

Paradise '49

Chiara Lubich

We are here publishing a translation of Chiara Lubich's talk about her mystical experiences that began in the summer of 1949.¹ This talk was presented at Oberiberg, Switzerland, on the Feast of St. Paul, June 30, 1961. The article following this one, entitled "Editorial Essay: Contextualizing 'Paradise '49,'" is meant to place this talk in historical context and in the context of the development of Lubich's spirituality as well as to add explanatory comments about the text itself. Here, we also present excerpts from the introduction to the original Italian publication of this talk written by Giuseppe M. Zanghi, editor of Nuova Umanità.

Our readers have probably come across some texts by Chiara Lubich that make reference to a mystical experience that was lived in 1949. . . . In particularly difficult and decisive historical moments, God ushers into the world through the church—the living Body of Christ—charisms, gifts, through

1. Translation by Callan Slipper.

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which the Holy Spirit opens new streams of light and new ways of life that are up-to-date and fitting to the times. . . . The person who is called to accept this gift on behalf of humanity has to transmit it in its complete genuineness. For this reason, God engraves the charism into the heart, mind and body of the founder with letters of fire, a living text of life in this charismatic person who will experience during his or her lifetime celestial joys and profound sufferings. . . . It was like this for Chiara. After a very intense period that lasted five years, Chiara was “seized” by God during the summer of 1949 and introduced into a particular participation in the life of the Trinity that revealed Itself to her, in as much as this is possible for a human being. It was then that the Work that she had to generate as a gift to the church and to the world, the Work of Mary [the official name of the Focolare], was revealed to Chiara in its divine roots. God has always acted like this with those he has called to give birth to new spiritual families and new understandings in the church. For example, there were the revelations that St. Ignatius of Loyola had in Manresa. For Chiara Lubich, 1949 was a time of particular communion with the mysteries of God. She was not alone but was with some of the first group of her companions and with Iginio Giordani to whom she communicated daily what God made her understand. . . . In 1961, Chiara wanted to write in a few pages a condensed version of this mystical experience according to what she remembered at that time and this is what we would like to share with our readers. We have added only a few short notes so as to maintain the strong impact of the text.²

2. Chiara Lubich, “Paradiso '49,” *Nuova Umanità* 177 (2008): 281–83.

ENTRANCE INTO THE FATHER

We had been trying with great intensity to live the main points of our spirituality: the present moment, mutual love, the Word of God.

We had been trying to become identified with the Word of God with which we made our communion constantly in the present moment.

There were three compulsory communions for us: with Jesus in the Eucharist, with our brother or sister, with the Word of God.

For about five years we had been meditating in our life upon the Word of Scripture and, in the Spring of 1949, I realized that the effects in our life of its various words were more or less the same, if not exactly the same, as if the substance of each word were “love.”

For years we had thought that, just as the whole of Jesus is in the sacred Host and likewise in each piece of it, so also the whole of Jesus is in the Gospel and likewise in each Word of it, in each complete idea.

But now we were experiencing this.

As a consequence the desire to continue this practice was gradually fading in me, not because it was not useful or out of negligence, but because it had, as it were, achieved its goal.³

I do not remember the way things happened exactly, but deep within me the conviction was taking root, with the practice that

3. Saying this, Chiara does not mean to devalue putting the Word into practice, but simply to underline the centrality of Jesus forsaken who, in that moment, became “Everything” for her. In a note written at a later date, taking into account the whole experience of that summer of 1949, she wrote: “It is wonderful that even the highest mystical experience we live never stops us from contemplating the Word, but urges us to live it with always greater intensity.”

went with it, that *Jesus forsaken* effectively summed up the whole of the Gospel. And that, in loving Him, all the virtues would blossom.

He seemed to us to be the summary of the ascetic practice God was proposing to us and that, by living Him, we would be able to live Christ in us.

In Jesus forsaken there were all sufferings, all loves, all virtues, all sins (since He had made Himself “sin”) and in Him we all found ourselves in every instant of our lives.

He was the summary of physical sufferings, because he was dying, and of moral and spiritual sufferings.

He was the summary of all loves: He was “father” for having regenerated us; He was “mother” in the labor pains of our divine birth; He was brother, friend.

