

Revisiting Chiara Lubich's Paradise '49 in Light of the Letter to the Ephesians¹

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This article is the first in a four-part study. It begins with the idea that genuine Christian mysticism and the thought it produces is never separated from faith. Rather, it produces a faith lived with greater clarity and intensity. This forms the basis for a study comparing the Letter to the Ephesians with some of Chiara Lubich's notes on her contemplative experience in 1949. Her experience, the author emphasizes, was born from an experience of communion, of church. Chiara lived in a personal way the reality of the church in its profound identity with the Body of Christ. This reality can be described as participation in the

1. This article and the other three that will be published in *Claritas* are considered classic publications on the mysticism of Chiara Lubich. This article was first published in *Nuova Umanit  XXXI* (2009): 351–75. It has been translated by Giovanna Czan-der, Dominican College, in Blauvelt, New York.

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Trinitarian life of God, by being inserted into the Son's relationship with the Father. This study appears even more appropriate when we consider that the principal concern of the Letter to the Ephesians is the identity of the church and its vocation to unity. Focus will be on themes of faith and, specifically, God, the Logos, ecclesiology, and ethics.

The Letter to the Ephesians

The Letter to the Ephesians is a unique text and in many ways a mysterious one. We do not know to whom it was addressed. Maybe this was a circular letter addressed to various Christian communities including the one in Ephesus.² Furthermore, the letter does not seem to have been written in response to specific internal or external dangers, such as the seduction of “philosophies” or persecutions, although scholars try to find them. Rather, the letter written in the years 80–90 CE stems from a time when the church needed to reflect on its own identity, its mission, and its place in the world during a time of transition. It was in fact a time in which the first generation, the generation of the apostles and especially of Paul, was passing away while the church was spreading throughout the Roman Empire and the future seemed open.

Taking the Letter to the Colossians as a starting point, the author of Ephesians offers a broad vision of the magnificent design of God on humanity and creation—which was already taking place in the church—and invites and encourages the church and Christians to become aware of God's design in a new way, namely,

2. The name “Ephesus” at the beginning of the letter (Eph 1:1) does not appear in the earliest manuscript (before the second century) or in the most important codexes (Vaticanus, Sinaiticus).

to join in it as protagonists and to bring it about. This perspective helps explain why the fundamental argument of the letter is that the church must rediscover and bring about its own identity, ideal, and mission in unity. Unity is actually “the specific theme of Ephesians more than any other canonical writing and it can be found both in its most doctrinal section (2:14–18; 3:6) and in its most parenthetical section (4:3–6, 16).”³

We do not even know the identity of the author of the letter. Looking at the context of the letter, we are led to believe that he must have been a “theologian with a broad vision and unique intellectual and contemplative abilities.”⁴ He can be considered a mystic, even though what he writes does not come from an extraordinary mystical experience, as Chiara Lubich’s did, but “from a vision of faith.”⁵

Mystical Experience and Vision of Faith

The intrinsic relationship between mysticism and a life of faith should always be kept in mind. Incorporated in Christ through baptism, Christians are already introduced as members of the Body of Christ into God’s life, into the bosom of the Father. They have, right from the start, the Holy Spirit and divine *agape* (see Rm 5:5). Each baptized individual is therefore potentially a mystic, because he or she can experience in his or her own existence a communion

3. Romano Penna, *Atti del III Simposio di Efeso su Giovanni Apostolo*, ed. Luigi Padovese (Rome: Istituto Franciscano di Spiritualità, Pontifical University Antonianum, 1993), 145.

4. Romano Penna, *Lettera agli Efesini* (Bologna: EDB, 1988), 62.

5. This is demonstrated in the fact that the author does not describe his own experience but makes use of other Pauline writings, in particular the Letter to the Colossians, to write from its point of view.

with God who lives in the depths of his or her heart. The baptized individual, if malleable in the hands of the Holy Spirit, can be transformed and become increasingly more similar to Christ (see 2 Cor 3:18). Through the gift of the Spirit, which introduces the person to the knowledge of God’s secrets (see 1 Cor 2:13), each believer is called to live as “normal” the extraordinary experience of communion with God within his or her own lifetime.

The mystical experience of the life of faith requires only that we put God in the first place in our lives and live out the gift of *agape*. The goal of a life of faith is not to achieve a personal contemplation of God in the desert but, according to the symbolism of the Book of Revelation, for the heavenly Jerusalem, made up of all peoples among whom God dwells, to descend to earth. This reality is already possible in the fraternal communion lived out in the midst of the world.

Christian mysticism, even if it can benefit from extraordinary insights, does not stray from faith. Authentic mysticism, as a unique phenomenon, is not different from the vision of faith (given from Revelation) but is this very same faith experienced with greater clarity and intensity. In the revealed texts (and especially in Paul and John) there is consistency between faith and mysticism. This is an invitation not to separate the life of faith and mystical experiences, because the two share the same root: the indwelling of the Holy Trinity in the deepest recesses of each member of the Body of Christ.

