

What  
is  
Unity?



# What is Unity?

*A View from  
Chiara Lubich's Paradise '49*

Edited by  
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# Introduction

by Fabio Ciardi

Unity!  
But who would dare speak of it?  
It's as ineffable as God!<sup>1</sup>

It is not easy to talk about unity. The reality of the world around us and that of our own personal experience can often seem quite far from what the word “unity” promises. Unity, however, is an innate longing within the heart of every human being. Unity is a key theme in philosophy, it's central to the practice of politics, and it's at the heart of our everyday life with each other.

Talking about unity always involves a risk, because unity is something that transcends us and is *ineffable*. We are called to unity and tend toward it. The biblical story of our origins talks about a cosmos that God created beautiful and good, drawing it out of chaos and filling it with harmony. It speaks to us of a God who shaped Adam from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, positioning him in unity with woman as well as with the created and the uncreated universe. God entrusted God's work to man and woman so that they might watch over it and accompany it throughout the course of history in its constant tendency toward unity.

The biblical narrative also tells of a collapse in that original harmony: first, in the relationship with God, then in a series of breakdowns between humankind and the natural

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1. Chiara Lubich, *Early Letters: At the Origins of a New Spirituality*, New York 2012, p. 103.

world. A future is described: human beings working with the sweat of their brow; the earth producing thorns and thistles that would also produce suffering; motherhood becoming a source of pain for women; the man and the woman blaming each other, resulting in a breakdown of their relationship. We also read of how Lamec marries two women, tearing apart the unity of the family; Babel marks the splintering and misunderstanding among people.... And yet, the more distant unity becomes, the more the desire for that primordial harmony increases; the nostalgia for a distant past is coupled with striving towards a new future.

Unity is *ineffable*. Not only because of the inadequacy of language, which is never able to express such a big reality, a reality as great as God, but also because the very idea of unity is multifaceted. Its implementation has many expressions that are both simple and complex, so often beyond our human ability to define.

We all know of grotesque distortions of unity. Such distortions arouse fear. Sometimes they are associated with an official rigid model of unity. There is a fear of a unity that would lead to uniformity and ignore the creative richness of pluralism. Unity in a rigid uniform sense would seem to contradict the equally innate aspiration for freedom. Does the affirmation of identity and diversity contradict unity? Or is it an integral part of unity? It is interesting to compare Babel and Jerusalem. The dispersion of languages in the city of Babel produced a multiplicity of peoples whereas Pentecost in the city of Jerusalem brought about a convergence of different languages.

The two drives (toward unity; toward pluralism) which could seem to be in conflict with one another, are still with us and very much alive in today's world. For instance, in the last century we saw contradictory phenomena. On the one hand, we witnessed progressive political and economic regimes, various forms of socialism, the establishment of the United

Nations, the European Union and the Unions of African and South American countries, the World Trade and Health organizations... On the other hand, however, there was no lack of extreme nationalisms resulting in catastrophic wars whose wounds have not gone away in regimes repressive of pluralism of thought and of government.

History repeats itself today but in a new way, with new challenges. We wander between forms of globalization and yearnings for autonomy, between outbursts of fraternity that push toward reciprocal integration and veins of subtle anarchy that shy away from any form of structured organization.

Unity attracts us because it is inscribed in the very fiber of our being. But it also provokes fear because of the misconceptions that have led to constraining and authoritarian deviations that have been presented under the name of unity.

Chiara Lubich lived in the midst of such tensions in the Italy of her day, tensions experienced also in her own city of Trent: from the irredentism of her fellow Trent citizen, Cesare Battisti, to the socialist ideals of her father, from the Fascist action squads to the nationalisms of the Second World War, from the appeals of Pope Pius XII for a more united Christian society, to the birth of a new fermenting of charisms in the ecclesial world....

It was in the midst of such tensions that she proclaimed unity. She was well aware of the ambiguous interpretations that this word could arouse, but, for her, unity was something that demands our attention because the Gospel underlines it so much. It wasn't that she herself simply proposed to heal the many tensions and divisions of her times, nor those that were already looming on future horizons. It was not she who chose to make unity her ideal in life, but quite the opposite: It was the ideal of unity that chose her as its instrument for a new and creative way of living out the prayer with which Jesus took his leave of this world (Jn 17). This was a task that she had received and perhaps she too, like the prophet Jeremiah,

would have said: “O Lord, you have enticed me, and I was enticed; you have overpowered me, and you have prevailed. If I say, ‘I will not mention him, or speak any more in his name,’ then within me there is something like a burning fire shut up in my bones; I am weary with holding it in, and I cannot” (Jer 20:7 and 9).

