

## The Prophetic Insight of Chiara Lubich: The Word that is Love

Chiara Lubich possessed “an almost prophetic capacity to intuit and actualise beforehand ‘the thought of the Pope.’” These significant words of Benedict XVI appear in a letter, read out by the Secretary of State, Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, at Chiara Lubich’s funeral Mass in 2008,<sup>1</sup> following the Pope’s mention of her uninterrupted bond with his predecessors from John XXIII to John Paul II. Saint John Paul II, born in the same year as Chiara and whose papacy was the longest to run in parallel with her action as Founder and President of the Focolare Movement, would surely have agreed on several counts. In his 1984 visit to the International Centre of the Focolare in Rocca di Papa, he had put his finger on one example recognising “the radicalism of love of Chiara, of the Focolarini,” – a “Gospel radicalism of love” – as an answer to what had long been his concern for a hate-dominated world. He saw it as a source of renewal in the direction of the vision of Church outlined in the Vatican Constitutions *Lumen gentium* and *Gaudium et spes*.<sup>2</sup>

In the present paper I wish to evidence the centrality of the Word of God in the “the radicalism of love” highlighted by John Paul II. It is a focus on the

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<sup>1</sup> Benedict XVI, Letter for the funeral of Chiara Lubich, 18 March 2008. [http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/it/letters/2008/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_let\\_20080318\\_chiara-lubich.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/it/letters/2008/documents/hf_ben-xvi_let_20080318_chiara-lubich.html). (accessed, 20 November 2019. *The translation is mine here and for all quotations taken directly from Italian sources*).

<sup>2</sup> John Paul II, Speech to members of the Focolare, Centro Internazionale Mariapoli, Rocca di Papa, 19 August 1984. [http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/it/speeches/1984/august/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_spe\\_19840819\\_movimento-focolari.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/it/speeches/1984/august/documents/hf_jp-ii_spe_19840819_movimento-focolari.html) (accessed, 20 October 2019).

Word which runs like a vein of gold through Chiara's spiritual life and writings from the start of the Focolare until her final breath.<sup>3</sup> In this short article I will concentrate on the early period, pointing out elements of originality for the times she lived in. Perhaps the most striking aspect, and best known, is Chiara's emphasis on the Word of Scripture as meant to be lived and shared. Not just meditated, heard, studied, but "eaten," "digested," and become as it were "flesh and blood" of those who receive it, with a subsequent communion or sharing of the relevant experiences. There is, however, another aspect of Chiara Lubich's comprehension of the Word that is theologically relevant and less well known, which I will take up towards the end of the paper. It is the understanding that all the Words of the Gospel are love, all substantiated, as it were, by love. We will see how this insight, initially born out of a lived experience of putting the Word into practice, was confirmed and took on a deeper meaning in a subsequent period of special light. Under the grace of mystical experience, the connection of the Scriptural Word of God, as a code of love transforming the life of Christians, and the "Logos", the Eternal Word in the Trinity, came into vibrant focus.

### **From Scripture to Life: Historical Background**

Today the Focolare practice of the "Word of Life", a sentence of Scripture chosen from the liturgy of the Word with a clear and practicable commentary, proposed on a monthly basis to be lived by adherents all over the world, has brought the dynamic life of the Word to scores of people, on a vast and grassroots scale.<sup>4</sup> But now that the idea of living the Word has become commonplace, we do well to recall the newness this "practice" represented in the 1940's, as the Focolare spirituality was coming to life, at a time when few lay Catholics had access to Scripture or were encouraged to live it.

That the Word of God, found in Scripture, is meant to be lived is not new. Did not Jesus himself speak clearly? "If anyone loves me, he will keep my word" (Jn 14:23). "Whoever hears my words and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on a rock" (Mt 7:24). The Fathers of the early Church

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<sup>3</sup> For an ample bibliography, see Fabio Ciardi, introduction to Chiara Lubich, *Parole di Vita*, [Opere di Chiara Lubich/5] (Rome: Città Nuova, 2017), 45-48. This volume includes a selection of Chiara Lubich's commentaries to the "word of life" from 1948 to 2006.

