

Chiara Lubich's Paradise '49 in Light of the Letter to the Ephesians

Jesus Crucified and Forsaken,
the Church, and *Agape*-Love¹

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Abstract: *This article is the fourth and last in a series we have published in which the author explores the relationship between the Letter to the Ephesians and the writings of Chiara Lubich. In this final article, the author explores three themes. First is the meaning of the death of Jesus Christ on the cross for the church, humanity, history, and the*

1. This article constitutes the final part of a four-part study entitled "Revisiting Chiara Lubich's Paradise'49 in Light of the Letter to the Ephesians." It proposes to collect the points of contact between Lubich's Paradise '49 and the Letter to the Ephesians, and to explore the grand themes of faith that emerge from both of these writings, in

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cosmos in the Letter to the Ephesians. The author turns to the mystical writings of Chiara Lubich about Jesus Forsaken's role in the life of the Christian, the church, and the destiny of humanity and creation. Second, the author reflects on the letter's understanding of church as the Body of Christ brought about by the cross, by which new human persons are transformed and fulfilled in Christ. The author explores Chiara Lubich's collective experience of being a cell in the church, of being both Mary and Jesus, to further the mission of Christ in the church and the world. Finally, the author explores the role of love—agape—both in the letter and in Chiara Lubich's spirituality of unity.

Jesus Crucified and Forsaken

Chiara Lubich's mystical writings, referred to as "Paradise '49," have consistently highlighted the foundation of the unification and divinization that brings all of creation into the Bosom of the Father, namely, Jesus Forsaken and the merit of his death. The cosmic and eschatological significance of the Risen One finds its roots in the cross. In each section of this article, I will first turn to the Letter to the Ephesians and highlight what it reveals about the death of Jesus.

particular God, the Word, ecclesiology, and ethics. For an introduction to the contemplative experience of 1949 see the first issue of *Claritas*, which contains a contextualizing editorial essay, several other interpretive essays, and the opening text of Lubich's Paradise '49. The first and second parts Ross 's study can be accessed at *Claritas*, 5.1, and the third at *Claritas* 5.2. This fourth article by Ross  was first published in Italian in *Nuova Umanit * 32 (2010): 21–55. It was translated by Giovanna Czander and Jessica Behrends.

From the Letter to the Ephesians

The author of the Letter to the Ephesians explains the salvific merit in the death of Jesus using strongly Pauline and traditional terminology: redemption-ransom, reconciliation, forgiveness of sins, sacrifice, and so on (Eph 1:7; 2:16; 4:32, etc.). Worth highlighting in the opening blessing of the letter is the shortened statement:

God favored us in the Beloved, in whom we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of transgressions, in accord with the riches of his grace (Eph 1:6–7).²

The expression “redemption-ransom” has a strong social connotation: It means the freedom of a slave or prisoner through a payment of ransom. Seen as redemption, the death of Jesus means freedom from everything that would tarnish our relationship with God. This freedom comes through the forgiveness of sins, a forgiveness that removes what might be lacking in our relationship with God and brings us into communion with the Father. The traditional expression “through his blood” alludes to a type of violent death that becomes “life-giving.” The connotation of the word “blood” is that the death becomes the communication of life. For the author of the letter, as we will see, this reconciliation that is obtained solely by the grace of God is not confined only to the spiritual realm. It also has social and cosmic repercussions. In short, our costly freedom was obtained by the Father’s *Beloved*, “and this explains the weight of *agape* in the [salvific] event.”³

2. Translators’ note: Here, the translation of Rossé’s version of this scriptural passage is ours. In all other instances, we use NRSV.

3. Romano Penna, *Lettera agli Efesini* (Bologna: EDB, 1988), 93.

The Letter to the Ephesians reveals how “love” is the key to understanding the event of the cross: the love of a God “rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us” (Eph 2:4). This is a divine love, reflected in Jesus, who “loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God” (Eph 5:2, v. 25). Here, the author links the traditional phrase “Christ gave himself up for us” (Gal 2:20; Mk 9:31, 14:24; 1 Cor 15:3, etc.) to an expression derived from liturgical terminology and presents the death of Jesus as a sacrifice. The death of Jesus as an act of obedient love abolishes forever the sacrifices of the Temple. It is the supreme manifestation of love and is fully accepted by the Father. It reflects the love of the Father, revealing the definitive and unmeasurable “Yes” of God toward humanity.

How is the death of Jesus able to bring about communion with God and make unity among humankind possible? How does the value of such a death have repercussions for the entire universe? To answer these questions, it is important to turn to the central piece of what would be the doctrinal section of the letter, namely, Ephesians 2:11–22 and, more precisely, Ephesians 2:13–18. After addressing the relatively deplorable religious situation of those who in the past had been pagans, the author shifts his emphasis to his new and great point: “But now, in Christ Jesus, you who were once far off, have been brought near by the blood of Christ” (Eph 2:13). Note that “Christ” appears twice in the verse. He is the mediator and at the same time the space of relationships. On the one hand, it is “through Christ” that those “far off” together with the Israelites have found a new intimacy with God, who has revealed Godself as the Father of all. On the other hand, it is “in Christ” because of his death on the cross that “Jews” and “non-Jews” have also found themselves in greater fellowship with each other.

The cross gave birth to the unity of peoples. Its reach is broader than only encompassing one's individual salvation; it embraces the entire social dimension of unity giving birth to a "new society." The author continues with the verses that form the central section of the Letter:

For he is our peace, in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us. He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it. So he came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near; for through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father (Eph 2:14–18).

"Peace" is the ultimate messianic gift, namely, the state of fullness and happiness that results from a real and lived unity among humanity in the context of the definitive closeness of God. Now it is Christ who is peace. On the cross, he united in one Body Jews and non-Jews, who up to that point had been enemies (v. 16); and he introduced them all into the direct presence of God (v. 18). Therefore, the two categories of peoples, until then symbolizing mutual hatred, have become a united people (while retaining their identities) in the church, where there is no longer Jew nor Greek. They have been introduced into the Bosom of the Father. The cross is the place where the distance between God and humanity, as well as the distance among peoples, is removed.

What happened on the cross? Jesus "put to death hostility in his flesh," breaking down the dividing wall. This dividing wall recalls the wall in the Temple in Jerusalem that prevented non-Jews from coming close to the presence of God. The "wall" also metaphorically recalls judgment, hate, and misunderstandings that Jews and Gentiles inflicted on one another. Concretely, the author blames the Law of Moses (v. 15)! This passage is a criticism of the Torah—the only of its kind in the New Testament—wherein the Law is seen only as a list of commandments that gave birth to numerous prescriptions fostering discrimination, division among peoples, and mutual hate. Jesus needed to suffer this division in his own humanity in order to remove this barrier. In his crucified flesh (that is, in his way of "being" in the state of death),⁴ Jesus removed the hatred that divides humanity. He "put to death that hostility in himself." The author does not explicate how Jesus does this. But the concept is clear: Jesus removed all enmity by taking on himself hatred and division, forgiving everything and bringing together these enemies in himself on the cross (Col 2:14), thus opening the way for the divine force of *agape*.