Unity appeared strikingly evident to Chiara;<sup>2</sup> she held fast to it and soon discovered the way to pursue it. Even then it remained *ineffable*. The sentence quoted at the beginning of this introduction is dated 29 April 1948: “Unity! / But who would dare speak of it? /It’s as ineffable as God.”

A year later, beginning on 16 July 1949, that unity, which she had begun to experience during the previous years, now opened up to a deeper understanding. While remaining ineffable, it became say-able, not because Chiara Lubich was capable of saying it, but because she had been told, and so could now retell. It was a period known in the Focolare Movement as “Paradise ’49” (*P’49*), an intense mystical experience that was lived as a body with her first companions in the midst of the daily events of a summer break in the Dolomite Mountains. The experience continued for about two more years in the cities of Trent and Rome.<sup>3</sup>

It was not only a new knowledge about unity, but an event of unity, an experience that from that moment on would illuminate Chiara’s life and the lives of many people with whom she shared what she had understood in that experience of light. “We had the impression,” Chiara later wrote, “that the Lord opened the eyes of our souls to the kingdom

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2. This book will often refer to Chiara Lubich simply as “Chiara.” This decision not only reflects the familiar way that the members of the Focolare Movement referred to her, but it also conforms to the way that Chiara was addressed by personalities from the religious world and beyond, as well as by the general public.
  3. The beginnings of this period of special graces is described in broad terms in the chapter by Stefan Tobler entitled, “The Roots of Unity in the Experience and Thought of Chiara Lubich” (pages 44 to 49).

of God that was among us, the Trinity indwelling in a cell of the mystical body.”<sup>4</sup>

This event, which first involved only a small group of young women, gradually indicated a way that was destined to involve more and more people, and to become a key for understanding everything, to the point that Chiara was convinced that “the created things of the universe are on a march towards unity, towards God.”<sup>5</sup>

This book finds its inspiration in that experience. Chiara Lubich communicated her experience in her collection of “Paradise ’49” (*P’49*) writings which she constantly drew upon in the development of her spirituality and of her thought.<sup>6</sup> The experience has become the vibrant heritage of the Focolare Movement that Chiara founded and that continues to inspire many people today. To the “Abba School”—a cultural cenacle that she gathered around her when she was alive and that has continued after her death—she entrusted the task of studying the Paradise ’49 writings in order to draw out the doctrine that is contained in them.<sup>7</sup> We are just at the beginning of this work, even though a number of studies have already been published in Italian.

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4. Chiara Lubich, *May They All Be One*, London 1977, p. 44.

5. This is how it appears in a 1950 text without a more precise date: *P’49*, 1217. In this book, citations taken from the Paradise ’49 manuscript will have as bibliographic reference the abbreviation *P’49* and the paragraph number, according to the numbering established by the author, followed by the date of that text where it is known. When dealing with a commentary note added by Chiara Lubich in the context of the Abba School, reference will be made to the note number and the number of the paragraph to which it belongs.

6. The collection of texts entitled *Paradise ’49* has not yet been fully published. Many passages have been reported and analyzed in articles, especially in the *Nuova Umanità* Review, and in the publications of the Abba School’s Studies Series.

7. The Abba School began in 1990. After Chiara’s death in 2008 it has continued its work under the direction of the president of the Focolare Movement. It is currently composed of 24 members from different countries, representing 22 academic fields. They in turn are linked to a group of some 200 scholars who collaborate with them in research and study.

The hundredth anniversary of Chiara Lubich's birth provided us with the perfect opportunity to address one of the central themes of her charism; indeed, the very heart of her charism, as she repeatedly said: "Unity is our specific vocation. Unity is what characterizes the Focolare Movement";<sup>8</sup> "Unity, therefore, is our ideal and nothing else."<sup>9</sup>

Since unity is what characterizes the Focolare Movement, it is fitting that a few years after the death of its foundress the Movement is called to question itself regarding the inheritance and the mission that she bequeathed to it. It's a time to look at ways in which the Movement can continue to develop in a manner that is both creative and faithful. How in today's world are we to live in focolare communities, in groups of Focolare members, in groups who live and share the "Word of Life"? How are we to proceed along the paths of courage and freedom, avoiding authoritarianism and individualism, and facilitating the full development of our personal gifts in the pursuit of common objectives?