<sup>4</sup> In 2000 addressing a Conference on Communication, Chiara referred to a monthly diffusion of 3,400,000 copies of the commentary of the word of life in 90 languages and dialects, in addition to its being transmitted through social media to an estimated audience of some 14 million persons. See "The Charism of Unity and the Media", in Chiara Lubich, *Essential Writings*, trans. Tom Masters and Callan Slipper (New York: New City Press, 2007), 291.

and, through the centuries, founders of religious orders and monasteries, and saints, have concurred with the advice to: "Put the word into practice and do not be content to hear it, deceiving yourselves" (Jas 1:22).

But as Chiara explains in narrating the story of the beginnings of the Focolare Movement, it was under the bombs of World War II that this first became for her a clear reality, in the air raid shelters where she and her friends fled several times each day, taking with them only the small book of the Gospel. One by one the Gospel phrases that came into evidence as they opened its pages became their code of life, beginning with the words to do with *the will of God* and with *love for neighbour and mutual love*. Scripture says that where there is charity and love there is God (1 Jn 4:8.16), and they claimed that in putting mutual love into practice, they experienced the presence of God helping them to better understand the words of Scripture. "It seemed that God himself explained the Gospel to us."<sup>5</sup> Not only did the Words of Scripture appear new and unique, but they were seen to be of universal application, capable of being transformed immediately into action in the circumstances of everyday life. "I admit – Chiara commented later – that up to then I had been a Christian, a practising Catholic, but I had never taken the Word of God so seriously; the Gospel had not been the law of my life. But now, living the Gospel, the relationship we had with God and with our neighbours changed in me and in my companions."<sup>6</sup>

What Chiara says about her experience before this turning point – that is, that the Gospel had not consciously been the law of her life – in reality reflects the general situation of the Christian community in which she was immersed. In the 1940's in Trent, the city of the Council of the Counter-Reformation, for a layman or woman to speak of living the Gospel, encouraging others to do the same, was to risk being accused of Protestantism. Indeed, Chiara and her followers were not exempt from accusations of this kind.<sup>7</sup>

In reality, after centuries in which in the Catholic Church the study and use of Scripture had been reserved to clergy and specialists and the central importance of the Word had become blurred, at the start of the twentieth century a current of renewal and a "return to the sources" was beginning to stir. This included a renewed interest in the Church Fathers as well as a "biblical movement." The gradual distancing of spiritual life from Scripture that had begun in the late Middle Ages and had led to what some – such as Hans Urs von Balthasar –

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<sup>5</sup> Chiara Lubich, *May They All Be One* (London: New City Press, 1977), 10.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>7</sup> See Bernhard Callebaut, *La nascita dei Focolari: storia e sociologia di un charisma (1943-1965)* (Rome: Città Nuova, 2017), 303-305.

deemed a “divorce” between exegesis, dogmatic theology and spirituality, was taking, as it were, a reverse trend. It was the start of a renewed recognition of the centrality of the Word in Christian life and thought which would culminate in Vatican II with its Constitution *Dei Verbum*.<sup>8</sup>

Of course, the Church, through the ages, has always found its force and vigour in the Word of God, from which it was born. Even in the period historically considered as a time of “the exile of the Word,” one can note a series of positive signs, beginning from the Council of Trent itself. In fact, the Council Fathers there, stimulated by the evangelical thrust of the Reform, in ways that are seldom remembered, put a renewed focus on the Word of God as being central to the teaching and pastoral activity of the Church.<sup>9</sup> Popes such as Pius X, Leo XIII and Pius XII strongly promoted biblical studies and stressed the importance of a proper and adequate preparation of biblical scholars in order that Scripture “might be more securely and abundantly available to the Christian flock.”<sup>10</sup> It is also good to recall that the lives of founders and saints, such as Teresa of Avila, John of the Cross and Ignatius of Loyola (sixteenth century), Francis de Sales (seventeenth century), Alfonso de’ Liguori (eighteenth century), and Charles de Foucauld (nineteenth-twentieth century), were imbued with the Gospel.