In light of the fundamental consistency between the light of faith and the light coming from mystical experience, it is legitimate to embark on a comparative study of the Letter to the Ephesians and Chiara Lubich’s writings from 1949. This is possible also because Lubich’s enlightening illuminations originated from an

experience of communion, an “ecclesial” experience. Chiara experienced personally the reality of the church in its deepest identity as the Body of Christ, which resulted in her participation in the Trinitarian life of God by being inserted in the very relationship of the Father and the Son. A comparative study is even more intriguing because the main topic of the Letter to the Ephesians is the church in its identity and calling to unity.

Approach

I would like to introduce a more external approach before comparing the content of the Letter to the Ephesians and of Chiara’s writings. I wish to look at circumstances and conditions that reveal commonalities between the two writings and therefore to underscore God’s consistent way of working throughout the history of the church.

The “Mystery”

The author of the letter uses the term “mystery” (Eph 1:9; 3:3, 4, 9; 6:19) to speak of the design of salvation, in all its cosmic-eschatological breadth, that had always been present in God’s mind but was hidden for centuries and is now being revealed. The letter calls it more specifically the “mystery of Christ” (Eph 3:4) because the “the wisdom of God in its rich variety” (Eph 3:10) is completely given, brought about, and revealed in the Christ event and is expressed in the “boundless riches of Christ” (Eph 3:8). Christ is the alpha and the omega of the Father’s design on the world. In Christ everything is recapitulated (see Eph 1:10). The mystery is also “the mystery of the gospel” (Eph 6:19). It is a mystery because it is the unique content of the gospel message that in Paul has its privileged, though not exclusive, mediator.

God Reveals through Charisms

The knowledge of this mystery, of the project of God’s love in all its cosmic-eschatological dimension, cannot be the result only of proper human reasoning nor of mere intellectual reflection on the truths of faith. Knowledge of the mystery manifested to the apostle can be received essentially through revelation, that is, through God’s initiative: “The mystery was made known to me by revelation,” writes the author, speaking of Paul (Eph 3:3). According to the author of the letter, Paul was the recipient of a personal revelation (Eph 3:3, 18). Shortly after (Eph 3:5), he associates Paul with the “holy apostles and prophets.” According to this letter, the way the mystery is communicated follows a divine logic. Knowledge of the mystery is not given directly to everyone; rather, God chooses specific individuals whom we could call “charismatic.” These chosen individuals experience a certain light, as the letter attests. Paul, we read, received a grace from God, a revelation (Eph 3:2–3) that had at first overwhelmed him. The author reminds the reader of the historical experience of the apostle on the way to Damascus. In Paul’s own words, “God said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness’” (2 Cor 4:6). The revelation of the Son was certainly for the apostle an experience of light, which enveloped him and reached the most intimate depths of his being, shining within him as on a new day of creation. As written in the Letter to the Ephesians, God is “the Father of glory” (Eph 1:17). The splendor of his Love is reflected on the face of his Son, and the Father communicates glory as inheritance to his children (Eph 1:18).

Now, the glory of the Father, his communicated splendor, is not only for the future. It emanates from the unity witnessed by the church, where two groups of peoples, Jewish and Gentile, up to this point a sign of division, live together in unity. The mystery

that was communicated already bears fruit. As Romano Penna writes:

This is the abundant glory of the mystery among the peoples (Col 1:27) not only in the sense that the mystery of God is brought to the Gentiles, but rather because the Gentiles' access to the mystery makes it shine in all its splendor, emphasizing the shining overcoming every division in a perfect mutual communion with God.⁶

Chiara expresses this aspect of light with the term “claritas,” an essential aspect of her contemplative experience in 1949.

Light Needs to Be Communicated

This light communicated by God to Paul and others is of the same nature as the light of faith: insight about the things of God coming from the Holy Spirit to the believer who is open to encountering Christ. Yet, it also has a unique feature: a touch of “novelty” because of God’s initiative. It is a light aligned with faith, but it has a “charismatic” nature. As such, this light, unlike faith understood as the believer’s supernatural intelligence (Eph 1:8), *needs* to be communicated to the whole church. It is a gift for the person who has a charism, but it is also a mission. For the author of the letter, therefore, “the holy apostles and prophets” (Eph 3:5), and especially Paul, are the recipients of a revelation that is hidden from the world and that now, through them, is being communicated to everyone and becomes an “event” in history. The author, however, does not consider these individuals as the first

charismatics in a long chain that continues throughout the history of the church. Their charism is unrepeatable and unique. For the author, “the holy apostles and prophets” are an eternal foundation for the church (Eph 2:20). As Bouttier writes, “The revelation of the *mystery* is not a permanent process. The great act of God has two stages: the first is its messianic implementation and the second its apostolic manifestation.”⁷

So can there be new insights in the church? Of course, but these subsequent revelations will reveal in more depth the meaning and realization of the message of these apostles and prophets. Our author confirms this because he too is aware of having been invested with a new light—reinterpreting the work of the great apostle more than twenty years after the fact.