In this obedient love until death, an immeasurable Love breaks forth in his body: the Holy Spirit that definitively surpasses a Law understood as a series of discriminatory prescriptions. On the cross, Jesus gives life to a new Law: to love always and everyone. On the cross, Love moves Jesus to identify himself with the sinner, with that which is division and disunity, to the point of appearing as a sinner even though he was without sin.⁵ It is exactly in

4. The context shows that "in his flesh" is referring to his death.

5. This thought assumes that the death of the Crucified One is understood as the highest manifestation of love, capable of reaching human beings where they are in their estrangement from God. There is a similar thought, perhaps, in Ephesians 4:9:

that Love, the Holy Spirit, that he is united with God the Father. And so, “in Jesus a spiritual space is opened, where God alone reigns without the mediation of the Law; God reigns there by means of His Spirit.”⁶ Effectively, the cross gives birth to a unity of peoples that, as the church, forms the New Human Being. This is not as a mere sum of different peoples, nor as a mixture, but as a “new creation,” already One because it is rooted in the Crucified and carries in itself the face of Christ (being his Body).⁷

In verse 17, Christ, who reconciles through his death the divided parts of humanity, becomes the missionary of his own work for peace. The Risen One universalizes what the Crucified One brought about by his death. By Jesus’s resurrection the reconciliation effected on the cross assumes a cosmic dimension. As Baulès writes, “It is not that there is more love in the Risen Jesus than in Jesus as he died; it is the same love, but through the resurrection, this love reigns over the entire universe and conquers hearts.”⁸

The text of Ephesians concludes with a striking synthesis: through Christ, and because of the cross, a united humanity gains access to the Father in the one Spirit. Christ is now the Mediator of the gift that is the Holy Spirit, a gift that is the direct avenue

Jesus “descended into the lower parts of the earth,” alluding to his solidarity to the very end with all of humanity, lived out in his death on the cross. In any case, such a thought is also present in the understanding of his death as an act of the highest love and the taking up of division “in his flesh.”

6. Robert Baulès, *L’Insondable Richesse du Christ*, Lectio Divina 66 (Paris: Cerf, 1971), 35.

7. A similar reality in relationship to the charism of unity is the birth of the “Soul” described by Chiara in “Paradise ’49,” *Claritas* 1.1 (March 2012): 8. Such a reality is certainly to be placed within the church as its living expression and is not intended as a second church.

8. Baulès, 147, n16.

for our intimate relationship with the Father and each other. The death on the cross, therefore, gives way to the power of Love that launches our return journey to the Father. Set as Head of the universe, the Risen One has already recapitulated all things in himself and has created universal “peace.” He removed the hatred that divides by his death on the cross, and he brought to life the power of Love, the communicated Spirit, that creates harmony and brings humanity together in unity.

The author finds confirmation in what would be the real masterpiece of God’s Wisdom, namely, the unity already attained in the church among those who up to that point had been divided enemies (Jews and Greeks) but who are now united into a single New Human Being. This is the visible sign of the cosmic recapitulation brought about by the resurrection, together with the power of freedom that will span history. This is the “unthinkable richness of God” that the apostle needs to proclaim to everyone (Eph 3:8): Humanity and all of creation are called to the “peace” already inaugurated in the Risen One. Erasing enmity, Jesus on the cross generates this unity that he, as the Risen One, extends to the entire universe. He is the universal Mediator of this unity; and as the author points out (in the only occurrence in the New Testament), he is also the author of the new creation (Eph 2:15).

From Chiara Lubich’s Writings

For Chiara Lubich, “the love of Christ that surpasses all knowledge” (Eph 3:19) and that was revealed on the cross has a name: Jesus Forsaken. As in the Letter to the Ephesians, Chiara presents a strong understanding that the death of Jesus, and more precisely his abandonment, is the perennial root of the eschatological event that brings God’s plan for humanity and creation to fulfillment.

To know Jesus Forsaken is to go to the heart of the love revealed on the cross, a love that makes Christ the universal Mediator.

How can we understand Jesus Forsaken in relation to the eschatological design of God? We read, “Jesus Forsaken summed up in His cry the nothing things are: ‘All is vanity of vanities.’”⁹ And again, “Jesus Forsaken has destroyed sin and death and put there: Love and Life. Jesus Forsaken in fact summed up in Himself all vanity and filled it with Himself.” Or, “Jesus Forsaken breathed into Himself all the vanities, and the vanities became Him and He is God.”

Lubich’s numerous texts about Jesus Forsaken speak of the fundamental importance of reality for her. Let us try to delve deeper. We read that Jesus Forsaken is nothing, is vanity. How do we understand this “nothing?” Nothing, when it is synonymous with “vanity,” conveys the solidarity of Christ crucified with everything that is an “abandonment,” everything that is non-God. It is creation as a “vanity” that is not to be understood in a moral sense. Rather, unlike God, it has no stability, it passes away. It is “the nothingness of all that is created; that is, its being is non-being in itself.” Vanity as nothingness (that is, the absence of God, the abandonment) is also in reality sinfulness, that is, separation from God as goodness itself: “Having been made sin and so disunity, individuality,¹⁰ as the Forsaken Jesus can be Spouse even of the

lowest sinner in the world, even while divided from everyone, because He—as sin—sees Himself in all sinners and all sinners can see themselves in Him.” And finally, nothingness seen as “vanity” is also suffering, death, and so on: “Pain is non-love and therefore, when God (Jesus Forsaken) suffered, He took Love from Himself and gave it to human beings making them children of God.”

In addition to this nothingness-vanity that is manifested in the Abandonment, and, with it, the total solidarity of Jesus with everything that is non-God, separation from God, the isolated individual, there is another nothingness. Jesus Forsaken lived another “nothing” within his nothingness. He became the non-existence characteristic of love. The dynamic of love is a total gift of self (a total self-emptying) that fulfills the person who loves by their giving the gift of “pure love” and thereby becomes a fullness of “being love.” At the culmination of his death—signified by his abandonment—Jesus lived in a fully human way the nothing of love: non-being as complete openness and gift to the Father and to humanity. In this total love lived on the cross, Jesus experienced “in his flesh” his non-existence as God, his nothingness as the Son in relation to the Father. By doing so, he introduces humanity into the dynamics of the life of God-Love.

Chiara applies the internal dynamics of love (non-being/being) also to the relationship between the Divine Persons: God is Love. In the “Nothing” of God, love and its internal dynamics of non-being/being are lived in complete fullness. Chiara writes, “Three Reals form the Trinity, and yet they are One because Love *is* and *is not* at the same time, but also when it *is not* it is, because

being, but became a little like Adam who before he sinned was *the* human being—he had all of humanity in himself—and afterward became an individual.”

9. An unpublished passage from 1949. Unless otherwise specified, all citations from the writings of Chiara Lubich refer to these unpublished materials, which date to 1949.