In Chiara Lubich’s emphasis on the Word, from the early period of the birth of the Focolare movement, we can note continuity with ecclesial tradition and life and, at the same time, strong elements of innovation. In drawing upon the Word of God as a source of light she was certainly in tune with the promptings of many saints. Indeed, we can assume that as a young Third Order Franciscan she drew a great deal from the example of the two great saints of Assisi, emulating them particularly in aiming to live the Gospel *sine glossa*. Her inspiration was also in harmony with the stirrings within biblical and theological studies at that time, although, as far as we know, she was not consciously aware of this. It is reasonable to suppose that the same Spirit who set these forces of revitalisation into motion in the Church was at work inspiring a charism that, thanks to its deeply biblical spirituality, would itself become a significant part of this renewal.

How can we characterise the newness of approach to the Word in the early experience of Chiara and her first companions? One obvious novelty is the fact that Chiara was a laywoman and opened the life and diffusion of the Word to

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<sup>8</sup> See Enzo Bianchi, “La centralità della Parola di Dio” in *Il Vaticano II e la Chiesa*, eds. Giuseppe Alberigo and Jean Pierre Jossua (Brescia: Paideia, 1985), 159-187.

<sup>9</sup> See Ciardi, introduction to Lubich, *Parole di Vita*, 9-14.

<sup>10</sup> Pope Pius XII, Encyclical Letter promoting Biblical Studies *Divino afflante Spiritu* (30 September 1943), n.4.

laity, foreshadowing Vatican II by twenty years.<sup>11</sup> Also particularly relevant is the twofold emphasis of transforming the Gospel into life and of communicating to others the insights and experiences gained, in order to fulfil the law of mutual love and evangelise the world.

## The Word Lived: Transformed into Life and Life-transforming

In a recent publication, in their chapter on “The Origins of the Focolare Movement on the Foundation of the Word,” Lucia Abignente and Cristina Soraci affirm that “it is impossible to speak of the origins of the Focolare Movement without retracing the way in which the Word has impacted its history, development and fruits, including how it approached difficulties and incomprehension.”<sup>12</sup> As Chiara confirmed years later, “When God wanted to bring this new Movement into life in the Church, the Holy Spirit oriented our lives towards the Gospel and the Gospel alone.”<sup>13</sup> “He enlightened its words and prompted us to live them.”<sup>14</sup>

What is particularly striking in the early years of the Movement is the radicalism with which the Word was lived. “Incredible was the intensity with which we lived the Word. The Word was our life, it was our breath,” Chiara remarked looking back. “We felt that we had to be nothing other than Word, to have no sense outside of our being the Word. Nothing else had meaning [...] Everything was absorbed by the Word.”<sup>15</sup> Throughout the years, in her writings, again and again, the centrality of the Word re-emerges, as she repeats to her followers the necessity of returning to this primary orientation of a radical Gospel lifestyle. “Are we living the Word of God with a radical fullness that breaks our ego, destroys our egoism, nails us with Christ onto the cross, in such a way that

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<sup>11</sup> In particular, see the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation of Vatican II, *Dei Verbum* 22 and 25, and the underlying message of the Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity *Apostolicum actuositatem*, also of Vatican II.

<sup>12</sup> Lucia Abignente and Cristina Soraci, “Le origini del Movimento dei Focolari: sul fondamento della Parola,” in *Verso un’estate di luce: la cornice storica dell’esperienza mistica di Chiara Lubich nel 1949*, eds., Silvio Cataldi and Paolo Siniscalco (Rome: Città Nuova, 2019), 162.

<sup>13</sup> Chiara Lubich, “*L’avete fatto a me*,” as quoted in *ibid.*, 161-162.

<sup>14</sup> Chiara Lubich, *Santi insieme* (Rome: Città Nuova, 1994), 55.

