift calls for gift and you will be loved in return. Thus loving is to love and be loved: it is the Trinity.” We are at the heart of the Gospel here: Jesus’s “new commandment,” love, as a

complete self-giving. In communicating her experience of God, Chiara gave us what was most precious for her. Each one of us has something to donate, and every gift is the way to reach the fullness of life, that of the Trinity, which is mutuality, the generator of communion and of identity.

Mother of God

The Discovery of Mary's Beauty

At six o'clock that summer evening, the sun was still high. When she entered the small church of Tonadico, owing to the contrast with the outside, it seemed that there was little light inside. Chiara sat in the pews to the right, in front of the altar of Our Lady. Slowly, the dim light dissipated and the statue of the Virgin, shrouded in a blue mantle, with her hands joined in prayer, appeared in all its beauty. Before heading toward the church, she had joked with her young companions: “Let us try to guess what the Bridegroom will make us understand this evening during our honeymoon in Paradise.” Nevertheless, they were sure that God’s imagination would be more daring than theirs and that they would be happy to be proved wrong. Only two days had passed since heaven seemed to have been opened to show them first the Father, and then the Word. Therefore they said: “Now it’s the turn of the Holy Spirit.”

Her companions were seated near her in the pew. Chiara had made them quite an original proposal: Think about nothing, annihilate all thoughts so that it would be the Lord himself who illuminates. Without knowing it, in a simple and intuitive manner, Chiara was putting into practice a very ancient “technique” found in Eastern Christian spirituality that entailed silencing the senses to gain access to the light. Once again, in the silent church, a light

came from heaven. Chiara narrated what happened in a letter she sent to Igino Giordani on July 19, 1949:

And then I looked above me, where there was *a beautiful* statue of our Mother, and I understood that she is only Word of God and I saw her as beautiful beyond all telling: all clothed in the Word of God who is the Beauty of the Father; hidden guardian of the Spirit within. And, as soon as I loved her, she loved me and with the clarity of Heaven showed me all of her beauty: the Mother of God!

Mary has always been hailed as the “All Beautiful.” If the Word is the Father’s splendor, Mary, being completely dressed with the Word of God, reflects the same splendor, the same splendor of the Word. The image of Mary being completely Word is not totally new. For example, Andrew of Crete (ca. 740) described her as a “living book in which the spiritual word has been silently written by the living pen of the Spirit.” A medieval theologian, Rupert of Deutz, affirmed that the Word of God is contained in Mary, “in whose womb God has conveyed the whole Scriptures, each and every one of its words.” Seeing her as the essence of the Word, and reflecting the beauty of the Son, the Father falls in love with her and sends his eternal Word in her: Mary thus becomes the Mother of the Word made flesh, and her beauty attains the highest splendor. Later, on July 9, 1950, Chiara wrote: “He [God] could not come down into sin and so he invents Mary, who, summing up in herself all the beauty in creation, ‘tricks’ God and draws him to earth.” Chiara did not consider Mary as the young woman from Nazareth, the most beautiful creature on earth, but as the Mother of God, made great as God by God, so much so that she could contain Him; she is contained in the Trinity and the Trinity is contained in her.

The prediction they made before entering the church was, once again, proven wrong. Following human logic, they were sure that after the Father and the Son, the Holy Spirit would be next to manifest himself. Instead, the Holy Spirit made way for Mary, his bride, and, as Chiara so audaciously wrote, “then, with her manifestation, enclosed her as fourth in the Trinity.” St. Maximilian Kolbe, with similar audacity, affirmed that since Mary “was integrated into the love of the Most Holy Trinity, she became, from her first moment of existence and forever, for all eternity, the complement of the Most Holy Trinity.” Chiara made it clear that Mary is fourth *in* the Trinity, not fourth *of* the Trinity. There is no “fourness” in the Most Holy Trinity. Nevertheless, from the moment Jesus, in all his humanity, ascended unto heaven, something new happened within the Trinity: His flesh, which is Mary’s flesh, was integrated into the mystery of the Trinity. He was followed by Mary, who was assumed into heaven in body and soul. From the early Marian basilicas, the iconography has always shown Mary seated next to her Son, surrounded by the two other divine Persons and all three Persons crown her queen. This is indeed the ultimate vocation for every Christian, of which Mary is sign and anticipation, as the letter to the Ephesians reminds us: “seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus” (Eph 2:6). When they left the church, the blue of the sky was extraordinary. Chiara narrated: “And so I understood: the sky contains the sun! Mary contains God! God loved her so much as to make her his Mother and his Love made him become small before her!”