In the beginning, Paul had the grace of understanding the importance of the Crucified Jesus as related to overcoming the Law and beginning the mission to the Gentiles. By the time the Letter to the Ephesians was written, what Paul had to fight for was already widely accepted, that is, the existence of a church made up by the unity of peoples who up to that point had been divided. Such unity is seen as a sign of the actualization of God’s plan on the cosmos: the recapitulation of all things in Christ. This is a new insight, though one in continuity with the apostolic message.

The mystery therefore is God’s great design on humanity and creation, hidden throughout the centuries, brought to fruition in the risen Crucified One, and revealed by God to the apostles—that it may be communicated to everyone. Christian faith has not fallen into the errors of mystery cults or Gnosticism that talk about

7. Michel Bouttier, *L'Épître de Saint Paul aux Ephésiens* (Geneva: Labor et Fides, 1991), 143.

6. Penna, *Lettera agli Efesini*, 62.

a “mystery” communicated but then reduce it to secret revelations addressed only to initiates and not to be shared. In the Letter to the Ephesians (and in the whole New Testament) even if the mystery is communicated to a few chosen people, it is destined to be shared with everyone. The author has written the letter precisely to communicate to the church a new light that, by a gift of the Holy Spirit, he has received. The grace that the apostle has received is “for you” (Eph 3:2), a grace to be given to the ecclesial “us.” The author’s prayer to God (Eph 1:18) is done in order that “the eyes of your heart [be] enlightened” to welcome and understand this new light.

Chiara Lubich’s charism should be understood from this perspective and in this context. She received a charism of light in 1949 but did not keep it all to herself as if it were something addressed to her alone. Rather, she immediately shared it with her companions. This points to two features:

- 1) The mystical experience of *Paradise ’49* is an integral part of a “charism” and therefore is to be communicated.
- 2) The “ecclesial” character of the visions means that they are addressed to the “we” that is the church.

Participation in the Charism

The author of the Letter to the Ephesians certainly desires to communicate to his Christian audience the light that has touched his inner being, his new understanding of the mystery. However, he is not satisfied with just informing his readers. Their knowledge of God is not simply the acquisition of concepts about God. It is not enough for one merely to receive information; rather one needs to

have the experience of knowing God, an experience that is at the same time contemplative and incarnational. The author wishes to bring his readers into the experience of light that he himself experienced: The same Spirit who enlightened him needs to enlighten also the faithful. Therefore, we can ask: What are the conditions for this collective experience? What does the author do in order to bring it about?

A feature of the letter is the relevance given to prayer. The first part (which is the doctrinal part) begins with a prayer (blessing and thanksgiving, followed by a prayer of petition: Eph 1:3–14, 15–23) and concludes in reverse order with a prayer of petition followed by praise (Eph 3:14–10, 20–21). The revelation that the author wishes to communicate is therefore addressed to “us” gathered in the church at/in the presence of God. Enveloped in prayer, the addressees become part of a movement that starts from God (blessing makes them aware of God’s working) and through the question and the praise returns to God as the human answer for/to the glory of God. The prevailing liturgical context in the letter, where “we” experience the church, is the perfect place where they can participate in the gift of the light. In the prayer that involves the whole assembly, the believers live out their Christian identity and become more keenly aware of their own mission.

It cannot be a coincidence that in *Paradise ’49* we find a very similar context. Chiara felt prompted to share with her companions her experience of entering into the bosom of the Father. This is why she “then invited them to come with us to church the next day.”⁸ This behavior happened regularly. Chiara writes, “I went into church for the usual meditation with the souls who made up

8. Ibid.

the Soul,⁹ and looking at the tabernacle I waited, upon the emptiness of myself, for God to send his light.”¹⁰ This example could be generalized.

However, gathering in church is not sufficient to participate with one’s life in the light to the charism. People need to *be* church. This need is expressed in the Letter to the Ephesians:

I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love towards all the saints, and for this reason I do not cease to give thanks for you . . . that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him, so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which he has called you. (Eph 1:15–18)

For the Spirit to communicate the wisdom and light that allow us to become intimate with God (see 1 Cor 2:6–10), faith is needed that places us under the vital influence of God as well as love lived out among the “saints”—the members of the community.