<sup>15</sup> Chiara Lubich, “Paradiso ’49,” in Vera Araujo et.al., *Il Patto del ’49 nell’esperienza di Chiara Lubich: Percorsi interdisciplinari* (Rome: Città Nuova, 2012), 3.

it is no longer we who live, but he, the Word, who lives in us?"<sup>16</sup> She also makes this fundamental affirmation:

The Word has to be lived as the most important thing to do in our lives. [...] The Word must be the first among all our loves, the pillar on which our existence stands, the root on which our life flourishes. The Word has to enlighten, moment by moment, everything we do, straighten out every crookedness and correct every expression of our lives.<sup>17</sup>

This marked intensity of the life of the Word from the early days grew out of a particular "method" or learning process and was sustained by it. In the circumstances of the war, the Spirit directed Chiara and her companions to concentrate on one word at a time, in a kind of divine pedagogy of Gospel literacy, which, having been a teacher herself, Chiara described as "the a, b, c's of getting to know Christ." Just as without a knowledge of a few letters and grammar rules one remains forever illiterate so, too, "a few sentences of the Gospel are sufficient to form Christ in us."<sup>18</sup> It is important to stress, as we shall see again later, that "getting to know Christ" through the Word of God was, at this point, for Chiara and the group around her no longer a mere intellectual understanding or meditative process but, as she remarked, something "completely different." It was a fathoming the depths of meaning of the Word through its varied applications in contact with everyday life, resulting in what Chiara called a "radical transformation." "When we were living it [the Word], it was no longer 'I' or 'we' who were living, but the word in me, the word in us."<sup>19</sup>

The stark reality of this affirmation is in full accord with Christian tradition, as Chiara points out quoting popes, saints and Church Fathers in a series of talks prepared for the formation of members of the Focolare Movement in 1975-76.<sup>20</sup> Since the Word is Christ, it generates Christ in those who receive it. Clement of Alexandria confirms: "Whoever obeys the Lord and through him follows the Scriptures [...] is fully transformed in the image of the Master: he reaches the point of living like God in human flesh."<sup>21</sup>

Chiara is mindful that it is not a once-and-for-all transformation, but one that continues moment by moment, in which Christians have a role to play, but

<sup>16</sup> Lubich, *Santi insieme*, 56. See Gal 2:20.

<sup>17</sup> Chiara Lubich, *La vita un viaggio* (Rome: Città Nuova, 1984), 38.

<sup>18</sup> Chiara Lubich, *The Living Presence: Experiencing Jesus in the Word, the Eucharist, and Our Midst* (London: New City, 1996), 19.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 22. See Gal 2:20.

<sup>20</sup> Chiara Lubich, "The Word of Life," in *ibid.*, 13-50.

<sup>21</sup> Clement of Alexandria *Stromatum*, lib. VII, c.16, *PG* 9:59C, as quoted in *ibid.*, 49.



in which at the same time it is God himself at work: "Lord, we are aware that we have many shortcomings. But we have the joy of knowing with certainty that 'being your living word' removes all the dross, so that we emerge anew moment by moment, like a nut from its shell."<sup>22</sup> We strive to incarnate the Word, to embody it in our lives, but the "principal actor is none other than the Word who lives, the Word who lives *us*."<sup>23</sup> The surprising attribution here of the verb "live" to the Word of God in a transitive sense is indicative. It is not said that the Word lives "in" us, but rather the Word "lives us", implying that the Word is the active subject. Thus, the intensity of our commitment in living the Word is concomitant to the totalising action of the Word in us. In every Gospel Word, she later proposed, we can discover an element of asceticism and an element of mysticism.