10. During a meeting of the Abba School, Chiara commented on this point: “This phenomenon of Jesus in his forsakenness is amazing. This is why Jesus does not say: ‘Father, Father, why . . .?’ but ‘My God, my God, why . . .?’ (Mk 15:34; Mt 27:46). He, in fact, having been ‘made to be sin’ (in an ontological sense, not a moral one) is reduced to being simply a human being, to ‘individuality.’ He is no longer *the* human

it is love.¹¹ In fact, if I take something from myself and give it (I deprive myself—*is not*) out of love, I have love (*is*).” The divine “Nothing,” in the logic of being love, corresponds to the *relatio subsistens* (essence signifying relation) of classic theology.

In his abandonment, Jesus lives the non-being of filial love that makes him One with the Father, in the highest solidarity with the non-being of the created world and of sin. In this way, he becomes the transparency of the Father, the point of convergence of God and creation, and the point (i.e., nothingness as empty space) where the Holy Spirit as “Divine Love” springs forth. Some of Chiara’s writings shed light on this concept:

Jesus is Jesus Forsaken. Because Jesus is the Savior, the Redeemer, and He redeems when He pours the Divine upon humanity through the Wound of His Forsakenness that is the pupil of the Eye of God upon the world: an infinite Void through which God looks upon us, the window of God thrown open upon the world and the window of humanity through which we see God.

Therefore, Jesus Forsaken is for humanity the revelation and encounter with God as Love. At the same time in Jesus Forsaken,

11. Again, during a meeting of the Abba School, Chiara commented: “Where non-being truly is being, is in the Trinity. The Father, in fact, in begetting the Son out of love, ‘loses’ himself in Him, lives in Him; he seems thereby to make himself nothing, but precisely in this making himself nothing out of love he is, is Father. The Son, as echo of the Father, returns to the Father out of love, he ‘loses’ himself in Him, lives in Him; it seems therefore that he too makes himself nothing out of love, but precisely like this he is, is Son. Equally with the Holy Spirit: in his being mutual love between Father and Son, their bond of unity, He “loses” himself in them, He makes himself nothing, in a certain way out of love, but precisely like this he is, is the Holy Spirit.”

the Father sees all of created humanity in the Son in that act of recapitulation that transforms the non-being of created humanity into love, that is, into “being.” In other words, it is in this “Emptiness” that the marriage takes place (i.e., the definitive communion, the New Covenant) between the Uncreated and the created:

The Father sent his Son to earth to be intermingled with created things, to sum up and divinize them. Jesus, the Mediator, was the cause of the marriage between the Uncreated and the created, of the unity between the created and the Uncreated, equal to the unity between the Word and the Father.

Jesus Forsaken is “nothingness” in what would be its purest state that can contain the All, God. Jesus Forsaken is the “Pure Act of Love”; *he is God*. Chiara writes:

Love is to be distilled all the way to being only Holy Spirit. It is distilled by passing it through Jesus Forsaken. Jesus Forsaken is the nothingness, is the point and through the point (= Love reduced to the extreme, having given everything) passes only Simplicity that is God: Love. Only Love penetrates.

Jesus Forsaken is then the Mediator, the point where that “dividing wall” vanishes. This dividing wall is between God and non-God that includes the whole of creation and humanity in all the possible situations of separation from God. Jesus Forsaken is the One through whom God recapitulates everything. The Risen One is Jesus Forsaken extended to everything that is non-God.

Chiara Lubich's ingenuity places the mediation of Christ within that "nothingness" where the "vanity" of creation and Trinitarian life can meet and enter each other. In Jesus Forsaken, "the Nothing is so united to the All (God) that what belongs to one belongs to the other and so the Nothing became the All: Jesus Forsaken is God." It is important not to forget that the "nothingness" lived by Jesus Forsaken is not a stagnant emptiness. Rather, it follows the dynamics of love. It is this love that has the capacity to transform the non-being of realities into "being" and "relationship."

Chiara (using mystical language) often speaks of a "divinization" that grants to creation a touch of the Eschaton: "As He translated pain into love, He translated wretchedness into Mercy. Everything is *divinized* by Him!" All negativity, therefore, can be transformed into love, into a Life that remains, transcending the "vanity" as "that which passes." "Jesus Forsaken clothed the All with Nothing¹² to make nothing of the Nothing and give divine consistency to all that passes: 'All is vanity of vanities' (Eccl 1:2)." Elsewhere, she writes:

And that Light,¹³ when it touched each one whose human nature was rendered of divine nature, "supernaturalized" all that is created in nature and in humankind in such a way that all is going towards God and nothing will be lost. For that which is lost will remain in Jesus Forsaken who

12. Chiara is thinking of the Nothing of the Word in the Father and of the Father in the Word. The expression "the All with Nothing" could also have this sense: the Nothing in all its fullness.

13. During an Abba School meeting, Chiara explained, "That is, the Holy Spirit who springs from Jesus Forsaken."

by divinizing it gives value in the eyes of God and of the blessed to Hell itself."

Therefore, even failures and what is useless are not lost forever. Jesus in his abandonment has saved everything and given everything a meaning. Now the New Creation is seen as more than solely a holy remnant saved from general destruction. It is not even a "new" creation, as it was born from nothing. But it is our nature transformed, where everything that is positive or negative becomes a light and a reflection of the glory of God that shines on the face of Christ.

In Chiara Lubich's thought, therefore, Jesus Forsaken is the key to understanding the depth of Christ's role in recapitulation. Because Jesus is Mediator precisely in his abandonment, the recapitulation of all things is brought about through the dynamics of love lived by the Crucified Man-God—of which the Risen One has given a value that is unchangeable, universal, and definitive. The reality of Jesus Forsaken is not an experience limited to the historical Jesus and therefore relegated to the past. But in Christ Jesus, it has eternal value; it is the eschatological event, where the glorious Christ remains forever the One who was crucified, the slaughtered Lamb. Over time, it is the ever-present way in which Christ acts out in and through the church his role of recapitulation.

Jesus Forsaken: The Role of Mediation of the Church and of Christians

Consistent with Divine Revelation and the Letter to the Ephesians, Chiara Lubich recognizes that the destiny of humanity and creation cannot be separated.

With that cry, He redeemed humanity and made it child of God, Trinity; and in it, He redeemed all that is created, in it the Trinitarian trace and life—where we found being and law and life, and all is Love: Father, Son, Holy Spirit—is borne by Jesus Forsaken to the full and complete Trinity.

Here, Jesus Forsaken offers us a completed and full vision that is at the same time:

- *unifying* (the bond between creation and salvation),
- *dynamic* (the bond between redemption and eschatology seen as full participation in the life of God),
- *anthropological* (with humankind as the synthesis of all of creation),
- *Christological* (the place and role of Jesus Forsaken in the plan of salvation-divinization),
- and *Trinitarian* (creation-eschatology as the work of the three Divine Persons).