He was the summary of the virtues: *the pure one*, to the point of being detached from every divine consolation, He who was God; *the poor one*, poor of everything . . . even of the sense of His divinity; He was *the obedient one*, because He was losing everything in the Father, who was Authority for Him.

In fact, in that cry He appeared to us as suffering and love together.

He had made Himself “sin” for us sinners, rebellion, division, excommunication, and so forth, out of love. I don’t know how to link these two terms: love and suffering that in Jesus forsaken appeared to us to be a single thing, so that one would not exist without the other.

By living Jesus forsaken we had come to understand that He had *made Himself nothing* and that in this *nothingness* was our life. To be like Him out of love for Him, that nothingness that we really are.

We nothing, He all.

At that time there took place an extremely profound meeting of soul with Foco,⁴ when he came to Fiera;⁵ when I spoke with him I found in him a soul like none I had ever met. Unlike the *pope*,⁶ he had a special grace to understand this Ideal that God had given to me, giving it the importance it deserved.

In his own person, he clearly brought a particular presence of Jesus in our midst, that made my soul rejoice in celebration and made me to see things in a way I had not seen them before.

Every meeting, every conversation I had with him, I then repeated to the *pope* in detail and with all the warmth I felt so as to make them participate in everything and because it seemed to me that whatever is not useful to humanity or at least to others, has no value. I also communicated it so as to conserve its divine transparency and so that no “human”⁷ elements would be added and ruin everything.

I remember that during those days, nature seemed to me to be enveloped totally by the sun; it already was physically, but it seemed to me that an even stronger sun enveloped it, saturated it, so that the whole of nature appeared to me as being “in love.” I saw things, rivers, plants, meadows, grass as linked to one another by a

4. Igino Giordani was a distinguished writer, student of Christianity, and politician of great moral stature.

5. Fiera di Primiero is a small center in the area surrounding Trent where Chiara went for a short period of rest.

6. This is a word in the Trent dialect, here in its feminine form, meaning “children,” which Chiara used to refer to the *focolarine*. The term recalls the “little ones,” the “children” of the Gospel.

7. Human is used here in the sense of something that flattens the mystical experience into something banal, neither open to nor informed by the divine.

bond of love in which each one had a meaning of love with regard to the others.

It was something similar, but universalized, to what I had experienced while walking down from the Franciscan Institute⁸ when I was twenty years old, singing the Hail Marys of the rosary. I had seemed to see the blossom of a horse chestnut tree alive with a higher life that sustained it from beneath so that it seemed to be coming out towards me.

In this red-hot atmosphere in which the Words of God within me were being fused into Jesus forsaken, the greatest “expression”—for us—of Jesus, of the Savior—and it appeared to me that nature was given substance by love—there came about the entrance into the Father.

Foco, taken by the desire to serve God, proposed making a vow of obedience to me.

I did not see any need for this, nor was this desire in harmony with my Ideal that was “to live according to the Mystical Body” (for me the greatest expression of Christian life). But so as not to waste this act of love of his that he wanted to make for the Lord, I proposed to change it.

The following morning, during Holy Communion, both of us would pray to Jesus-Eucharist that, on *our nothingness*, He should make a pact of unity.

We did this with full faith and with love.

While Foco then went to visit the fathers of the monastery next to the church, I went before the Blessed Sacrament to pray to Jesus. But I found it impossible. I could not utter the word *Jesus*,

8. The Opera Serafica where Chiara taught as a young woman.

because it would have been calling upon Someone I realized had become identified with me, One who in that moment I was.

I had the impression of finding myself on the peak of a very high mountain, seemingly the highest one possible, that came to a point, the point of a pin: *one* therefore and high, but *not love* (and from this came my instant torment), so much that it seemed to me that even *being God, but not threefold*, would be a hell.

And in that instant, on my lips blossomed the word “Father” and I found communion again in the midst of amazement and joy.

I told Foco about this and, I do not know in which moment of that day, I found myself again, as in a vision seen with the eyes of the soul, having come *into the Bosom of the Father*, who showed me, as it were, the inside of a sun that was all gold or flames of gold, infinite, but not frightening.