Faith and love, which characterize the church as human-divine communion, are therefore indispensable to experiencing light in a vital way, to sharing in the charism. The following text by Chiara is the best commentary. After the Pact with Foco and the experience of entering into the bosom of the Father, we read the following:

Then I went home where I met the focolarine [her companions], who I loved so much, and I felt the urge to

9. Chiara uses the word “Soul” to refer to what she calls “that One which united all of us.”

10. Unpublished note from 1949.

bring them up to date on everything. I then invited them to come with us to church the next day and to pray Jesus, who entered their hearts, to make the same pact with Jesus who entered ours. And they did so. After that I had the impression of seeing in the Bosom of the Father a small band: it was us. I communicated this to the focolarine who made such a great unity with me that they too had the impression of seeing each thing.¹¹

A life of a “collective” mystical experience (expressed in *Paradise* ’49) and a life of faith lived out as church (expressed in the Letter to the Ephesians) are the same if the following conditions are present: gathering in prayer, faith, and mutual love. Specific to Chiara and her companions were also the Eucharist and the Pact of Unity. In light of this, the prayer we read in Ephesians 3:14–19 is particularly compelling:

For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named, that according to the riches of his Glory he may grant you to be strengthened with might through his Spirit in the inner self, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may have power to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ which surpasses all knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.

11. Ibid.

In spite of the difficult phrasing, which is typical of the author's style, this prayer shows an overall movement: the design of the Father has been realized in Christ, and to achieve the "fullness of God" in Christ it needs to be comprehended and incarnated thanks to the Spirit in a life rooted in love.

The three divine Persons work within this design, which is to bring the "fullness of God" to human beings. What dominates is the theme of light. The Holy Spirit is requested in order to be able to "comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ which surpasses all knowledge." The author is inspired by Paul's cry of admiration (in Rm 11:33–36; see Rm 8:38–39) and has an eye on Colossians 2:2, which is even clearer: "I want their hearts to be encouraged and united in love, so that they may have all the riches of assured understanding and have the knowledge of God's mystery, that is, Christ himself."

"To be rooted in love, with all the saints" is the source of a knowledge that goes beyond ordinary knowledge. Knowledge then has an ecclesial dimension. It is experienced together with all the saints, not in the sense of sharing the same doctrine but of having together the vital experience of light. From unity a light shines forth that is not the sum total of the lights of the individual persons. As Michel Bouttier argues, "We essentially need others, in time and space, to approach what is in Christ and beyond us. We don't do this by collecting the tiny sparks in each one but because the truth to be comprehended is a truth made of love. Without a relationship based on love, the truth remains ungraspable."¹² Knowledge that comes from love and is a gift of

the Spirit becomes realized in a light that goes beyond knowledge. It is a light that stems from having become Christ-like, and Christ leads to the "fullness of God."

Growing in the "fullness of God" is lived "together with all the saints." It could not be otherwise, because the splendor of the glory of God shines precisely in unity, that is, in the realization of the divine plan of reconciling all things. This universal reconciliation that manifests the glory of the Father is already at work in unity lived out; it is not only something to hope for. It is a process in progress, a growth that tends toward fulfillment, as the author says, "that you may be filled with (*eis*) all the fullness of God." The choice of the preposition *eis* entails a "movement toward," a journey from light to light, from fullness to fullness.

I maintain that this prayer in the Letter to the Ephesians is like a condensed version of the reality of faith experienced mystically by Chiara. It is seen especially in the Pact of Unity, in her having entered into the bosom of the Father, and in her visions of the various "Realities."

Unity as Cosmic Eschatological Design

Unity may be approached from different viewpoints. Paul emphasizes its Christological and ecclesial reality in his concept of the Body of Christ, of "being one in Jesus Christ." John explores its Trinitarian (being one as the Son and the Father are one) and Christological-ecclesial (allegory of the vine and the branches, etc.) dimensions. In the understanding of faith according to Ephesians (and Colossians), which has continued by the great tradition of the church and also in the mystical experience of Chiara, unity is inscribed in a great divine design with cosmic, eschatological, and Trinitarian dimensions as a Christological-ecclesial reality.

12. Bouttier, *L'Épître de Saint Paul aux Ephésiens*, 143.

In the Letter to the Ephesians

Unity does not simply appear to be a part of this great universal design but coincides with this plan of God for creation and humanity. It is a plan that originates in God and is projected toward its fulfillment in God, having Christ as its center. Furthermore, in the Letter to the Ephesians, as well as in Chiara's writings, the interest concerning the cosmic greatness of the divine design is not purely speculative but arrives at inserting each person's daily life into it. Even the behavior of just one believer is part of the cosmic design. This reality is all-encompassing and embraces the cosmic dimension all the way to interpersonal relationships, as shown by the link between the beginning (doctrinal) section and the exhortative section of the Letter to the Ephesians.

Let us give a quick overview of the divine design. Here is a summary of this vision in the letter: the design starts from the Father, is mediated by Christ, and reaches out to humanity and creation in order to return in Christ to the Father (see Eph 3:14–19). This is only an outline of the description but should be enough to call attention to an important point not always evident in past theology: the uniqueness of the divine design does not separate creation and humanity or redemption and eschatology.