It is important not to separate the beginning of God's Design carried out "in Christ" from its eschatological and ultimate role in the recapitulation of all things "in Christ." The creation "in Christ" and the universal and eschatological recapitulation are part of the same Design of God. Jesus Forsaken reveals and brings to fruition, even in our own history, both the bond of love that exists between things and the law of the Trinitarian pattern that from the beginning was always underneath creation and is now brought completely to the surface by Eschatology. The universal law or pattern and the relationships among things will turn into beauty, harmony, cohesion, and a reflection of the same Life of their Creator.

As has been observed, the recapitulation of all things in Christ has already been accomplished with the resurrection (see the aorist verb in Eph 1:10). What is the reality within God aims at being accomplished also in history through the church that carries in herself "the Fullness (*pleroma*) of Christ" (Eph 1:23). What is left is "that through the church the wisdom of God in its rich variety might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places" (Eph 3:10), a step in the plan of salvation that will precede unity. Because of Jesus, humans can be freed from the invisible and hostile powers that dominate them and from the hate that gives birth to division and so can become positive agents in a universe and a history that have universal reconciliation as their ultimate end.

It is the church's mission to irradiate into creation the unifying power of love set into motion by the Crucified One. The church, however, is not an abstract reality. It comes to life in the lives of believers. Therefore, the exhortative section in the Letter to the Ephesians is of great importance. This section seeks to portray the life of unity as a commitment that corresponds to the divine Design already in motion in the church—a living reality that is diverse, dynamic, and constantly growing into its Head, Christ. The desire for unity appears already in the first verses of the exhortative section (Eph 4:1–3) and includes commands that are very concrete and even obvious. We will look more closely into this concept later.

The charism of unity according to the texts of Paradise '49 also goes beyond a mere doctrinal analysis. It leads to the incarnation of the life of unity, inviting us to put it into practice and offering practical solutions for what is faced in daily life. In such texts, specific moral exhortations were not predominant. Instead,

the exhortations focused on the mission of universal recapitulation that is entrusted to the church and to which every believer is called to participate. Chiara Lubich does not offer Christians so much a list of prescriptions as the greatness of the God's Design enacted in daily life by their participation in the reality of Jesus Forsaken.

Like Jesus Forsaken, and in communion with the Risen One who lived the abandonment, the Christian is called to bring love to those places where there is none and to give to the "nothing," the eschatological dimension of a divinized reality:

For every mistake made by my brother or sister I ask forgiveness of the Father as if it were my own because my love takes possession of it. In this way, I am Jesus. And I am Jesus Forsaken as sin, always before the Father, in the greatest act of love for my brothers and sisters and so for the Father.

This text does not mean that one should imitate Jesus Forsaken but rather that one should bring about in history, through communion with the Risen One, the eschatological function of "reconciliation." In a broader sense:

I understood that, wishing to communicate with Jesus Forsaken Humanity, it was as if wanting the dreadful pain that circulates in the Mystical Body of Christ,¹⁴ and that this communion transmuted the pain into Love (it is always thus

14. Again, at a meeting of the Abba School, Chiara added, "I mean the whole of humanity."

in our Ideal) whereby I became: *Mystical Body of Christ*,¹⁵ all clarified by this newest communion.

On this point, Chiara's own experience is quite telling:

I went into church with a headache, and I said: "Why, my Jesus, do I feel this pain when You have taught me that *there is only Love*? Why can a physical disunity that is not Love make a greater din than health which is Love and so is that which is? I did not understand. . . . And yet, I had seen so clearly that only Love *is!*"

Throughout the meditation I communicated with Jesus-Eucharist . . . and I said: "Jesus Forsaken-Love, You are me and I am You" and I thought: "What other Heaven will I be now?" What is the Love of Loves? Pure Love? And I understood that it is Pain and that I had become: Jesus Forsaken-Pain and was as such before God.

It was not enough for God to love in the Uncreated (Trinity) and in the created (with the law of love spread throughout the universe).

He wanted to make of every *disunity: Love!* He made Himself man to love in a new form: with pain, to divinize pain, and, that is, every disunity; and he gathered upon Himself all the pains of the world, all the disunity of the universe, and He made them: Love, God!

15. Chiara comments, "This means the whole of humanity bought back to Christ."

Therefore now I can love more than before. I love with Love and I love with Pain, through Jesus Forsaken divinizing all Pain.

What value Pain has! It is an added God; it is the Superlove! And now I am before God as the *Whole Love*. I no longer lack anything. I . . . equal Jesus Forsaken. More than this, I could not love!

Jesus Forsaken does not strengthen (recapitulate) merely the law of love inscribed by God in creation but also the “negative nothing” (suffering, disunity, death) as an opportunity for salvation: Nothing escapes the salvific love of the God-Man. Therefore, loving in the midst of suffering, loving in a situation of disunity, is not just bearing it but divinizing it: “I, therefore, being Jesus Forsaken Pain, present myself to God, having in me the Value, that is, the divinization of all the pains that were, that are, and that will be.” This means bringing to every circumstance of non-being the eschatological dimension of “being.” This is a great example not just of the function of recapitulation by Christ (“whatever is assumed is redeemed”) but also of the fact that each believer can carry ahead this mission in communion with Jesus Forsaken, that is, with the Risen One who, on the cross, eliminates all divisions.

Joined with Christ, the Christian finds himself or herself wherever the Risen Lord is: in the heart of the world, close to everyone and every situation, since Jesus in his abandonment reached out to everyone, forever. Chiara Lubich is not afraid to write that such love “goes beyond the Trinity,” since it is lived in communion with the One who not only is God but also became man in complete solidarity with humanity from within. In fact, concerning

soteriology, there is a great consistency between Chiara Lubich’s writings and the Letter to the Ephesians. Redemption is read through the lens of unity (recapitulation, reconciliation) and is perceived in its cosmic and eschatological dimension, to which the understanding of Jesus Forsaken gives all its breadth. Jesus Forsaken also includes the redemption of what is negative and offers a key to a transformed living (the Super-Love) that can be experienced by anyone as a participation in the mission of the church.

The Church

From the Letter to the Ephesians

I am not setting out to explain all of the ecclesiology in the Letter to the Ephesians. The author has incorporated concepts from tradition (Body of Christ, Temple of God) and integrated them well in his own vision. I would like to focus on this vision in the aspects where I see the most evident similarities with Chiara Lubich’s experience.

The letter is not concerned with the internal organization of the church (though it shows that it is aware of it and mentions it) nor with the church’s institutional aspect. Rather the church is seen as a fruit of God’s grace, generated on the cross where Jesus abolished all divisions. The church is already an eschatological reality. Since in the church the eschatological reality of unity is already happening, the church is called to bring about in history and in the world this universal reconciliation of which she is a manifestation. To accomplish this calling, it is not necessary to reach out toward the galaxies but, in love, to be introduced into the Divine, where the Risen Lord reigns, where all things are already recapitulated. The previously cited text in Ephesians 2:14ff is key:

In his flesh he has made both groups into one . . . that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it.