I remember well that this vision—let’s call it—only became clear to me when I asked the *pope*, on the nothingness of themselves, to make the same pact with Jesus-Eucharist, so as to be united with us.

And I saw this little company of persons in the sun.

From that moment, I called “Soul” that One which united all of us. And for two months, while there was a succession of intellectual and imaginary visions (as it seems to me they were, though I could be grossly mistaken),⁹ we always spoke of the Soul.

Within it we had the impression of finding ourselves in Heaven. Above all there was space to breathe that was infinite, ample, utterly new, and our souls found themselves at ease.

9. Using the theological language of the time, Chiara indicates the ways in which God discloses himself in mystical experience, either by “visions” created by God in the imagination or by “communications” in the intellect.

In the Communion we received on the following days, the “Soul” was aware of being in communion with God and therefore of taking steps forward in the divine. And during the day these “Realities,” as we called them and felt them to be, were lived by all of us united in a rather unique way, perhaps as a result of these special graces.

In the evening, at our meditation that lasted about half an hour, we were careful to place the whole of our souls in the most absolute passivity, so that the Lord, if he wished, could communicate Himself. And my companions silenced everything in them, even what could have been inspirations, so that unity with me would be perfect.

And during the meditation new manifestations followed one after another. I was always intent upon communicating them at once to the other *pope*, because I felt them to be our common heritage and because we could then all place ourselves in those Realities.

THE SON

Perhaps on the third day, as we remained in the Bosom of the Father, we had the manifestation of the Son. I remember that it had an extraordinary light, but maybe I lack now all the elements to be able to describe it.

I only know that from the walls inside the Sun, the Father pronounced the word: *Love*, and this Word, concentrated in the heart of the Father, was his Son.

Outside in the evening, a majestic sunset displayed by nature, rendered more beautiful by the enormous Sun shining in us, seemed to confirm this “vision.” And so far as I now recall, if I

recall it correctly, the long rays of the sun, that like arrows of light caressed the blue sky after the sun's disk had gone down, gave us an idea of the Word, *as the light of the Father*, the splendor of the Father.

Everything in those days worked together to build "Paradise" inside and outside us, almost as if the elements, people and events were themselves actors in the divine drama that for a long time transfixed our soul—as if the one, divine Wisdom ordered all things with ever new scenes and scenery.

At the point that the Son was made manifest, we had an experience full of meaning for us and in keeping with the Truth.

We *entered* into the Most Holy Trinity, and what had already been manifested remained, subsisted.

If now it was the hour of the Son, in our soul the Father remained in His place as God, present.

And life before this "entrance" appeared to us rather like an "ascent" fulfilling the divine will, each one on our own ray, until the hour came for our "fusion" in Jesus and for being admitted together into the house of the Father.

MARY

We were convinced that if there were to be another manifestation, it could only be of the Holy Spirit. Before going into church all of us wanted in some way to guess what the Lord would do. And we said this as a fruit of our own reasoning, of a human logic. But we said it convinced that it would not be like this because [what took place was] not the work of human beings but of God, whose logic transcends us. Communion with Him is not a human calculation or composition.

And thus it was always.

On that day I understood Mary, perhaps through an intellectual vision, *as I had never seen her before*. And now twelve years have passed since that day, but I still have the clear impression of the unexpected "greatness" that this discovery of the Mother of God in the Bosom of the Father made on me.

As the blue of the sky contains sun and moon and stars, so Mary appeared to me, made by God so great as to contain God Himself in the Word.

I had never had such a notion of Mary, but there her divine¹⁰ greatness was impressed upon my soul in such a way that I do not know how to say it again.

I can say only that no human reasoning would be able to render the idea.

That vision produced conviction.

And we thought that perhaps the Holy Spirit would have given His place to Mary in the sequence of divine pictures, because she is His Spouse. And it appeared to us that the Word wanted to present the "Soul" to Mary before "marrying it." And this it seems to me is what happened, when the "Soul" felt it was no longer "Soul" but "Church": that small company of souls immersed in the Bosom of the Father felt it was *Church*.