### The Word that is Life Shared

As we have mentioned, another important and clear element of originality in Chiara Lubich's relation to the Word of God is a robust community dimension. If the first emphasis of Chiara and the group around her was on mutual love, as a natural consequence, they shared not only material goods, but also inspirations and life experiences, including the new light received in putting the Word of God into practice. Indeed, Chiara even speaks of a "daily duty" to share the experiences made in living the Word with one another.<sup>24</sup> The foundress of the Focolare Movement interprets this dynamic thrust to the action of the Holy Spirit, seeing it as an expedient of his divine pedagogy, for in sharing light, it grows, while if kept to itself it gradually dwindles and dies.<sup>25</sup> Thus the sharing of the discoveries in living the Word, which began in the air raid shelters and continued on as a genuine lifestyle characterising the Movement, led to a dynamic growth in the spiritual lives of individuals and in the community which was emerging. If unity was the ultimate charism Chiara felt called to bring, it was radical love as gleaned from the Gospel that made unity possible and that led to the birth of a community in many ways reminiscent of the community of early Christians described in Acts 2:43-47.

The community born from unity in the Word was to be in turn leaven for the evangelisation of the world. This call was clear to Chiara from the early years, as we find expressed in a letter explaining the practice of the Word of Life to a religious (17 August 1948): "We've come to realise that this world is in need of a cure ... that

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<sup>22</sup> Lubich, *Essential Writings*, 127.

<sup>23</sup> Chiara Lubich, *In unità verso il Padre*, (Rome: Città Nuova, 2004), 59.

<sup>24</sup> Lubich, *The Living Presence*, 29.

<sup>25</sup> See *ibid.*, 21.

is, a treatment of the Gospel, because only the Good News is capable of providing the life that the world does not have. This is why we live the word of life.”<sup>26</sup> The social impact of incarnating the Word was also evident from the start. In a letter to her local bishop, Archbishop Carlo de Ferrari, dated Christmas 1947, Chiara expressed her undaunted certainty that the logic of the Gospel could resolve not only all the social problems of the post-war city of Trent, but of the world.<sup>27</sup>

### **The Word that is Love: An Experiential Discovery**

We have spoken of the educational method of the Spirit guiding Chiara and her companions to consider and strive to live one Word at a time. The Spirit began, she said, with the words that could appear the easiest to understand, directly related to love. Only later did they understand the reason for this choice. One of the fruits of love is interior enlightenment, so a person who loves acquires light. Moreover, in mutual love Christ himself is present (Mt 18:20), opening a deeper understanding of all the words of Scripture.<sup>28</sup>

However, as Chiara explains, at a certain point, after several years of intense life of the Word, a clear new understanding came about: all the words of Scripture are substantiated by love:

I realised 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.<sup>29</sup>

From the reference to fragments of the Eucharistic host we can discern how, from the earliest days, Chiara had an intellectual understanding that all the Words of the Gospel are of equal value, for each has the value of Christ, the Word. The Word of God, as repeated by Church Fathers, is a presence of Christ and coincides with Christ the Word.<sup>30</sup> But after years that Chiara and

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<sup>26</sup> Chiara Lubich, *Early Letters: At the Origins of a New Spirituality*, trans. Bill Hartnett (New York: New City Press, 2012), 120.

<sup>27</sup> See Lucia Abignente, *‘Qui c’è il dito di Dio’: Carlo de Ferrari e Chiara Lubich: il discernimento di un carisma* (Rome: Città Nuova, 2017), 100.

<sup>28</sup> See Lubich, *The Living Presence*, 43-44.

<sup>29</sup> Chiara Lubich, “Paradise ’49,” *Claritas: Journal of Dialogue and Culture* 1/1 (2012): 4. <https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/claritas/vol1/iss1/2> (accessed 20 September 2019). In speaking of the Word, Chiara uses the terms “substance” and “substantiated” without defining them.