Enjoying Paradise '49

“Always in her was the Word. So it should be in our Soul: always living with the Word—totally concentrated and only concentrated on the Word.” Mary’s greatness lies in her being the Mother of

the Word, who is Word of God: She welcomed and lived out the Word. This is the path along which those who want to be another little Mary must journey: to live the Word of God, to be solely Word of God. It is only by being so that we shall be invited to sit in heaven in the embrace of the Trinity.

That Earthworm

Paradise: Substance of Love. Hell: Infinite Disunity.

After mailing to Igino Giordani the letter she wrote the day before, Chiara and her friends walked up a hill toward the small church of St. Vittore, which for more than six centuries has stood solitary over the Primiero valley. The day was Wednesday, July 20, 1949. Arcangela, the custodian of the cemetery next to the church, was coming down the hill, all dressed in black as usual, and with a nod greeted the young women whose smiles made summer even more beautiful. The young women sat in a circle on the lawn in front of the church and admired the scenery: the mountains, the villages down below, the wonderful nature. At Chiara's feet there appeared, among the flowers and the grass, a small earthworm, a lowly creature in that ocean of light and beauty. Perhaps it had come from one of the nearby tombs that surrounded the church. For someone with a pure heart, all things have meaning, even a worm, and Chiara was reminded of her Bridegroom. She confided her thoughts to her companions sitting around her: "Jesus Forsaken is the worm of the earth and he became such so that, when our soul is in Heaven and our flesh has become all a worm, it will sing to Love Forsaken who is so similar to it, its Spouse. Thus all creation, and even the most despicable beings, sings to Love." For her, Jesus was Jesus Forsaken, and she saw him everywhere and in everything. God is Love, and

so is the Son made man. On the Cross, in the painful cry by which he assumed all the sufferings of humanity and creation, the greatest love was manifested: Jesus, love, is Jesus Forsaken, the greatest love, which made him give up his life and his unity with the Father.

By the following March, Chiara still remembered that little worm, and it reminded her of Isaiah's prophecy when he spoke about the Servant of the Lord who "had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him" (Isaiah 53:2), and even more it reminded her of Psalm 22:6 "But I am a worm and not a man." Thinking about all this, she wrote: "Around us everything is Jesus Forsaken. Everything therefore is loveable because beneath everything and everyone we see the Spouse of our soul. . . . He, Worm of the earth, Ugliness, a meld of blood and tears, of pain, is God. Everything, he divinized: to everything, he gave Being."

Let us go back to the summer of 1949. For two days, July 21–22, Chiara wrote nothing because she was overwhelmed by the light that was penetrating her. Finally, on July 23, as if a dam had broken, she wrote down the experiences she had accumulated with passion, filling many pages and producing the longest text written in those years. She wanted to communicate to Igino Giordani what she had understood about the dynamics and the relationship that constitute Paradise: everything is love, everything is unity and harmony.

Divergent rays seemed to come out of the Father, and these arrive at all creation and give it unity. The presence of God may be discerned under every single thing. The Son has the Ideas of the created things, and the Father projects these outside Himself, thus giving Order, which is Life, Love, and Truth. Everything has been thought of in the Word and everything was created in him. In the Word made man, in Jesus, the Father reaches every creature. In their origin, all things are united. At the end of times, Jesus

will bring back everything in himself, in the Word, and therefore in the Father's bosom, from where everything started: "From being divergent they will become convergent and their meeting will form Paradise all made from the substance of love . . . in its attire, abloom and starry and many-hued, with seas, with mountains, with lakes, with stars, with the sun, with the moon, with broad avenues." From being divergent, the ideas and the rays will become convergent, and everything shall be made divine. This is the ultimate destination of unity.

Is it possible for hell to exist in such a great harmony and unity? In Chiara's vision, hell is outside Paradise, and she saw all its harshness: unformed matter that is desperate to attain its form, which is love, but is unable to possess it. "The damned will take down below their immortal souls and with full awareness will feel what they should have done: love, yet they will no longer be able to love." In fact, there will be no unity between cold and fire, between motion and stillness, between unity and multiplicity because "in hell no two things can love each other." Everything is without life, without order and without love. So, in the afterlife, will there be duality between paradise and hell? No. We go back to the image of that little worm, of Jesus who became sin, hell, so as to make everything divine. It is he, and he only, Jesus Forsaken, who fills everything with his love and leads everything toward unity. Therefore, hell exists, but only for those in it. Those looking from Paradise, on the other hand, see only and everywhere Jesus Forsaken.

Enjoying Paradise '49

"Truly Jesus Forsaken made himself ugly to beautify all things, sin to take sin from the earth and make all things: God; pain to take evil from the world and reduce pain to love." The international

music group Gen Rosso, in one of their famous songs, paraphrased Chiara's words as a comment on this text: "So that we may have light, You made yourself darkness. So that we may have life, You experienced death. Lord, for us it is enough to be similar to You and offer our sufferings with yours. You are God, you are my God, our God of infinite love."