The church is certainly a social reality, but it was not born through mutual agreements with the purpose of establishing a different nation. The church is a people, but not the people of Israel plus the Gentiles. Rather, it is the “place” where each and all are lifted together to be the New Human Being, that is, already One in its origin. What was born on the cross is a New Creation: a social reality that is also the Body of Christ whose Head already lives in God in the Eschaton and whose Body, nourished by the Head and of the same nature as the Head, in its deepest essence¹⁶ is called to become “the perfectly fulfilled human being” and to achieve the “measure of the fullness of Christ” (Eph 4:13).

Unity manifests the nature of the church. “There is Church wherever there is reconciliation, where the walls of separation are reversed.”¹⁷ However, this unity that will become true in the people of God is a gift and belongs to God’s Mystery; the deepest identity of the church: Body of Christ. This unity is essentially an ecclesial experience that starts from Christ and leads to Christ, from the New Human Being (Eph 2:14) to the perfect Human Being (Eph 4:13). It is a story of relationships where Christ is always the origin and ultimate goal. So, the church, which is already “Christ” in her

16. Chiara notes, “We cannot think of a body with a head of one nature, of one brilliance, and the rest of another nature, almost as if the head were of gold and the members of lead.”

17. Michel Bouttier, *L’Épître de Saint Paul aux Ephésiens* (Geneva: Labor et Fides, 1991), 284.

deepest identity (the *pleroma*), is always journeying toward Him and lives in a constant dynamic of approachment. The church needs to become increasingly, and in always new ways, penetrated and transformed by the presence of the Lord who is her measure, because the Risen Lord is the church’s *pleroma*, the locus of divine Fullness, of her intimacy with God.

It is in the life of unity that Christ, present in the church who is his Body, becomes transparent as fullness received and always goal to be reached. In the unity that leads the church to conformity with its Head, to the perfect Human Being, each one finds one’s own fullness and perfection. The Letter to the Ephesians addresses its exhortation to everyone. Each individual is called to find his or her own maturity, that is, perfection and fulfillment in the relational dynamics of the New Human Being who grows toward Christ. As we read in the Letter to the Colossians: “It is he [Christ] whom we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone in all wisdom, so that we may make everyone perfected (fulfilled) in Christ” (Col 1:28).¹⁸ It is in the unity that brings about the New Human Being (= the church) that each person participates in the value of the All, realizing in oneself the growth of the Body toward the Head. The individual receives the value of church and makes visible the dimension of the ecclesial Christ in his or her own existence lived out in love.

From Chiara Lubich’s Writings

This reality of church becomes real in the group of people, called “the Soul,” who by divine grace decided to put the love of unity as the foundation of their relationships. By “Soul,” Chiara Lubich means herself and her companions, who, united to her, shared in

18. The translation of this scriptural passage is ours. [Translators’ note]

the mystical experiences she was having. They felt that they were united as one Soul: “The Soul is the church, but in the sense that by church we mean *Unity* (that is, the New Jerusalem), or better the fullness of Christian life.”

This is consistent with Ephesians. To live unity is to live in conformity with the deep essence of the church and let emerge that which constitutes her identity, the One who makes her One: Christ. The Soul is the manifestation of the church who lives out her own reality of being the Body of Christ. Therefore, each person in this Soul receives also the dimension of the church given him or her by the brothers and sisters in mutual love, therefore by the presence of Christ himself. This close connection between Christ and his Body, lived out in unity by the individual members, is expressed by Chiara as follows:

Today those who are clarified are (with the fullness of Life) living members of the Mystical Body of Jesus! They are the *same* Jesus, not “another.”¹⁹ They are “the same Mystical Body of Christ”²⁰ and, because thus united, each of them is “the same Christ.”

Unity lived out gives to all and each one—they having become Body of Christ—the Christic dimension of the church. This brings about an aspect of God’s Design described in the Letter to the Ephesians as making humanity in one Body whose Head is Christ. In Chiara’s thought, this reality is inseparable from the

19. Chiara makes reference here to the unity-distinction in the life of communion, where in any case there prevails the strength that comes from unity (“they are the same”).

20. Chiara explains at an Abba School meeting, “They live, that is, the reality of His mystical Body in themselves and among themselves.”

other description of the Divine Design: in Christ, the adoption of God’s children and the access to the Father, that is, the “Trinitarian” dimension of the life of the church. These two aspects of the great Design of God, namely, Body of Christ and access to the Father, that in Ephesians are at opposite poles are joined into one in the experience of the Soul entering the Bosom of the Father, and therefore are always inseparable in Chiara’s thought. This can be summarized in the following way: “We: sons in the Son in the Father. And Jesus at our side looks and makes us look upon One Alone: the Father. At our side and in us: for through HIS eyes we look upon the Father.”

The reality of church lived out in unity makes individuals similar to the Son in his relationship with the Father. In this above text, Chiara is careful to maintain the distinction of “Jesus at our side.” “Being Jesus” in mystical language means to receive from the Spirit Jesus’s relationship of sonship, that remains present in one’s brother and sister (see Rom 8:29; Heb 2:11). As Chiara Lubich says, “Whoever lives unity, lives Jesus, and lives in the Father.”

Chiara later shared a renewed experience of the Pact²¹ that she had on November 10, 1949:

When Jesus came into my nothingness I clearly heard the voice of the Spirit speaking to my Soul: “What? I have to make a pact with myself? *I* am in your nothingness.” And I saw a single Jesus in everyone, and all of us—as if members—uniting to form him, so that in the chapel I seemed to see only him: him with his Head upon the altar and we all members [of his Body].

21. See Chiara Lubich, “Paradise ’49,” *Claritas* 1.1 (March 2012): 7–8.

This experience is a renewal of the ecclesial-Christologic dimension, that is, of being church in her identity of being the Body of Christ. Here, the voice of the Holy Spirit emerges. The Spirit cannot make a pact with himself. The Holy Spirit in “nothingness” is the space for the Divine: “Love is to be distilled all the way to being only Holy Spirit.” It is the Holy Spirit present in the “nothingness” of the mutual love that forms the church, who unites individuals with each other so that they are “Body of Christ,” since it is the Holy Spirit who is the Relationship of Sonship of Christ with the Father.

Compared to the initial Pact with Foco, here there are new emphases. There is a relationship of identity with Jesus present not only in the tabernacle but also in each person who lives out unity. In unity each one is, for the other, Christ present in the church: “Like this I am Jesus and I live with Jesus.” The final impression of this experience is interesting. It is one of identity and not uniformity: “I saw coming out from that little chapel a single Jesus and I thought: ‘Whoever meets one of these will meet Jesus! Lucky them!’ And in us I saw perfect identity.” “I saw coming out a single Jesus” is the perception of being One, that is, of living in the dimension of the church with others (the Soul), the presence of Christ as the true Subject of the community: the experience of participating in the church, *pleroma* of Christ.