Of course, Chiara Lubich's legacy is much more far-reaching than the Movement. Her vision of unity sheds light on the difficult pathways to be traveled as we navigate our ways in openness to diversity, safeguarding legitimate autonomy, searching for our identity while all the time accepting others, integrating them and sharing with them. Her vision pertains to the Church, but it also sheds light on relations among religions, and it also has something to say regarding the civic sphere in terms of relationships among individuals and groups, regions and nations....

The theme of unity, given its vastness, depth, and relevancy, lends itself to vast horizons of research. What is presented in this book is modest; it is only the beginning of a reflection on some of the pages of Paradise '49 directly relating

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8. Chiara Lubich, *The Secret of Unity*, London 1997, p. 20.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 37.

to the key-theme of unity. This book is not intended to be a comprehensive discussion about unity and its multiple implications for the different fields of thought and practice. Rather, the focus in this book is on unity in the experience lived by Chiara Lubich and the first group that gathered around her in the years between 1949 and 1951 within the horizon of Jesus's prayer, "... that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me" (Jn 17:21). The contributors to this book have limited themselves to the study of and reflection on just a few of the pages written up during that period. They have pointed out some dimensions that resonated for them within their own academic or specialist interest. Though this book is certainly not a complete discussion on such a vast and demanding topic, nevertheless we nurture the hope that the fruit of our study, thanks to the texts that seem to us of extraordinary richness, may be of benefit to the reader and open a dialogue with people of different cultural backgrounds.

This book is the result of the sharing among the current members of the Abba School acting in accordance with the style that Chiara Lubich gave to the study group when she gathered with its first members. For two years we met on a monthly basis to read her writings from Paradise '49, paying special attention to the theme of unity. Several contributions emerged, some of which are presented in this book, while others will be published elsewhere. Each contribution was born from the communion and sharing that characterizes all of the work done by the Abba School. Each text was put before the group for evaluation, in an ongoing dialogue that enriched it with new and different perspectives. Therefore, while the texts carry the signatures of their individual authors and reflect their style, expertise, and methodology, they are also the fruit of the communion among the whole group. This way of working in unity carries with it a certain "gymnastics" that was not

always easy but very worthwhile! It was necessary to welcome and understand each other's diversity, often far perhaps from one's own way of thinking and expressing things. We come from different countries, have different academic backgrounds, and work in distinct fields with distinct methodologies. It was an opportunity that we happily and confidently welcomed.

This book is divided into two parts. The first offers a global view of the topic from a biblical and spiritual-theological point of view, keeping in mind the prism of Chiara Lubich's thought. The second proposes four in-depth analyses of the theme, based on texts from Paradise '49. In this way, we are taken back to the origins of the charism and its foundational intuitions that can help us grasp the meaning that Chiara gave to the word *unity* and what she means when she asks that we live it....

Since the language of Paradise '49 is predominantly of a religious nature, we wondered how to write a transdisciplinary book about such an ambiguous word like *unity*, without running the risk of talking about different things and mixing vocabularies. The question had to be asked: In what sense does the study and the life of Paradise '49 offer criteria that can serve as inspiration for those who operate in society and for those who carry out research within their own distinct fields of knowledge? As will be stated further on, "Various social realities and indeed academic reflections in various fields have emerged from this Movement defined by its spirituality of 'unity.' There should exist therefore a common denominator, a point of departure, a fixed point that allows all, even among those working in different fields, to be able to make their own the words of Chiara and say 'Unity is our vocation'—even if perhaps they do not speak specifically of unity but express it in a language specific to their own discipline."<sup>10</sup> This book offers only a few intuitions

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10. See Stefan Tobler on p. 39 of this book.



in relation to some fields of knowledge that will then need to be further explored and developed.

The goal of this book is to take a look at unity from the standpoint of Paradise '49 and to invite the reader to enter along with us into this communion of life and of thought.



Part One  
**The Foundations**