<sup>30</sup> See Fabio Ciardi, “Ogni Parola di Vita contiene il Verbo,” *Nuova Umanità* 18/5 (1996): 526-529.



her companions were striving to live the Gospel directives, they came to the existential awareness that all its words were love:

The fact is that every Word, even though expressed in human terms and in different ways, is Word of God. But since God is Love, every Word is charity. We believe that at that time, beneath every Word, we had discovered charity. And when one of these Words came down into our soul, it seemed to us that it was transformed into fire, into flames; it was transformed into love. It could be said that our inner life was all love.<sup>31</sup>

### **The Word that is Love: A Mystical Deepening**

The increasingly greater understanding which came about through living the Word was a preparation and prelude to a prolonged mystical experience, immediately shared with those around her, that Chiara later called “Paradise ’49.”<sup>32</sup> It was an experience that brought with it a new comprehension of many of the truths of faith, including the reality of the divine Word as “Love.”

In describing an intellectual vision of the Eternal Word – the second Person of the Trinity – in the bosom of the Father, Chiara writes: “The Father says: ‘Love’ in infinite tones and begets the Word, who is love, within himself, the Son, and the Son, being the echo of the Father, says ‘Love’ and returns to the Father!” In order to portray this dynamic of the life of the Trinity, Chiara adopts geometrical terminologies:

The Father has an expression of himself outside himself, made, as it were, of divergent rays, and an expression within himself, made of rays that converge in the centre, in a point that is Love: God in the infinitely small: the “Nothing-All of Love! The Word.” While the divergent rays, as Chiara explains in detail in further writings, represent the Word present in creation, the convergent rays in the heart of the Sun, which is the Father, are Word of God, are Word converging in the Word.<sup>33</sup>

Thus, Chiara’s previous experiential understanding of the identical substance of all the various words of Scripture, as their all being love, along with the

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<sup>31</sup> Lubich, “Paradiso,” in Araujo et. al., *Il Patto*, 12-13.

<sup>32</sup> Summing up the experiences of the 1949 period Chiara wrote: “We had the impression that the Lord had opened to the eyes of the soul the kingdom of God that was among us: the Trinity that dwelt in a cell of the mystical body.” Lubich, *May They All*, 44. For more see “Traveling Paradise,” *Claritas: Journal of Dialogue and Culture* 8/1 (2019). <https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/claritas/vol8/iss1/3> (accessed 20 September 2019).

<sup>33</sup> Quoted in Gerard Rossé, “Rivisitare il Paradiso ’49 di Chiara Lubich alla luce della Lettera agli Efesini-II,” *Nuova Umanità* 31/4-5 (2009): 514.

knowledge that “real love is *Christ Jesus*, it is the Truth, it is the Gospel,”<sup>34</sup> finds its ontological underpinning and elucidation in the dynamic relations of the inner life of the Trinity and of the Trinity with created reality.<sup>35</sup>

Indeed, we can say that in differing ways the relation of the Scriptural Word and the Eternal Word runs through the entire mystical experience of Chiara Lubich, with an accent on the Word *lived* as an expression of love in response to God-Love. Here we can only mention a few concepts of this rich and profound patrimony, leaving a more thorough investigation to further studies.

From the very first days of the mystical experience which began on 16 July 1949, living the Word of God was seen as a spousal response to God-Love. In the first recorded writing of that period of light, a letter of 19 July to Igino Giordani,<sup>36</sup> we read:

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 by living the Word I would love him as Bride and he would be me ... living the Word in each instant.<sup>37</sup>

And again, in language typical of mystics, after experiencing the “mystical marriage” with the Eternal Word, Chiara wrote:

To live the reality of the marriage of my Soul with the Word: “Love,” [...] I have to be only Word of God. Every instant I live the Word is a kiss upon the lips of Jesus, those lips which spoke only Words of Life. And from lips to lips passes the Word; he communicates himself (who is Word) to my soul. And I am one with him! And Christ is born in me.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Lubich, *Early Letters*, 24.