A Dynamic Experience of Church in the Letter to the Ephesians

The identification with Christ, experienced in unity, is not static. Participating in the love of unity in the reality of the church, the Body of Christ, means to participate in a life that entails growth in an increasingly deeper relationship with Christ, the origin and

goal of this growth (Eph 2:20f). The goal is to achieve a perfected human being, “to the measure of the full stature of Christ” (Eph 4:13). We need to “act²² the truth in love, and thus we must grow in every way into Him who is the head, into Christ” (Eph 4:15). “Acting in the truth” means to live the gospel by putting into practice the foundational commandment to love and to live an authentic relationship with the truth contained in love. It is an invitation to live authentically the relationship among brothers and sisters within the community (Eph 4:25). Christ is the goal of this growth. Growth is directed toward Him “in every aspect.” Therefore it is not just spiritual growth but also growth that spills over every human activity into all realms of social and individual life, because love wants to inform the whole human person in his or her being and behavior.

The author employs various analogies to express the relationship between the Body and the Head, the church and Christ. From the Head, as source of life, comes the vital energy that permeates the whole Body, nourishes it, and unites it (Eph 4:16; see also Col 2:19). However, this vision that emphasizes Christ as source of life and principle of unity has the negative implication of presenting the church as passive, rather than as a “thou” before Christ. The personal response of the church, who lives her relationship with Christ as a relationship of mutual love, does not always appear. This fact was particularly felt by Chiara: “I understood I had been made Church in order to love Him.”

The Letter develops another model present in the biblical tradition: the symbolism connected to the marital relationship between Christ and the church (Eph 5:22ff). In the New Testament,

22. In NRSV, “Speak the truth in love.” [Translator’s note]

the Letter to the Ephesians is the writing that theologically most develops this marital relationship. One aspect emphasized by the marital reality is the relationship of love between two individuals who give themselves fully to each other. This love has unique qualities: for Christ, marriage-love means “to give oneself up” to the other (Eph 5:25) and thus generate the church as bride. For her part, the love of the church for the Groom (Christ) is expressed as openness and giving (Eph 5:24). And the Groom is always open to the bride, giving His grace at all times. The relationship of the two emphasizes the distinction of two individuals who are *united*. Therefore, there is a vital dynamic in the marriage of Christ and the church, a dynamic where the bride grows in love and unity with the Groom, who gives the bride the grace to become a New Human Being. In the words of the letter:

In the same way, husbands should love their wives as they do their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. For no one ever hates his own body, but he nourishes and tenderly cares for it, just as Christ does for the church, because we are members of his body. (Eph 5:28–30)

In the verses above, the author joined the reality of marital relationship with the one of the Body of Christ, thanks to the term “body,” which is synonymous with “flesh” (see Gen 2:24 and Eph 5:30). In the marital union, the two become one flesh and therefore one Body. In the verses under consideration (28–29) the analogy focuses on the love of the husband who sees his wife as another self. “To love one’s body,” rendered as “loving himself,” reminds one of the commandment, “Love your neighbor as yourself.” Applied to the relationship of Christ-church, and therefore

to the mutual love of the life of unity, this commandment receives its fulfillment, so to speak: “the neighbor and I-myself coincide.”²³ This coinciding is something on which Chiara’s mystical intuition insists: “I am you, you are me, because on the nothingness of mutual love, we are all Jesus.” The author of the letter alludes to this “mystery” by inserting verse 30 “because we are members of his Body.” He does not mention the church but talks about “we,” and therefore the author shifts from the analogy Christ-church to a level that entails participation that makes one Body out of the two.

The Dynamic Experience of Church as Chiara’s Mystical Experience

In Chiara’s ecclesiological vision, the relationship between church, Body of Christ, and church-Bride of Christ is relevant to the experience of unity. She and her companions identified first with Christ in the mystical experience of having entered the Bosom of the Father. Therefore, Chiara Lubich emphasized the “same nature” of Head and Body. The Soul-Church (Chiara and her companions as one Soul that is also in that unity the church) lives the fullness of the relationship with Christ as the Bride of Christ: “She understood she had been made church in order to love Him. Thus the Word wedded the Soul in a mystical marriage.”

This experience of the authentic church is remarkable:

- As Bride, the church is a subject capable of loving;
- The fullness of the relationship with Christ is given only to the church, not to an isolated individual except by participation, in unity, to the church. Congar wrote, “All

23. See Bouttier, 246.

[Christians] are Brides but they are seen and willed to be so by God, as members of the Bride who is the Church.”²⁴

The following text by Chiara summarizes well the bridal dimension of the relationship that takes place in a “collective spirituality”:

When, because it is virgin, any soul says that it is the bride of Christ, it lies if that soul is not *Church*. Only now, after our souls have, *because of Jesus among them*, been wedded to one another and are Church (because they are Christ: one Christ and three Christs or as many Christs as souls of ours who in this way are united, one Church and many Churches), can they say, both in unity with the others and *individually* (because each soul has the value of all, that is, of *Jesus* in their midst), that they are brides of Christ. In fact, Jesus can wed only Jesus. For Jesus is not *One* but with Himself.

Here, Chiara does not argue against traditional mysticism, that is, the experience of the individual soul as Bride of Christ, but gives an important criterion for understanding authentic mysticism as well as the life of faith. The spousal experience is possible only because the mystic (the believer) is a member of the Bride, the church who possesses this relationship with Christ. This is what happens in the spirituality of unity.

The church-Bride, whose “I” is Christ present in her, lives the loving relationship with the Groom in more than a sentimental way. Chiara Lubich’s whole being was involved in her mystical

experience: “My sweetest Spouse. . . . All that is left for me is to swoon into You, to die again into your Heart, consumed by your love!” While this was true, she also emphasized that based on love as expressed in Ephesians 5:24, loving submission to Christ includes: “If you love me, you will keep my commandments” (Jn 14:15).

Therefore, the Word is relevant as the expression of a lived relationship. It is being open to the gospel that nurtures the spousal relationship between the church and Christ and makes her grow. In unity lived out in mutual love, which is the commandment par excellence, the dynamic relationship of the growth of the church toward Christ, between the New Human Being and the Perfected Human Being, is fulfilled:

To live the reality of the marriage of my Soul with the Word—“Love,” who I saw in Paradise after the Father (Infinite Love)—I have to be only *Word of God*. Every instant I live the Word is a kiss upon the Mouth of Jesus, that Mouth which spoke only Words of Life. And from Mouth to mouth passes the Word; He communicates Himself (who is Word) to my Soul. And I am one with Him! And Christ is born in me.

The Word, the gospel as something to be lived out, is understood not as pure intellectual knowledge but as life that is shared by self-giving through the kiss on the mouth, that is, in the very contact with the Person who speaks it. In his Word, Christ brings about his self-giving gift that makes him “alive” in the community and in each member. Another text, also of spousal flavor, confirms this concept:

24. Yves Congar, “La personne ‘Eglise,’” *Revue Thomiste* 4 (1971): 639.

Jesus from the tabernacle taught me how I should draw Him to myself with love, almost breathing Him into me, and how He was the Word of Life and how *living* the *Word* I would have loved Him as Bride and He would have been me. . . .
Living the Word in each instant.