In the initial blessing we read that God the Father “chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world” (Eph 1:4–5). God created the world with God's children in mind! The connection between human beings and creation is constantly present in the Bible. In God's mind, human being precedes creation and the goal of creation is humanity. Furthermore, as will be explained shortly, the creation of which human beings are the pinnacle participates in the eschatological destiny of human beings.

Creation and eschatological salvation are therefore part of the same divine plan: This truth is expressed in a condensed way in Ephesians 3:9, which speaks of “the mystery hidden.” As Bouttier writes, “The economy of salvation and the economy of creation, far from being foreign to one another, are contained in one another. At the heart of the creating inspiration there is already the collection in the universe of Christ.”¹³

For the author of the letter, those who are prechosen, predestined, are the ecclesial “we”¹⁴ who already experience the reconciliation brought about by Christ in the unity of the church. In the church, the recapitulation, or “gathering up” of the cosmos brought about in Christ becomes visible. Unity lived out is the visible sign that the divine design of recapitulating the universe in Christ is already being realized in our history as the effect of unity already eschatologically fulfilled in the Risen One.

Creation, in its own way, takes part in the design of the unity of humanity and is called to share in the Risen Christ in the eschatological destiny. The letter summarizes the Messianic design of God: “to gather up all things in him” (Eph 1:10). By rising, the Crucified One is put at the head, therefore as king of the cosmos. All things are unified through Christ. The whole of creation finds in Christ cohesion and ultimate meaning. Montagnini writes that through and in Christ, God wants to “gather the scattered parts and put them together so that they form a harmonious united reality.”¹⁵

13. Bouttier, *L'Épître de Saint Paul aux Éphésiens*, 143.

14. Note: “election” does not mean “selection.”

15. Felice Montagnini, *Lettera agli Efesini* (Brescia: Queriniana, 1994), 104.

Based on this vision of the design of God, let us summarize the vision of Ephesians:

- Redemption through Christ is not merely the salvation of human beings but includes the universe: Therefore, it has a cosmic dimension.
- Redemption, that is the incarnation of the Son, has the function not only of healing from evil but also of fulfilling the eternal design of the Father.
- This design is a project of unity forever present in the mind of the Creator.
- Eschatology is the completion both of the creative act and of the redemptive act.

It is not by chance that in a context that talks about the eternal design realized by Christ for the sake of humanity (Eph 3:8–12), the author gives to God the title of “the one who created all things” (Eph 3:9). God is the origin and cause of creation and salvation: These realities are connected, destined from eternity to be fulfilled in the “new creation.” Creation, destined to be recapitulated in Christ, finds its meaning in the Eschaton begun by the crucified-risen one. Therefore the laws of the universe, the relationship between things and living beings, will be beauty, harmony, cohesion: It will be “peace” (Eph 1:2), a term that includes the eschatological good *par excellence*.

The recapitulation of all things has already happened through the resurrection of Christ (the verb is in the aorist). But what is reality for God in our world needs time to be fulfilled. In the church, where Jews and Gentiles already are living united in order to form one and the same “new humanity” (Eph 2:15), God’s project to

recapitulate all things in Christ takes shape on earth. This deep connection between creation and humanity in the design of God, the cosmic role of Christ, creation-salvation-Eschaton as the design of God toward unity: all of these aspects of the theology of Ephesians (and Colossians) certainly were not ignored, but they were emphasized very little in classical mysticism and in theology before the Second Vatican Council. The unitarian character of the divine design, contemplated under these various aspects, is certainly one of the most unique themes of the mystical vision of Chiara.¹⁶

In Chiara’s Writings

The connection of creation with humanity redeemed in Christ is constantly present in Chiara’s mystical vision. Since the beginning, when she had the mystical experience of entering into the bosom of the Father, creation was present. In the Pact of Unity with Foco, made after having received the Eucharist, Chiara says,

I recognized that I was Jesus. I felt the impossibility of communicating with Jesus in the tabernacle. I experienced the elation of being at the peak of the pyramid of all creation, as on the point of pin; at the point where the two rays meet, where the two God (so to speak) make a pact of unity, trinitizing themselves where, having been made Son in

16. This, however, should not be seen in isolation, as if the Spirit did not manifest itself in the whole Church. So Teilhard de Chardin expressed his Christian vision of the world. His own thinking, which encountered opposition at the time, is beginning to have an impact. The renewed impetus in biblical studies is also linked to this field in modern theology.

the Son, it is impossible to communicate with anyone except the *Father*.¹⁷

This is not just about the place of human beings within creation. From the Eschaton, Chiara contemplates the place of redeemed humanity. In unity, having become Son in the Son, the believer finds him- or herself where Christ is, the one who recapitulates all things. It is there, in the Recapitulator, that creation has access to the Father through humanity. Creation therefore is associated with human destiny and belongs to the divine design toward the fulfillment of humanity.