<sup>35</sup> See Fabio Ciardi, “La Parola come Amore e la presenza di Dio sotto le cose. Lettura trinitaria di un’esperienza,” *Nuova Umanità* 28/2 (2006): 155-180. Recent research in the line of a philosophical/theological deepening of Trinitarian ontology can also be helpful here. See Piero Coda, “L’ontologia trinitaria: che cos’è?,” *Sophia* 4/2 (2012): 159-170; “La Trinità come pensiero. Un manifesto,” *Sophia* 9/1 (2017): 9-17; Emanuele Pili, “L’ontologia trinitaria cosa ‘non’ è?,” *Sophia* 9/1 (2017): 47-57; Lubomir Žak, “Unità di Dio: quaestio princeps dell’ontologia trinitaria,” *PATH* 11 (2012): 439-464. See also the ground-breaking work of Klaus Hemmerle, *Thesen zu einer trinitarischen Ontologie* (Einsiedeln: Johannes Verlag, 1976).

<sup>36</sup> Igino Giordani (1894-1980), well-known Italian author, journalist, and politician, who met Chiara Lubich in the early years of the Focolare, and whom she considered as a co-founder for his singular support and presence at her side. A process for his beatification and canonisation is under way.

<sup>37</sup> Chiara Lubich, *La Parola di Dio*, ed. Florence Gillet (Rome: Città Nuova, 2011), 34.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*; see also Fabio Ciardi, “Vivere la Parola per essere la Parola,” *Nuova Umanità* 18/6 (1996): 659, for lines omitted in the edition of Gillet and for a commentary.

There would be much to point out and comment on in these short lines which are only a sample of a rich spiritual and theological content of which we can only scratch the surface in this paper. Suffice it to say that the reality Chiara experiences here results as a confirmation of what she had been striving to live in the previous years, a verification of the importance of living the Word of God, of letting the Word “live her,” of being “living Word of God.” Under the light of mystical experience, she exclaims: “The whole of my life must be only a relationship of love with my Spouse. Everything that goes outside of this is vanity. Everything that is not the Word lived is vanity.”<sup>39</sup>

Furthermore, it is a spousal relation with the Word that extends to all. In the light of the initial intuition of the convergent and divergent rays as expressions of the love of the Father – the convergent rays generating the Eternal Word and the divergent rays, extending outside of the Father in creation – we find that each individual is an expression of the Father’s love. Each is “word” in the Eternal Word, in the same trinitarian dynamic by which each word of Scripture is distinct and yet fully the Word. Chiara reminds her followers that “for each of us, the Word of life is our clothing, the wedding dress of the soul who is the bride of Christ.”<sup>40</sup> Each one, being an expression which the Father has uttered *ab aeterno*, is “called to clothe a particular Word of God, which, because it is love, is complete but also needs the other Word(s) to begin a new beauty of love.”<sup>41</sup> Thus we are all words in the Word: particular words, but at the same time – in the Logos/Word – universal. Chiara elucidates this profound insight from an eschatological/ecclesial perspective describing the relation of love between the distinct Words of the Gospel – impersonated in human individuals – as constitutive of the Mystical Body of Christ. “In Heaven we will be solely Word of God and in the unity among our souls will be the harmony of the new song which is the Gospel formed by the Mystical Body of Christ.”<sup>42</sup> Commenting on these thoughts later in an informal conversation, Chiara presented a practical conclusion: if in Heaven we will be solely Word of God, right from now, on this earth, we ought to be solely Word of God.

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> For this quotation and for an initial analysis of this dense concept, see Fabio Ciardi, “Lampada per i miei passi è la tua parola,” *Nuova Umanità* 19/1 (1997): 49-51.

<sup>42</sup> Chiara Lubich, *Essere tua Parola*, eds., Fabio Ciardi and Michel Vandeleene (Rome: Città Nuova, 2008), 82.