THE HOLY SPIRIT

It must have been the fourth day when, as usual, we were all recollected in meditation in front of the beautiful little statue of Mary,¹¹ when it seemed to me that a light wind, like a gentle breeze, came out from the tabernacle and brushed my face.

10. Divine by participation in the divinity of God.

11. A wooden statue of the Virgin Mary in the church of Tonadico di Pimiero.

I had great doubts about this physical fact, but many years later I checked that no window opens up next to the tabernacle. That “air” was, as it were, Jesus’ breath, as it were the atmosphere of His Heart.

Then I saw—in an imaginary vision—coming from the tabernacle a white dove with its wings spread open, and it moved to the height of Mary’s face [on the statue] and circled several times above us and then stopped in an attitude as if about to illuminate, but it did not illuminate.

I understood that the Holy Spirit is the atmosphere of Heaven, in the Bosom of the Father.

Going outside, I did not have the courage to tell my companions what had happened, but looking at a fiery red sky, I saw on the electric-light wires three little birds. And one came out from behind the church and flew above us. Still caught up with what had happened inside the church, I mustered the courage to speak, as it seemed to me that those three were a tiny symbol that each Person of the Trinity is God and that the Holy Spirit is God.

* * *

This is how the first chapter of this story came to a close, the part I most remember.

The rest I remember with a certain disorder without the [thread of the] succession of pictures that were, we said, about a hundred and fifty.

They made us understand the Kingdom of the *Heavens* because it was a matter of different Heavens, one more beautiful than another, always linked to our life of union with God—in that Reality where the Soul-Church found itself—to perfect communion among us and, above all, with Jesus Eucharist.

At that time, I was convinced that the Lord was going to draw the “Soul” into the Heavenly Kingdom as on a divine honeymoon and that the *whole* of the *Word* would be revealed to me, naturally as much as my capacities could “understand.”

OTHER PICTURES

In the divine abyss of love and of light where we walked, I expected now to be presented with the *saints*. But it was not like that. I am not sure, but it seems to me that the only saint I saw “intellectually” was St Joseph.

Another time we decided to “consecrate”—I think it was on a feast day of Our Lady—the “Soul” to Mary.

We came back from church with the impression that the “Soul” was somehow “sacred” with Mary. It had been made Mary, as if our destiny were to “be Mary.”

I do not know if it was that time, but I know that I understood that we had to be like a small reproduction of Mary, as Chiaretta, my niece who at that time looked very much like me, appeared more my daughter than her mother’s.

We had to be perfectly Mary, daughters only of Mary, other Marys.

Another time I saw Mary in Heaven in the position of, so to speak, *the handmaid of the Lord*: a speck in the infinite, as if she were all recollected on her knees, in adoration.

Another picture I remember is what seemed to me to be *my place in Heaven*. I seemed to be in the center of a living amphitheater made up of my companions (around me), of young people, behind whom, like radiating rays, were the religious orders. I *set the tone* and I felt as if I were covered, I do not know how to express myself, as if I were veiled.

This picture filled me with joy, but it did not exalt me. I said it had the effect there was for St Teresa when she saw her place in hell (if she did not mend her ways). I saw my place in Paradise (if I lived up to what was asked of me). It seemed logical to me that in a “Mystical Body” type of spirituality, where there is Christ among us, we should see the positive.

Another time, after the Consecration to Mary, I sensed a word in my soul that to me meant “bearing within” and it seemed to me that God wanted to repeat mystically an incarnation with the Soul consecrated as “Mary.”

Heaven and earth, exulting in unspeakable joy, were celebrating the event and, as I was going up to St Victor’s¹² these words sang in my soul: “Hushed one day I know not on what slopes.” At the same time, unusually, in church the Magnificat was being sung, and Archangela¹³ was locking up the cemetery. That underlined for us a richer presence of Jesus on earth, of life against death, of the One who is Risen.

One day in the Bosom of the Father, that for us was always like the inside of an infinite Sun, a great change took place; we found ourselves in a *heavenly landscape* made up of all the elements that make up the earth, in color.

I remember trees, paths, springs and, I think, flowers and birds, and I understood that there Above, it will be as here, but in God. Before this new vision that finally revealed the inside of Paradise to me, I thought that we would have had to suffer a little at not seeing anything. But instead it was not like that. Heaven is always Heaven and even if it is immense, in it you do not feel alone.