This passage says in different words what Jesus promises in the Gospel of John, “Those who love me will keep my word and my Father will love them and we will come to them and make our home with them” (Jn 14:23). As the commandment par excellence in the Gospel of John is mutual love, it is in the “mutual nothing,” and therefore in the life of unity that makes the church, that this relationship is best lived in a spousal manner.

Regarding the growth of the Body of Christ toward Christ and of the spousal relationship between Christ and the church, the Letter to the Ephesians had not yet recognized in the Bride the face of Mary, which later Mariology-ecclesiology developed. On this point, Chiara Lubich makes a Mariological connection that is well attested in theology. However, I would like to offer not just a “reflection” of Chiara Lubich but a mystical experience she had, whose originality is given by the charism of unity. There is a deep consistency here with the ecclesiology in the Letter to the Ephesians:

One day,²⁵ one of us suggested consecrating ourselves to Mary and, that means consecrating the Soul to Mary. It was the will of all, and in the morning at Holy Communion each of us asked Jesus-Eucharist to consecrate the Soul to Mary,

25. Probably July 27, 1949.

according to His intentions, asking Him to reveal, then, what had taken place in us. As soon as we said this, the Soul understood that it had become Mary or, better, that it had the very *bodiliness*, in which she was contained, *immaculatized*. The second rebirth, that of the Spirit, had done so much as this. Indeed, the Soul understood immediately that our being consecrated by Jesus to Mary was our being *consecrated as Mary*, that is, making us sacred with Mary, like Mary. Our *bodiliness*, then, was Marian. The outburst of joy in us was immense.

It was probably the devotion to Mary that suggested this consecration. However, the effects go well beyond devotion and are to be interpreted in light of the charism of unity and, therefore, from the perspective of church. It seems to me that there is an experience of mystical identification with Mary that goes beyond, or is distinct from, the one expressed as “Mary’s face of the Church-Bride.” In this latter case, Mary’s attitude, described in the Annunciation story, is relived by the church and is the typical attitude of the church as Bride, as described in Eph 5:24. It entails submission that is receptive love, made of complete openness to God, of receiving Christ, who communicates himself in the Word and dwelling in the church, temple of the Divine Presence (Eph 2:22).

Now, in Chiara Lubich’s case, Christ produced an identification that I would call “existential”—not simply symbolic—with Mary: the experience of having *Marian bodiliness*. Chiara talks about a “second rebirth, that of the Spirit.” This is not the baptismal immaculatization (Eph 5:27) that is the first rebirth but the full accomplishment of the baptismal reality in the life of unity.

This experience continues on the following day, July 28, 1949, when it becomes more fully understood:

But what happened after that was even more marvelous. The following day, we—united—being Mary, the Immaculate, went to Holy Communion, and let Jesus illuminate us on the other mysteries that were happening in us within Paradise. As soon as Jesus had entered into me, I heard distinctly, with the hearing of the soul, a voice: “*Pregnant*,” whose meaning immediately opened up to me as: “Within you I press,” that is, in your immaculate bodiliness I form now my Son, or better: your immaculate bodiliness I transform into divinized bodiliness, into that of Jesus, in such a way as to make of you “another Jesus” in the truest sense of the word. And I had the impression that Jesus grew within me to the point of taking my place completely, the place of my immaculate bodiliness. It was the mystical incarnation!

The experience of having “Mary’s bodiliness” has now a clear purpose: being “pregnant.” The Soul that has the *bodiliness* of Mary is made capable of “generating,” of becoming Mother to the mystical incarnation. Through the spousal union, the Soul becomes a tabernacle of Jesus present within her. But the Soul is also Mother, because she is capable of giving Christ to the world by generating him outside of herself, which is possible only if she contains Christ given to the world.

In the maturity of the “second rebirth,” the Soul has become capable of offering to the church and the world Jesus generated in the life of unity:

The Church is Mother because she is not only the recipient nor only the channel of grace but an essential aspect of the grace she receives in that she becomes able to participate to the whole divine life and the communication of this life, because it is the life of *agape*.²⁶

The movement expressed in this mystical experience is remarkable: the Soul, being Mary, generates the Son, not as distinct from herself, not by separating herself from him as in any normal motherhood. On the contrary, she becomes the Christ she generates, “your immaculate bodiliness I transform into divinized bodiliness, into that of Jesus, in such a way as to make of you ‘another Jesus’ in the truest sense of the word.”

The ecclesiology of the Letter to the Ephesians sheds light on this point: the church, Body of Christ, takes on her universal mission and lives out her vocation not by abandoning her identity of Body of Christ but by growing toward Christ (Eph 1:22ff, 4, 16). Thus, the church becomes increasingly more Christ-like, that is, letting herself be increasingly transformed by the Lord who is generated within her. To reach Christ, the church does not have to go to great distances outside of herself but let herself be “divinized” by Christ, who lives in her deepest recesses. In love, the Body builds itself, says the letter (Eph 4:16). When *agape* is the law of the life of the Soul, the Soul is completely permeated by the *pleroma* that dwells within her. And thereby the love of Christ, which takes away all divisions (the Crucified one creates unity), can emerge and become a compelling witness.

26. Louis Bouyer, *L’Eglise de Dieu* (Paris: Cerf, 1970), 658.

Chiara Lubich's notes explain that at the beginning of this contemplative period of time, God had given her a magnificent vision of "Mary, Mother of God, generator of God." Then at a certain point, God gave her what he had already shown her. He gave the Soul with "Mary's bodiliness" the "true Jesus," that is, the Risen Christ who becomes visible in the "nothingness" of mutual love. The Christ of the "second rebirth" (in the Pascal event of death and resurrection) is the true and final "God-with-us." The maternity of Mary is fulfilled in the maternity of the Soul-church: it is "the mystical incarnation." *Unity is the mother of God-with-us.*

Agape-Love

From the Letter to the Ephesians

In the Letter to the Ephesians, the typical sign of the church is the unity already in place between Jews and Gentiles thanks to the Crucified and Risen One who united in one Body these human categories, symbol of a permanent division (see Eph 2:11–12). The parenthetical part of the letter, the exhortations in the second part of the letter, starting from chapter 4, aim at preserving this unity in the daily life of the believers. The exhortation aims at promoting the unity of the Body of Christ among the members. Hence the initial recommendation provides the tone:

I therefore . . . beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. (Eph 4:1–3)

Unity²⁷ is the distinct feature of the church and thus the vocation of every Christian. The author therefore sees in unity the most important task to carry out. To do this, the author mentions three virtues: humility, meekness, and patience. The context clearly says that these are not qualities that each individual has to develop privately but qualities that are needed to live out the relationship within the community. Humility in the life of unity consists in "being nothingness," which entails deep and complete openness to one's brother or sister and makes room for Christ, who is present in the relationship of mutual love. One who is meek knows to respond with calmness to violence and thus diffuse it. Patience in relationships with brothers and sisters is contrary to intolerance and haste: It is knowing how to make room for the other just as he or she is.