In Chiara's vision as reported in her writings from 1949, one name expresses this connection between creation and humanity in the unifying design of universal recapitulation: Mary. Mary is the creation that culminates in humanity, that culminates in the people of God, that culminates in the church, that culminates in unity: the point in which the Uncreated weds creation in an eschatological marriage. Chiara cannot hide her surprise before the greatness of Mary, a cosmic greatness that makes Mary similar to the woman in the book of Revelation (Rv 12) because she contains within herself the "sun and moon and stars. All was in her."¹⁸

This is not all. Mary is so great that she contains God within her. "Mary contains God! God loved Her so much as to make her His Mother and his Love made Him become small before Her!"¹⁹ The greatness of Mary, which Chiara found very surprising, is manifested especially in two aspects that are not to be separated:

- Mary, enclosed by the Holy Spirit, is the fourth within the Trinity.
- Mary is the Mother of God.

The first aspect cannot be understood separately from a text that gives an interpretive key and confirms this interpretation of Mary: "All creation returns, through Mary, to God. Mary is the whole Creation purified, redeemed. And as such, She is the fourth in the Trinity, in Mary creation is the fourth, so to speak."²⁰ Mary represents all of creation that, through the redeemed humanity, has achieved eschatological maturity.

Creation takes part, because of its connections with human beings, in the relationship of humanity with the Father. Mary is seen as humanity that has become Christ and participates by "co-naturality" in the father-son relationship because of having received the Spirit. Therefore she is inserted in the Trinitarian Community. Though inserted into the Trinity, Mary-Creation does not cease to be a creature. Though "divinized," that is, being relocated transfigured into the bosom of the Father and participating in the Trinitarian Life, Mary-humanity-creation is not dissolved into the Trinity. She is the fourth one in the Trinity. Here, we are far from a Gnostic vision.

On the other hand, Mary's greatness is also that of being the "Mother of God." The interpretive key has not changed. The expression "Mother of God," which was solidly rooted in the Christian tradition by the Council of Ephesus, is now explained in a totally surprising way. Mary, in her maternal womb, contains God. She is greater than God just as the "sky which contains the sun."

17. Chiara Lubich, unpublished note from 1949.

18. Ibid.

19. Ibid.

20. Ibid.

Mary's motherly womb represents the value of the Incarnation. It becomes the revelation of divine love, a real symbol of a love so great that it makes itself smaller to the point of fitting into the limitations of the human condition, of taking the last place "to serve and give life." In this act, God makes humanity greater,²¹ a greatness that becomes even more astonishing for Chiara, who only a little earlier has experienced God's greatness.

Fourth in the Trinity and Mother of God should not be separated in Chiara's vision. Entering into the bosom of the Father is not a negation of created reality but is made possible thanks to God descending into creation, "becoming smaller" within humanity. To enter into God, one does not need to be detached from creation in order to find God somewhere far away. The resurrection of Jesus does not send Christ far from creation but brings to an end the descending movement of Incarnation. The resurrection confirms that the true maternity of Mary, Mother of God, is finally fulfilled in the church, in the redeemed humanity: offering to the world a Jesus "made perfect" (that is, "divinized") also in his humanity. Mother of God and fourth in the Trinity explain also the wonder of a mystic who contemplates the greatness of God's design in this descending of God into the heart of creation and humanity in order to raise humanity in the intimacy of God's life.

The greatness of Mary contemplated by Chiara at the beginning of *Paradise '49* was not an isolated vision. While in the bosom of the Father, the visions continued, month after month, and always with that cosmic scale. Chiara called them "Realities."

21. The same idea is in 2 Cor 8:9: "Though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich."

Today we are Mary-the-Creation:

the Creation which is synthesis of created and Uncreated.

Our nothing is clothed with this dignity before God's eyes, the Angels and those who understand.

We needed to pass through Immaculatization to arrive at Divinization and—made God (keeping so with Jesus Forsaken)—be renewed each day in the Gospel which, begun here below, will last forever Above.

Mary, the Creation!

In our eyes, in our face, in our every member are, in God's eyes, all the created beauties in the mineral kingdom, the plant kingdom, the animal kingdom . . . and in the soul, everything is God. There the Trinity rests, has come to dwell.²²

As in her initial vision, Mary-Creation is still seen as humanity, synthesis of the universe, open to God. Again this vision contemplates not humanity in general but a redeemed, united humanity, represented by Mary with her "immaculatized flesh." Immaculatization, in Chiara's mind, brings to completion the baptismal virginization (see Eph 5:16–17). It happens in the life of unity, in the "nothingness" of mutual love, that is purifying by its excellence, where God can find room for our divinization, and that, nourished by the gospel, gives this "being *one*" the face of Mary who welcomes God within her. A humanity thus fulfilled enjoys the presence of the indwelling Trinity. Such humanity is not only the synthesis of creation but the goal of creation, in which God can contemplate all the beauty of creation.