From One Heaven to Another

The Mystical Incarnation of the Soul and the Realities Seen from the Perspective of the One

Ten days after July 16, 1949, the contemplation completed its first stage. Chiara had experienced the Father, the Word, and Mary. The Holy Spirit had not been experienced yet. On the afternoon of July 26, Chiara, as usual, entered into the semi-dark church of Tonadico and, together with her friends, sat silently in front of the altar. Suddenly, she felt Jesus's breath in the tabernacle, and from there it reached her face like a light breeze, like a zephyr. The Holy Spirit made his presence felt and manifested himself, producing almost an atmosphere of Paradise. Chiara was not aware that in 1439 the Council of Florence had defined the Holy Spirit as the breath of God. Many years later, St. John Paul II affirmed: "The Holy Spirit is like the 'breath' of the Risen One." A light breeze? But that is precisely the name of the Holy "Spirit," *ruach* in Hebrew, *pneuma* in Greek. To give the Holy Spirit to his disciples, the Risen Lord had breathed upon them (Jn 20: 22). On that July 26, there were no biblical reminiscences or theological reflections; there simply was the manifestation of the Spirit and the experience of his presence, which was so strong that it appeared as a dove that flew from the tabernacle and hovered over the heads of the young women.

The day after, the “stroll in Paradise” entered another phase. A few days after having contemplated Mary as extremely beautiful and great, Chiara felt a deep desire for the whole group sharing her journey to be consecrated to her. She made this request to Jesus in the Eucharist just after receiving Holy Communion. That was not a simple devotional act. Jesus really transformed those young women, all fused in a single “Soul,” into another little Mary. Indeed, this collective subject, the Soul, became aware of having “the immaculized flesh” which contained Mary. Immaculized? Isn’t that too audacious? It is simply the fulfillment of the action of Jesus in the Eucharist and of the Holy Spirit, which was initiated in Baptism. It is the goal toward which every Christian is called, as we read in the Letter to the Ephesians: The Father “has chosen us . . . to be holy and immaculate in his sight in love” (Eph 1:3–4). As St. John Paul II wrote: If we walk in Mary’s footsteps, “we may hope to be totally purified from sin and even become ‘saints’ and ‘immaculate.’” And he continued with a prayer: “Oh Mary . . . teach us to believe in the possibility of a full immaculization.”

Chiara, referring to the following day, July 28, wrote, “However what happened next was even more marvelous.” She felt the presence of Jesus within her in a new manner. In fact, the grace of the Immaculate was not an end in itself. Mary could thus become the Mother of God. Analogically, the grace of the Immaculization of that group of souls around Chiara, fused to form a single Soul, led to a “mystical incarnation,” which transformed the immaculate flesh into divinized flesh. In 1961 she narrated: “Following the Consecration to Mary, I became aware of a word in my soul which I understood as meaning ‘enclosed within,’ and it seemed to me that God wanted to repeat, in a mystical way, an incarnation with the Soul consecrated ‘Mary.’” That is a prophetic outline of the journey

that the Church is called to fulfill in history until it achieves its fullness. As usual, nature accompanied this event. Some months later, Chiara narrated that, on that day, as she and her companions were walking toward the small alpine church of St. Vittore,

The sun shone directly down upon my head while in the church the priest who had given us Communion, not knowing what had happened, sang out the ‘Magnificat’ and peals of bells resounded. Coming out of the church, we saw Arcangela, the caretaker, close the gate of the small graveyard by its side. It seemed to me a sign that death had been banished.

After the Immaculization and the divinization, the “Soul” was so well constituted that it was ready for a new and deeper immersion in the realities of heaven. Having placed unity at the foundation of their life, Chiara and her group became Jesus who journeys. In them, the Way became the Traveler and, beginning in August, he led the Soul toward ever new understandings and experiences. It is impossible in a few pages to follow Chiara in this intense new phase of her journey. There were about a hundred and fifty “pictures,” one after the other, that she called “realities.” She saw the truths of the faith, albeit from a particular perspective: from the One, from the Trinity. It was a passage “from one heaven to the other,” penetrating ever-new understandings of the Kingdom of heavens, because in Paradise life is not static but a continuous discovery. It was a prelude, a taste of the glorification that awaits us when “we all, who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord’s glory, are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit” (2 Cor 3:18).

Enjoying Paradise '49

“Having entered into the Kingdom of Heaven, into the Bosom of the Father, we are eternally in the Root which is the Father, so life is eternal and the force that flows in this root is love.” Heaven and earth, the uncreated and the created, all come from the Father, who is life, and his life is Love. Therefore, love is the substance of everything, and to live we need to be “grafted” into the Father, that is, into love: to live according to our “nature,” as children of the Father; to be love and to love.