12. Another church in Tonadico.

13. The sacristan.

There Above it seemed to us that every time souls meet, they form between them a new spiritual heaven that is continually different and various and heavenly through participation in the Trinitarian life that is always new.

From Paradise I saw creation. The Father, looking into the Son, had created, and from the Center of the Sun what seemed to be like divergent rays were going out beyond the Sun.

At the end of time, God would have drawn back those rays that from being divergent would have become convergent, and in the bosom of God we would have had new Heavens and new earths.

On earth there was not the *idea* of the pine tree, for example, for it was in the Word, because the plants have their being in humankind and humankind in Christ who leads creation back into the Bosom of the Father.

In Heaven I understood that created nature had the stamp of the Trinity: matter like the Father; its law like the Word; its Life like the Holy Spirit.

By contrast, I do not remember when, I seemed to understand something of hell.

It appeared to me that Jesus forsaken, in that cry that was the salvation of the redeemed, was the justice of the damned.

And that He, I do not know in what way, eternalized hell.

From Heaven, however, hell—through Jesus forsaken—would be seen upside-down, in the sense that, for the blessed, every disunity would appear as unity and that in Jesus forsaken hell would turn out to be the Paradise of Paradise.

Jesus forsaken having made himself “sin” had made himself hell. But He is God and in Paradise one sees God.

It seemed to me that through Jesus forsaken the duality of the Afterlife was wiped out and that Jesus forsaken was the solution,

the contact between the two realms where in one Eternal Life is lived and in the other Eternal Death.

In hell nothing would have made unity because love does not exist. In hell one is in the impossibility to love.

Hell was thus like the corpse of nature, where there are eyes to see but do not see, ears to hear but do not hear, and so forth. All are constructed to tend to God Whom eternally it can no longer reach. And every meeting between souls was in order to become more separated in an always more tragic division.

Hot would not make unity with cold and there would never be lukewarm. Only hot or only cold. Fire and gnashing of teeth.

* * *

I remember that in the final “realities” of Paradise we were the “Mystical Body of Christ.”

And I remember the last “vision” was this: all those Heavens that we had seen and lived and possessed as if they were the most sacred—tremendously sacred—thing, as a result of an intervention like a new dimension, disappeared. But it was not a matter of being extinguished, but of *being sublimated*, because each one of us felt that he or she bore in himself or herself distinctly that which until that moment had been our common heritage.

And we came down from Fiera with this treasure in our heart.

I did not want to leave Paradise. I could not reconcile myself to having to go away from that Heaven where, for about two months, we had been living. I did not see the reason and I did not understand it, not because of attachment or a whim, but because of the *inability* to adapt myself to earth after having become accustomed to Heaven. I believed that God could not want it.

It was Foco who gave me courage by opening my eyes when he reminded me that Jesus forsaken was my Ideal and that I should love Him in the humanity that awaited me. It was then in my pain and tears that I wrote: “I have only one Spouse on earth: Jesus Forsaken. I have no other God but him. In him there is the whole of humanity, in Him is the Trinity. What hurts me is mine. I will go through the world [seeking it in every instant of my life]. . . .”¹⁴

Chiara Lubich consecrated her life to God on December 7, 1943, which is considered the birth of the Focolare Movement. Her first publication, Meditations, appeared in 1959. Subsequently, she published more than fifty books, eight collections and anthologies, and numerous articles, reflections and meditations. In 1977, she won the Templeton Prize for Progress in Religion. In all, she received sixteen honorary doctorates in such fields as social sciences, theology, communications, philosophy, humanities, economics, psychology and education. She also received recognition from many local, national and international bodies including the UNESCO Prize for Peace Education (1996), the Cruziero do Sul prize from the President of Brazil (1998), the Human Rights Prize from the Council of Europe (1998), the Bundesverdienstkreuz prize from the Federal Republic of Germany (2000), and the Cavaliere di Gran Croce from the President of the Republic of Italy (2004).

14. This refers to a meditation that can be found in Chiara Lubich, *Essential Writings* (New York: New City Press, 2007), p. 95.