Virtues are therefore unifying qualities of *agape*. Concretely, "bearing with one another" is what is needed. This is at the foundation of life together, the remedy that heals the inevitable conflicts, psychological or of other kinds. This has the purpose of keeping the unity alive that comes from the Holy Spirit. Living unity brings about peace, the eschatological good that envelops the church and all of creation (Eph 1:10). The tone is set, and the letter immediately introduces the reader to a Christian ethics aimed at the life of communion, and therefore at a "collective spirituality" that lives out this communion in the relationships among brothers and sisters in the covenant with God.

27. In all of the New Testament, the noun "unity" appears only in Eph 4:3, 13.

From Chiara Lubich's Writings

This logic of Christian ethics is found in Chiara's texts, where she draws a distinction between ethics based on the development of virtues and the "Pascal" ethics of the life of unity: "To have God we must lose the virtues: *all of them*. This too is a secret that has burst from the Wound of Jesus Forsaken." Chiara Lubich explains, "Jesus Forsaken teaches us to be nothing and so one has everything, God, who is Love."²⁸ Chiara Lubich certainly does not question the existence and value of the virtues; rather, she questions an ethics that bases Christian behavior on a planned development of virtues in order to achieve individual perfection: This a self-centered morality. The "nothingness" of love, in the measure of Jesus Forsaken, who has in himself all the eschatological powers of "divinization," includes all the virtues but as expressions of love, therefore as "fruits of the Spirit" (Gal 5:22f). It is not about perfecting one's ego but about giving oneself to *agape*. In other words, one needs to lose one's ego in the non-being of love and be perfected by God.²⁹

For the author of the letter, love, lived out, brings about growth toward Christ (Eph 4:15). The church is herself in as much as, because of mutual love, she lets the face of her Lord shine through her. Chiara Lubich wrote the following on this topic:

Whoever lives in the brother or sister does not have the virtues as they are normally understood: he or she is *nothing*, and the nothing has *nothing*: it does not have purity, nor

28. At an Abba School meeting.

29. And this perfection lies in the "divinization" that only God can bring about, and in the attainment of one's own vocation, in one's own human-divine design, personal and unique for everyone.

humility, nor patience, nor mortification, etc., because it is nothing. Therefore true purity is the purity of purity, humility is the humility of humility, patience is the patience of patience, etc. That is, the virtues "à la Trinity," as we put it, and, that is, as they are lived by the Trinity which is Love. Now, a soul in which a particular virtue is noticeable, in reality has the opposing vice. In fact, someone who speaks ill of self is spiritually proud, at least if not using this way of speaking *in order to love* their neighbor, but then it is not humility, it is charity and to charity everything is permitted.

In this text, *agape* is understood as the "fullness of virtues" (paraphrasing Paul), as their fulfillment that includes and at the same time transcends them. Mortification is there, as well as purity, patience, and the other virtues, which are expressions of the love of neighbor: They are faces of the non-being of love ("purity of purity . . .").

There appears a complete difference between virtue-based morality and unity-based morality (a Paschal morality). Virtue-based morality leads to a virtuous individual who is in control; the unity-based morality leads the individual to being a new creation, a New Human Being. However, as Chiara Lubich reminds us, to become such, one needs to be the "nothing" (the non-being of love), because only then is there room for the Spirit of God that divinizes and unifies. Therefore: "Whoever lives unity has found God as God has never before been found. Going beyond one's own perfection (still a matter of self-seeking), he or she *believes all* and lives Jesus who is in the midst. He or she is Jesus."

In this "being Jesus" of each person, that is in reflecting in one's own being the fullness of the presence of Christ in the community

(in the unity of two or three...), the church is built as the Body of Christ. In the perspective of the Letter: in love, each one becomes a channel through which the Life which comes from the Head can obtain the unity of the Body (Eph 4:15–16). All this ethics is consistent with the life of faith: “Whenever I am weak, then I am strong” (1 Cor 12:10). In the Letter to the Ephesians, as well as for Chiara Lubich, the life of unity is the foundation of Christian ethics. Living the presence of Christ and being church, His Body, are indivisibly connected. Living “in love” brings about both realities in a dynamic of growth that increasingly tends toward elevating and building up the “fullness of Body of Christ” (Eph 4:13). This is the true identity of the church: from the Body, to the dwelling of the Fullness (*pleroma*) of Christ (Eph 1:23), to the “fullness of Christ” (Eph 4:13).

This ethical-ecclesial concept needs to be included in the broader Design of God on creation, as presented both in the letter and in Chiara Lubich’s mystical writings. The invitation to love, to “maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (Eph 4:3), is part of the broader Divine Design that brings it about in history. Knowledge of the “Mystery”—the goal of the letter—leads to contemplation that in turn leads to praise and thanksgiving but also prompts action: It is indispensable in order to accomplish God’s universal Design already here on earth. Conversely, this knowledge shapes the actions of each person, whose “love,” even if minuscule, is part of the great Divine Design begun with the Risen Crucified Lord: universal recapitulation.

The Use of “In Love” in Ephesians

I would like to conclude by underscoring the relevance of the expression “in love” in the Letter to the Ephesians. The expression

appears six times (Eph 1:4; 3:17; 4:2,15,16; 5:2) in the letter and only four other times in the entire New Testament. The expression suggests, and the context confirms this suggestion, that love is not understood as one of the virtues, not even as the greatest of them, nor it is identified with acts of charity, even if they are a natural consequence of love. The author writes, “Be imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us” (Eph 5:1–2). “Living in love” is about a way of being that imbues the whole Christian existence and expresses a life whose source and model is God’s love, which manifests itself in the Crucified One. “Be imitators of God”: this daring expression is unparalleled in the New Testament, though it is a biblical concept (see Deut 5:12–15; Lk 6:36; Mt 5:45; 18:33). It invites one to enter into the perspective of God, who self-revealed as Love.

Love is therefore the foundation of Christian life, the soil in which the life of unity has its roots (see Eph 3:17: “rooted in love”). As such, *agape* is also the unifying force that makes the community grow toward its goal, a growth into a shared nature, which leads the church to be increasingly like Christ, her Beginning. Therefore love brings the great Divine Design to its fulfillment (Eph 4:15, 16).

Finally, when the author of the letter says that the Father “chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before Him *in love*” (Eph 1:4), it is clear that love is not just a means for growth but the very goal. Love is an eschatological reality identified with Life in Paradise, the fullness of life to which we are called. It is “in love” that makes us “holy and blameless,” so that we come to participate in the “fullness of God” (Eph 3:19). “The revelation of God in Jesus Christ is the rising

of love as universe is destined to be.”³⁰ Whatever is at the origin, what moves God to act is also God’s final goal: revealing to all and for all ages that everything is love (Eph 2:4–7). It is *love* as the essential feature of God and of Paradise that strikes Chiara Lubich, and remained consistently present in her experience and reflections. On this Paradise, which is the Divine Design for humanity and creation, I conclude this study comparing the Letter to the Ephesians and Chiara’s mystical experience.

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30. Baulès, 102.