One Never Stops Living

Daily Life Spent in the Exceptional Contemplation of Paradise Paradise '49 is Chiara Lubich’s most precious book, and it will surely be read by future generations. However, during the summer of 1949, it was not a book but an experience that was being lived out and shared with those who were close to her. Some of her companions, including Lia Brunet, Bruna Tomasi, Ginetta Calliari, and Marilen Holzhauser (Chiara went to get Marilen in the evening of July 16) stayed at Tonadico the whole time, whereas others, including Vittoria (Aletta) Salizzoni and Natalia Dallapiccola, remained in Trent because of their work and traveled to the mountains for the weekend or just a day. The latter group also included some young men, such as Marco Tecilla and Aldo Stedile (Fons).

Marco recalled:

I still have a vivid recollection of that period. One Sunday, together with the focolarine, we went on a hike to a place called “Madonna della luce” [Our Lady of the Light]. There was a deep spiritual feeling among us all: God had fused

together our souls. . . . Each time we returned to Trent from up there, we had the impression of coming down from a very high mountain enveloped in light; indeed, we found it hard to “re-enter” our normal daily life . . . we lived through a continuous contemplation.” Sometimes, Chiara would go down to Trent to share with those closest to her what she was living so as to involve them in the same journey.

Igino Giordani continued to be involved in that heavenly adventure: Whenever he found time, he would go up to Tonadico to be with Chiara; when they were apart, Chiara kept him updated through letters. He narrates how he kept her communications safe: the updating was

so beautiful that, for fear of being lost or of falling into the wrong hands, in Switzerland where I was, I used to transcribe the letters, adding the heading: “Visions of the blessed Julian of Norwich.” Between games, in the shadows provided by the conifers or under some overhanging rocks, possibly near an icon or a shrine, Chiara used to speak about God, the Virgin, and spiritual life: Her nature was super-natural. . . . Therefore, those forests were transformed into cathedrals; those summits seemed to be peaks of holy cities; the flowers and the grass were colored by the presence of angels and saints: everything became alive in God. The barriers imposed by the flesh disappeared. And Paradise was opened for us.

The small group stayed in a rustic mountain cabin that Lia Brunet had inherited; since then, this has been called “Paradise cabin.” The upper part of the hayloft was transformed into a big bedroom

that could be reached by means of a ladder from the ground floor, which consisted of a room and a small kitchen. In the bedroom, they arranged some camp beds and a wardrobe, which they had to hoist up with a pulley.

The spiritual density of those days was in harmony with their simple daily life. Chiara writes: “In the meantime we did not cease living, living with intensity, amid our jobs about the house, the reality that we were, living the Word. They went again to church for meditation in front of the altar of the Madonna. During the rest of the day, having donned a work apron, they would do the laundry at the public fountain in the village square, complete the house chores, and then head off into the woods and along the meadows for long walks on the mountain. Aletta recalls:

We went all together and, as we walked, we held conversations When we stopped for a picnic or in the shade of a tree or on a meadow, Chiara would start to speak to us as we sat around her. While we rested we were building unity among us, that is, we loved each other in a supernatural way. We were continually in God, with simplicity. We started from what was natural because, after all, we were here on earth. The supernatural on its own did not exist, because everything was natural and, at the same time, everything was supernatural. For us, nature and the supernatural were the same thing.

Being young, they liked games: They used to write invocations of the Litany of our Lady on pieces of paper, and then each one would draw an invocation, as if as an indication of what that person ought to become, or the name of a flower. . . . One day there

were twelve in of them and each was given the name of one of the Apostles. Luigina recalls:

I got Judas Thaddeus, and I didn't like it because of that name, Judas. Well, Chiara changed my mind when she explained to me that Judas Thaddeus “was the cousin of Jesus.” Paradise was not something “up there.” It was here on earth and it was real like Jesus, who came to dwell among us, thus bringing heaven down here! When we used to speak about “realities” or ‘paradise,’ *we* never considered them to be things of another world, but things to be lived here on earth.

Enjoying Paradise '49

“We must be ‘without a thought’ because we are children of God. The children of God do not have thoughts . . . without will to have the capacity for God’s will. And without memory so as to remember only the present moment and live ‘ecstatically’ (outside ourselves).” Even when we are facing difficulties, trials, and doubts, which sometimes render our daily life heavy, we may still abandon ourselves trustingly unto the hands of God, certain of his love. He will give us new eyes with which to discern reality and a creativity to live it, while endowing our hearts with the “carelessness” of children.