22. Chiara Lubich, unpublished note from 1949.

One vision follows another and each contains and deepens the previous one. From vision to vision, it is a journey through Paradise. For example:

Today is Saturday and in the Glory of the Trinity we are Mary the Trinity.

Therefore, everything that is, is Trinity and is Mary, who is identified with the Trinity and we ourselves are united in Claritas and to each other, if, united, we make ourselves distinct as are the Three in the Trinity, as Mary who, though being Trinity, is perfectly distinct from the Trinity as a creature participating in all the Glory of the Creator.

Here we see how the finite and the Infinite are fused, and the finite is rendered infinite and the Infinite is rendered finite. It is a continuous incarnation. Today it is the incarnation of the Trinity in Mary such that the Trinity becomes Marian, is clothed in Mary.²³

This is a new contemplation of “Mary” always from the viewpoint of the Eschaton. And as always, it is a mystical perspective that tends toward the identification between God and creation to express the sublime greatness of divine love, which was contemplated. Again, Mary is the creation that, through redeemed humanity, lives in full communion with God. However, living in communion with God means to live in the style of the Trinity—by living full unity, which maintains full distinction, that is, the identity of each one—in a constantly new dynamic, in order to participate in the life of Communion of the Divine Persons. Mary

identified with the Trinity means the complete participation of humanity in the life of the Divine Persons. Jesus’s prayer “as you and I” (Jn 17) is thus fulfilled. In Paradise, the eternal wedding feast is fulfilled: the love that from God’s perspective is descent (incarnation) into humanity and that from humanity’s perspective is ascent of the humanity-creation in God becomes a reality.

Going back to Ephesians, this “wedding feast” is fulfilled in the Crucified Jesus (for Chiara, in Jesus Forsaken, as we will see later), who creates communion (Eph 2:13–22). As Risen Lord, Jesus is placed at the head of the cosmos and of the church and extends his position to all of creation. Chiara summarizes this concept succinctly, in the style typical of mystical language, which attempts to embrace everything and express what is ineffable:

Today in the Glory of the Trinity we are—*Jesus*: Universal King, the One which is the trinity of the Trinity.

In Him:

- is God Uncreated—Trinity
- is the one Divine Person of the Word who is trinity (the Unity of human nature and the Divine Nature through the work of the Holy Spirit)
- is Humanity (= Creation) which participates in the Divine and therefore Trinity in Being-Law-Life [= what nature already is], made supernatural by the marriage with the Divine Nature of the Word incarnated in Mary.²⁴

23. Ibid.

24. Ibid.

The Word incarnate (in the ultimate fullness of the Crucified-Risen Jesus) is seen as the marriage between God (in the richness typical of the Divine Persons who give themselves to each other in love) and creation made “in the image of the Trinity,” that is, bearing in itself the Trinitarian stamp of the Creator: Being, Law, Life. As I will discuss later about Chiara’s mystical experience, “Being” refers to the Father, who gives being to all things in creation; “Law” refers to the Word, which contains all the “divine ideas” that give form to all things in creation; “Life” refers to the Holy Spirit, who gives life to all living things in creation.

So far, I have emphasized the similarities/consistencies between the Letter to the Ephesians and Chiara’s vision concerning the cosmic dimensions of the redemption. It is true that Chiara’s vision of creation goes beyond a reflection on the letter, which does not touch on topics that were developed later in the history of the church. Does creation have existence in the bosom of the Father? St. Thomas Aquinas denies it (only the four elements remain), even though according to part of revelation this is undeniable. Chiara wrote about this, still as part of her mystical experience of entering into the bosom of the Father:

I was expecting you to show me the saints one by one, yet I saw instead the whole of Paradise decked out in its vesture—abloom and starry and many-hued, with seas, with mountains, with lakes, with stars, with the sun, with the moon, with lanes and the whole of Paradise . . .²⁵

25. Ibid.

Therefore, creation too—impacted by the work of human beings—is found wherever humanity is found in Christ. However, Chiara noted the difference in “existence” in Paradise:

At the end of time, therefore, life will be drawn back from the universe and the divergent rays will return and converge in the Word . . . so all that is in nature and is not immortal will return to the love of God that gave rise to it, but without being distinct from that love, that is, from the mind of God which is the Word. Man, instead, being immortal, will return into the Word: son in the Son, but will be distinct from the Son and another son of God. Having in himself, however, the whole of the Word he too will be a mirror of the Universe which is in the Word . . .²⁶

This follows the logic of traditional theology: unlike other creatures, each human being exists in him- or herself because his or her soul is created immortal.