## The Whole of the Gospel in the Cry of Jesus Forsaken<sup>43</sup>

Towards the end of her life Chiara noted, in one of the final pages of her diary (2 August 2004): “A person lives the Word completely by living Jesus forsaken, and that is, lives an Other, or others, because living the Gospel is nothing other than repeating the life of the Trinity here on earth.”<sup>44</sup> It was a concept embryonically present from the earliest years, after the understanding of “Jesus forsaken” as the greatest Love, the highest expression of God’s Love, and as the Master Way for Christians, who aim to practise mutual love to the point of *kenosis*, emptying self out of love for God and neighbor.<sup>45</sup> “Living him [Jesus forsaken] meant living the nothingness of ourselves in order to be all for God (in his will) and for the others.”<sup>46</sup>

As we saw as being the case for other important notions and practices, the underlying intuition of Jesus forsaken as the Word that is Love finds ample confirmation in the 1949 period of mystical light. “Jesus Forsaken appeared to us as the Word par excellence, the Word totally unfurled, the Word completely opened out.”<sup>47</sup> Chiara continues to elaborate upon this when she states:

Living the Word of Life in the will of God, moment by moment, I am the living Word, the living expression of love. And Jesus is never Word more alive than there on the cross when he cried: “My God, my God...” (Mt 27:46; Mk 15:34). There Love speaks, expresses Love, the Love that is God.<sup>48</sup>

This too was a part of Chiara Lubich’s great discovery of the Word as Love from the beginnings of her spiritual adventure: “Jesus Forsaken is the Word: every Word is him.”<sup>49</sup> and “Whoever fixes the eye of the heart upon him finds ... the pure Gospel.”<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> In the Focolare spirituality, the expression “Jesus forsaken” refers to the cry of Jesus on the cross: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Mt 27:46; Mk 15:34) and the conformation of Christians to his death and resurrection in every situation of limit or suffering. It also expresses the radicality of love that is required in order to love one another “as” Jesus loved us.

<sup>44</sup> Quoted in Ciardi, introduction to Lubich, *Parole di Vita*, 43.

<sup>45</sup> See Chiara Lubich, *The Cry*, trans. Julian Stead and Jerry Hearne (New York: New City Press, 2001).

<sup>46</sup> Lubich, “Paradiso ’49,” in Araujo et al., *Il Patto*, 13.

<sup>47</sup> Lubich, *Essere tua Parola*, 65.

<sup>48</sup> Quoted in Ciardi, “Ogni Parola,” 533.

<sup>49</sup> Chiara Lubich, *The Holy Spirit: Renewing the Face of the Earth*, eds., Florence Gillet and Raul Silva (New York: New City Press, 2018), 40.

<sup>50</sup> Lubich, *Essere tua Parola*, 67.

## Conclusion

Chiara Lubich was aware that the Gospel is timeless and unchanging. “To those who follow you, leave only the Gospel” was a recurring thought in her soul.<sup>51</sup> At the same time she knew that through the ages from time to time the Holy Spirit sheds new light on one or another of its facets, “stirring up minds and hearts so that new blood will flow again in Christianity,” making it particularly suited to the needs and demands of the age.<sup>52</sup> The experiential discovery of the Word of God as Love, “substantiated by Love,” at the beginning of the Focolare Movement, fits into this perception. Much has yet to be studied and developed regarding the theological implications of the light that grew out of this discovery, a light that links the Eternal Word in the Trinity, the Incarnate Word in his outpouring of Love in the Passion, and the Word embodied in the lives of Christians: all in the perspective of Love.<sup>53</sup> Also to be further studied is in what sense this may be considered a foreshadowing of Saint John Paul II’s call to a New Evangelisation.

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 85.

<sup>52</sup> Chiara Lubich, *Fragments of Wisdom*, trans. Margaret Linard (Bombay: St Paul Press, 1992), 68.

<sup>53</sup> For a detailed study linking the first two elements, see Anna Pelli, *L’abbandono di Gesù e il mistero del Dio Uno e Trino. Un’interpretazione teologica del nuovo orizzonte di comprensione aperto da Chiara Lubich* (Rome: Città Nuova, 1995) which still is a valid and a most thorough study. See also Stefan Tobler, *Tutto il Vangelo in quel grido. Gesù abbandonato nei testi di Chiara Lubich* (Rome: Città Nuova, 2009); Anna Pelli, ed., *L’Essere come Amore. Percorsi di ricerca* (Rome: Città Nuova, 2010).