The Earth Is My Heaven

The “Descent” from Paradise

In the Primiero valley, the days grew shorter and the leaves of the larches began to turn yellow. The hot summer started to be attenuated by the fast-arriving autumn. Nature was changing its appearance, but it seemed that Chiara was not aware of this. Being

immersed in the contemplation of heaven, she lived within, rather than outside, herself. Igino Giordani narrates that when he went to meet her in those days, he saw her so immersed in God, in her interior life, that he was worried for her health. She didn't even eat the simple meals cooked in the cabin. One evening, while they were returning from a conifer wood, he found the courage to tell her: "Haven't you taught us that the supreme love is Jesus Forsaken? Now, for his sake, leave God for God, leave Paradise and stay on earth, where you may lead many persons toward Paradise. Leave the angels for a while and come back among us humans. For the love of Jesus Forsaken." Chiara burst out in tears: "Do I have to leave Paradise?" "Yes, Chiara," Giordani told her, "this is what your children are asking from you." She went into her room, and, alone with God, wrote down that declaration of love that is the quintessence of her spirituality. "I have only one Spouse on earth: Jesus Forsaken: I have no other God but him. In him is the whole of Paradise with the Trinity and the whole of earth with Humanity." This happened on July 20, 1949, and explains why Chiara left the Dolomites to return to Rome.

A careful reading of *Paradise '49* reveals that in the preceding days, she had already felt an attraction and a calling toward "suffering humanity." Indeed, the prayer written on the first day of September is significant:

Lord, give me all the 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 plants cause me pain . . . even the animals that are alone. Who consoles their weeping? Who mourns their slow death? Who clasps 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: being your arms that clasp to themselves and consume in love all the loneliness of the world.

This was, after all, the experience of all the great mystics: The more one approaches God, the more one feels love for humanity; the higher one goes, the greater is the urge to come down again, following in the footsteps of the Son of God, who renounced his being equal to God to come and dwell in our midst. Although that was painful for her, Chiara understood that what was "heritage or gift of God to the Soul," that is, for herself and those who participated in the same gift and thus had become one soul, "now entered totally into each one of us. We were to return into the world, to build the Work, each one bearing in his or her heart the whole of that Heaven."

Chiara left Tonadico but not Paradise, or better still, Paradise did not leave her. The illuminating experience lived out on the mountain continued even in Rome. The text she wrote on July 20, 1949—"I have only one Spouse on earth"—which is normally thought to be the conclusion of that period of light, is found halfway through *Paradise '49*, which Chiara, in order to narrate her experiences, kept writing until September 22, 1951. At that point, influenced by the harsh realities of daily life in the difficult post-war period, a new way of living the realities of heaven started.

Rome exemplified the social conditions of that time: lack of housing and employment even as migrants, especially from the southern regions, kept on coming, and there was no plan to respond to these challenges. Indeed, the city was run-down materially as well as morally. A few days after returning to the city, Chiara wrote: "If I were to look at Rome as it is, I feel that my Ideal is far away. . . . The world, with its filth and vanities, dominates it in the

streets and even more hidden in the homes where there is anger and all kinds of sin and agitation.” This external vision, however, overlapped with a loving gaze that came from the light of Paradise and that made her believe that the resurrection of Rome and the entire humanity was still possible, because they were flooded with the fire of God’s love. This was a new phase in her narration of “strolling in Paradise”; it was the fulfilment of what she had contemplated: “Therefore, now, down here, I’m living with even greater fullness the Heaven I saw up there this summer and which I experienced. Then, it was more of a vision than life, or, it was a vision as much as it was life, all united, but not as united as they are now. Now it is *sicut in coelo et in terra* [on earth as it is in heaven]. The earth is my Heaven.”

Enjoying Paradise '49

“It is necessary to make God be reborn in us, to keep him alive and make him overflow onto others as torrents of Life and resurrect the dead. And keep him alive among us by loving one another. . . . Then everything is revolutionized: politics and art, school and religion, private life and entertainment. Everything.” Christian life, even in its highest contemplation, is a concrete commitment to restore the true meaning of what is human, social. This entails allowing God to live within us and among us, so that all things may be resurrected and brought to their fulfilment.

Light. Charisms. Church.