However, the mystical vision cannot be grasped by philosophical thinking. So, when Chiara writes that things “will return to the love of God,” this means not that things will become abstract and vanish but that they will be even more “real” because they will have become “God,” therefore “always alive and always new,” though unlike human beings. The universe finds in the Word, the risen Christ, its original beauty and harmony as conceived before creation by the “the wisdom of God in its rich variety” (Eph 3:10). Therefore: “Paradise will be the Word: substance of love in which

26. Ibid.

the flowers and the stars and the roads and the seas will be Love and so immortal—immortal in the eternal Word.”²⁷ This conviction corresponds to revelation: see Romans 8:19–25; Ephesians 1:10; Revelation 21.

A Closer Look at “Recapitulation” (see Eph 1:10)

With respect to creation, the central statement of the letter appears in Ephesians 1:9–10: the mystery of the Father’s will “according to his purpose which he set forth in Christ as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth.” Prepositions are important: They express the role of Christ as mediator (to unite all things) and his protological and eschatological position (“in him” as beginning and end of the movement). The divine design, rooted and originated “in the Love of God,” was never conceived outside of Christ. Therefore, it is “in Christ” that God wishes to fulfill this project: to recapitulate all things “through Christ and in Christ.”

Chiara’s texts emphasize that the cosmic role of the Risen Lord is also an eschatological role (present at the Beginning). “At the end of time, therefore, life will be drawn back from the universe and the divergent rays will return and converge in the Word.”²⁸ In God’s eternity, protology and Eschaton reconnect with each other: Christ recapitulates “the wisdom of God in its rich variety” (Eph 3:10) which was always present in God’s project. In other words, the goal of creation is already inscribed in its nature, in the law that governs it, as potentiality open to the “new creation.”

27. Ibid.

28. Ibid.

There are other texts by Chiara that can be helpful in this regard:

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 center, in a point that is Love: God in the infinitely small: the Nothing-All of Love! The Word.²⁹

Later, Chiara explains:

The convergent rays in the heart of the Sun, which is the Father, are Word of God; they are Word converging in the Word. . . . The Father says: “Love” in infinite tones and begets the Word, who is love, within Himself, the Son, and the Son as the Son is, echo of the Father, says “Love” and returns to the Father!³⁰

And she adds:

I understood that from the Father those divergent rays went out when he created all things and those rays gave Order that is Life and Love and Truth.³¹

These texts are consistent with Christian thinking rooted in biblical wisdom and in the Jewish tradition (Prov 8:26–31; Wis 7:26, etc.). Creation is not chaos but is permeated by Wisdom,

29. Ibid.

30. Ibid.

31. Ibid.

order, and harmony, as reflections of God. Later, Christian Wisdom literature (see Colossians and Ephesians) attributed wisdom traits to Christ: the world has meaning and direction, revealed through faith in Christ, who is an “image of the invisible God” (Col 1:15). And later, Christian reflection becomes enhanced by the doctrine of the Trinity: creation is understood as originating from the divine depths, stemming from the love among the three divine Persons. As a work of the Trinity, creation is born *ad extra* but within the dynamics of life among the three divine Persons, where the Father loves the Son in the Spirit.

From the heart of the Father, from the Word who expresses the Father, depart diverging rays: that which is created. In the Son, the “wisdom of God in its rich variety” (Eph 3:10) is present and becomes concrete in creation. Creation is not only characterized by a rich variety of wisdom and diversity, but it is already aiming toward being recapitulated in Christ, converging its rays in the Word as the final and full manifestation of the “unsearchable richness of the Divine wisdom.”

Creation is born from the heart of the Father, from the Word. It is therefore rooted in the eternal generation of the Father. It is not born outside the Fatherhood of the Father, “the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ” (Eph 1:3), who is also “one God and Father of us all, who is above all and through all and in all” (Eph 4:6). This latter statement, where the term “all” is found four times (both in the masculine and neuter gender) should be understood in a universal, cosmic way. The fatherhood of the Father is the “first principle” of unity, from whom everything radiates and in whom everything converges. What is created, therefore, is in a filial relationship not just because of being adopted but because of being created from the Fatherhood of the Father. The world has always

been “in Christ” (Eph 1:9) and has always had filial traits, “the Order which is Life, and Love, and Truth.”

What is created, destined to be recapitulated, reveals already the hidden divine law that is at the foundation of the relationships among things beyond mathematical and physical laws: love. The universal recapitulation in Christ, which is the eschatological fulfillment of the universe, will make shine forth this law of love hidden within and among creatures. It will also require a sort of death and resurrection of the cosmos (“life will be drawn back from the universe”³²). In order to become what has always been in the Word, creation needs to follow Jesus Crucified and be joined to his death. Jesus Forsaken is exactly “the point . . . where the nothing is lost in the bosom of the Father.”³³ In the universal recapitulation by the Father in Christ, human beings will inherit a world reconciled, transformed, and freed from any separation and disharmony, a world therefore fit for the new condition of the children of God.

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32. Ibid.

33. Ibid.