Christ Revealed Throughout the Centuries

The silence, peace, and enchantment of the Dolomites were already a faraway memory. For some months Chiara had been in Rome—a

city full of noise, building sites for postwar reconstruction, and the influx of new migrants. However, revelation and contemplation—the ever-new experience of heaven—are not bound to places and situations: They are a gift of God, a gift that is present everywhere. His light kept on illuminating Chiara’s mind and life even in Rome. In her notes written in mid-December, we find the names of masters of mystical theology, such as Jean-Jacques Olier (1608–1657) and Adolphe Tanquerey (1854–1932), whose works she was reading. Up until then, however, it seems that the only Teacher was Jesus, the Bridegroom and his Holy Spirit. Why, then, do we now find the names of these authors? At that time, she was surrounded by contemporary professors and scholars of spirituality such as Gabriel Roschini (1900–1977), Giovanni Battista Tomasi (1866–1954), and Leone Veuthey (1896–1974). Perhaps they were the ones to hand her the manuals of mystical theology. It seems that Chiara felt the need to compare the experience she was passing through with the tradition of the Church, so as to discern continuity as well as novelty. She wanted to initiate a reflection upon the light that had been illuminating her for months, well aware of its doctrinal importance and its ecclesial destination: She understood that what she was experiencing was meant for the entire Church. However, she deemed as inadequate the instruments that were available to her. Chiara became aware that those scholarly manuals were inadequate compared to such a profound and new experience, and therefore, she sought other means. While limited, owing to her lack of access to sources and critical studies, she sought a direct relationship with the great mystics. She started dialoguing with Angela of Foligno, Teresa of Ávila, and John of the Cross. For a long time she had been familiar with Francis and Clare of Assisi and Catherine of Siena; now, however, she rediscovered them from new perspectives.

The following year, 1950, she wrote a magnificent page that was the fruit of the relationship she nurtured with the saints during the preceding months. The text carried a most significant title: the Church. It is a hymn to the Church in its charismatic dimension, which the manuals of ecclesiology of that time ignored; their concept of Church was limited to the magisterium and the sacraments. In this text, Chiara sees the Church as a succession of charisms, as if Christ was revealed along the centuries, a living Gospel, incarnated, which is seen, above all, in the blossoming of the religious Orders. “Each Order or Religious Family is the incarnation of an ‘expression’ of Jesus: a Word of his, an attitude of his, a fact in his life, a suffering he had, one part of him.”

Therefore, she goes through the various Gospel Words that were lived out in a charismatic way by Francis and Clare of Assisi, Catherine of Siena, Marguerite M. Alacoque, and Therese of the Child Jesus. She contemplated the Church as a “magnificent garden in which all the Words of God blossom.” In a poetic vein, something common to mystics, she utilized a metaphor: “As water is crystalized into tiny stars of every shape when it falls upon the earth as snow, so in Jesus Love took on the Form par excellence, the Beauty of beauties (‘the most beautiful of the sons of men’). In the church, Love took on various forms and these are the Orders and the Religious Families.” In every order, she sees “a ray of the Order that is God . . . a light of the Light that is Jesus.” Thanks to this evangelical, charismatic, and holy dimension, she arrived at contemplating the Church in her profoundest and most permanent reality: the incarnated Word, a lived-out Gospel: “All these Words form the Church, another Christ or a Christ continued, the Bride of Christ. It is the New Jerusalem, bedecked with all the virtues.” The Word’s centrality to her understanding of Church

includes even the hierarchical and sacramental dimensions, in that these too are an expression of the Gospel. Chiara herself, commenting this text, noted:

The charismatic Church, described in these pages, is not one part of the Church alongside the hierarchical part, but rather the whole Church, in the sense that it expresses the Church in its entirety. Apart from anything, the institutional Church is also born from the Gospel, from a word of Jesus: “You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church . . . I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven.” (Mt 16:18–19). Therefore it too is the repository of a charism.

At that time, this vision of a completely charismatic Church was totally new. It was only some years later that we saw the innovative works by Henri de Lubac (*Meditations on the Church*) and Karl Rahner (*The Dynamic Element in the Church*). Rereading her own experience of Paradise ’49, Chiara discovered that she was part of the charismatic current that made the church “beautiful,” and she also understood what her mission was: “We have only to make Love circulate among the different Orders.” It is a continuation of Mary who, in the Cenacle, became the Mother of the Church in all her expressions.

Enjoying Paradise ’49

“As one Sacred Host, from among the millions of hosts on the earth, is enough to nourish us with God, so one brother or sister, the one whom God’s will puts next to us, is enough to give us communion with humanity, which is the mystical Jesus.” The Church comes about and grows as a result of concrete love toward

every person, “those who the Will of God places close to us.” This is how living cells of fraternity are generated.

A New Spiritual Way

The Exterior Castle: Continuity and Novelty in the Life of the Church

The comparison with other mystical experiences and the study of the spiritual doctrine of the Church made Chiara Lubich ever more conscious of the novelty of her “strolling in Paradise”: God was introducing a new spiritual pathway. The very expression “strolling in Paradise,” so original, allows us to intuit that it is an authentic experience—this word, “experience,” with its root *ex-pèrior*, entails going to some place to discover, journeying in the sense of immersing oneself, penetrating. More than strolling “in” Paradise, it is a matter of strolling “the Paradise,” that is, living each one of the realities present there in such a way as to be transformed by them. Reading the texts of *Paradise* 49, we encounter the language of the “spiritual senses,” part of the Scriptures and the Christian Tradition. In all simplicity Chiara affirms: “I heard distinctly, with the hearing of the soul, a voice”; “His subtle voice said to me”; “I clearly heard the voice of the Spirit speaking to my Soul”; “I feel this delight that takes me over completely”; “And I saw and felt him [the Father] as never before”; “I felt myself really him [Jesus Eucharist]”; “one feels (almost as if the soul had senses).” Hers was an authentic mystical experience, understood as an “adaptation” to the Mystery, to God, as a “transformation” in him.

When one speaks about mysticism, one speaks also about gratuity. Many times, during her meetings with the Abba School (which she undertook from the early nineties to just before her

death), while reading her texts, Chiara expressed her surprise in finding so much beauty, boldness, accuracy, and prophecy. She asked herself: “How was I able to write these pages?” Her answer was that it was the Holy Spirit who made her understand and write those pages: “It was all a grace.” The charism Chiara received made her share her experience instead of keeping it only to herself. Thus, since day one, she communicated all she was experiencing to Igino Giordani. She did the same with her companions. More than revealing her experience, she wanted to introduce others to it, to involve them, to make them participants. Years later, she wrote: “These mysteries took place in me, Chiara, but no sooner were they communicated to the rest of the Soul than we perceived them to be shared.” Therefore, the experience became a proposal to journey together: a new spirituality.

Once back in Rome, Chiara started to look at what she had experienced with a certain detachment and continued to live her normal life. She became aware that hers was a “new pathway . . . albeit an old one.” She started referring to it as “a new mysticism”:

Ours is the mysticism of Jesus and of Mary themselves: the mysticism of the new Testament, the new commandment, the mysticism of the Church, by which the Church is truly Church, because Unity, Mystical Body, Love, because in it there circulates the Holy Spirit who makes it Christ’s Bride. It is the mysticism of Jesus, of the whole Jesus. . . . And Jesus is “where two or more.” Hence the mysticism of those who love one another as he has loved us; of a unity of souls that mirrors, while on earth, the Trinity On High: while on earth, because here below we are to witness to the God-who-is-Man and here below is the Church. Hence our

mysticism presumes at least two souls made God, among whom there truly circulates the entire Holy Spirit, made Person, that is, a third, God, who consumes them in one, in a single God: “As you and I,” Jesus says to the Father. Then and only then are the two Jesus. And this is our mysticism.

To say that the mystical life is life in Christ is well-established in the Christian tradition (“I no longer live, but Christ lives in me”). The novelty was in having intuited that one becomes “truly” Jesus, the “whole Jesus,” as Chiara writes, when one is his Body, the Church, when we are in unity. Jesus is found in the “two or three”; it is Jesus in our midst. This is an experience that does not regard only the individual but also the community. In the spirituality of unity, the subject of the experience is once again the Church (the Soul), as in the experience of the two on the road to Emmaus: “Did we not feel something like a fire in our heart, when he [Jesus in the midst] spoke to us and explained the scriptures.” Pentecost itself was an experience of the Spirit lived out all together. On November 8, 1950, Chiara spoke about this new spirituality in terms of an “exterior castle, in which God is in our midst.” A castle that reminds us of the temple of the Spirit mentioned in the First Letter of Peter, and in which each person is a living stone. The image must have come to her mind after reading about the interior castle proposed by Teresa of Avila. When, on December 2, 2002, Chiara visited the Convent of the Incarnation in Avila, she wrote the following in the visitors’ book: “Thank you, St Teresa, for all you did for us throughout our history. Thank you! . . . Keep on watching over us, over our exterior castle which the Bridegroom has established on earth as an addition to your interior castle, to make the church beautiful, as you wanted it to be.” Chiara’s spirituality is at

the same time both in continuity with and something new in the life of the church.

Enjoying Paradise ’49

“God who is in me, who has shaped my soul, who rests there in Trinity (with the saints and the Angels), is also in the heart of my brothers and sisters. It is not reasonable that I should love him in me alone. Were I to do so, my love would still have something personal, something egoistical: I would love God in me and not God in God, while this is perfection: God in God (for he is Unity and Trinity). Therefore my cell, as souls intimate with God would call it and as we [would call] my Heaven, is in me and, just as it is in me, it is in the soul of my brothers and sisters. And just as I love him in me, recollecting myself in this Heaven—when I am alone—I love him in my brother or my sister near me.” This is to love the other, because the same God who lives in me lives in the other. It is the way to “dilate” our interiority, to build the exterior castle, thus promoting universal brotherhood to reach unity.

A New Movement in the Church

From the Experience of Paradise to the Structuring of the Focolare Movement

In the autumn of 1949, when Chiara returned to Rome, not only did she start to reread the experience she had recorded in summer, thus making the first attempts at a doctrinal elaboration, but she also witnessed an accelerated development of the Movement that had been born six years previously. Until then, Chiara had never thought of structuring the Movement. Indeed, on October 21, she stated as much to the Bishop of Trent, who asked her for a

detailed report of the Movement, including numbers. She admitted that she had never given any thought to the organizational aspect, “letting the Lord see what has been done, or rather, what He has done in our midst. Not only that, but I have a certain repulsion for empty lists and other external forms lacking any spirit. We have truly neglected the organization, as we tried to love God and to make others love him too, and we did this with facts rather than words.”

From that moment onward, however, the development and the life of the Movement were seen as being in harmony with the light of Paradise, which continued to shine even in Rome. In the writings of that period, in fact, the mystical illumination and the organization of what would be called “Work of Mary” started to interact in a profound way. Years later, in her dialogues with the members of the Abba School, Chiara asked: “Was what we saw in 1949 Paradise or the Work of Mary?” She concluded that the two realities were intertwined.

We are at the final stage of our journey, and to keep to the image of a flight on an airplane, this is the landing stage. In the final pages of the book that we are reading together, Paradise sheds light upon the Work of Mary, upon its members, its articulations and its structures, and indeed, everything acquires a taste of heaven. Chiara once commented: “In these last pages I seem to discern the first illuminations on the life of the Work of Mary, starting from the first and smallest expression: the focolare.” It was through the focolare, which became almost the prototype of all other communities, that the clearest and profoundest ideas appeared, above all, regarding the relationships modeled on the Trinitarian law of mutual love, which gives rise to the Holy Spirit. Chiara also understood what she called the “designs”: of the first women and men focolarini, of Igino

Giordani and of Fr. Pasquale Foresi. Looking at these persons, who formed the first nucleus of the Movement around her, she seemed to discern God’s plan for each one of them and saw what their contribution to the entire Work of Mary would be. Chiara did not invent the tasks, the structures, and the lifestyles based on some abstract considerations. Instead, she saw these present and alive in the persons who were called by God to be close to her.

Even the leadership modalities of the Work of Mary were the fruit of this contemplation. Years later, to the members of the Abba School, she explained: “I understood that the Movement had to be governed by a Centre which lives according to the model of the Trinity.” Already on July 23, 1949, she had intuited the kind of relationships, an interplay of unity and distinction, that ought to bind together the members of the nascent Movement. She expressed this with the image of a rose with many petals:

In our unity of “us” and the focolarine, every now and then all the focolarine will unite themselves to us to form as it were the bud of a mystical rose. Then from the center they will become distinct, detach themselves (in praise and repetition of the Trinity) as it were into many petals, each of which will take the form of a rose, of a rosebud with other petals subdividing themselves, separating themselves out and forming in their turn other buds. . . . The whole then will return to the heart bud. . . . The rose then will open up in other ways, according to other relationships among the souls, and the patterns and the harmonies will be perennially new.

In the summer of 1950, she entrusted her vision of the structure of the Movement and the relationships between its components

to a fable (yes, *Paradise '49*, among its many literary genres, also includes a fable). She called it “The Fable That Blossomed along the Foco Trail.” It tells a tale of some potted flowers placed on the windowsill of a mountain cabin that, in an imaginative gesture, could move about, die, be born again, and bloom with flowers of many colors. . . . Thus, as in a prophecy, with that lightness that was to characterize the Work of Mary, she hinted at how it would be articulated, following a mysterious divine plan.

As I said at the very beginning, I consider the first and last words of the text of *Paradise '49* to be highly significant to the overall shape of this extraordinary journey. The first, which marks the beginning of the journey, is “Abba, Father”: One is in the Father’s bosom, in Paradise. The last word, which marks the end of the journey, is “man,” in his fullness, that is, Christ: “Jesus is Love because he is God. But the excess of love made him Jesus Forsaken who appears merely a man.” One is on earth, with the entire Paradise within. The earth in heaven, and heaven on earth. Paradise continues even today, among us . . .

Enjoying Paradise '49

“When we are united and he is there, then we are no longer two but one. In fact, what I say is not said by me, but it is I, Jesus, and you in me who say it. And when you speak it is not you, but you, Jesus, and I in you. We are a single Jesus and also distinct: I (with you in me and Jesus), you (with me in you and Jesus), Jesus among us in whom we are I and you.” This is the life of the focolare, that is, of all those who are called to live unity. Chiara says, “If we live in this way, we are already in paradise. There’s nothing better than to feel loved; when you see yourself in the other and the other sees himself in you, we feel completely understood.”

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