

Chiara Lubich

# *The Church*

*What is it? Who is it?*

Edited by

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## Series Preface\*

*“To those who follow you, leave only the gospel.”*

Chiara Lubich has articulated the gospel in many ways, which are outlined in twelve cornerstones: *God-love*, the *will of God*, the *Word of God*, *love of neighbor*, the *new commandment*, the *Eucharist*, the gift of *unity*, *Jesus crucified and forsaken*, *Mary*, the *Church-communion*, the *Holy Spirit*, *Jesus present among us*.

Since they emerged in the late 1940s, these points have been inscribed in the souls and in the lives of thousands of people from every corner of the earth. Nevertheless, since Chiara Lubich’s death in 2008, what has been missing is a document that combined many texts, including those yet unpublished, that would illustrate them. This series of books seeks to deepen our understanding of these twelve cornerstones by presenting three sources from which they have emerged:

- the dimension of her personal testimony, especially as Chiara Lubich understood, deepened and lived these points;
- the theological dimension of reflecting on the mystery of God and of humankind;
- the dimension of incarnating these points in human life via a communitarian experience, in line with Vatican II (see *Lumen Gentium* 9).

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\* This volume contains Chiara Lubich’s thought and experience on “the Holy Spirit.” While it is the tenth in this series of titles originally published in Italian by Città Nuova, it is the fourth to be translated in its complete form and published by New City Press.

The series will include as many as twelve books, through which it is hoped that readers may discover:

- A great spiritual teacher who can accompany them in their spiritual life;
- A deeper appreciation of the communal aspect of Christian life, and the implications of a communitarian spirituality for the Church and humanity;
- A deeper and more personal understanding of Chiara Lubich's life and thought that they can apply in their everyday life.

## Introduction

“What can we do to improve the Church?”

“It’s very simple! We just have to start! It’s up to you and me.”

This short conversation between a journalist and Mother Teresa sums up what each of us can do in this time of challenge. Now, in a particular way, all churches, especially the Catholic Church, feel a strong need for a total renewal that begins by returning to our origins.

In today’s global, multi-religious and multicultural society, characterized by increased mobility and mass migrations, with rapid developments in economics, politics, and the media, there is a growing sense that Christians need to renew their lives so as to make a real impact on society. It’s not by chance that the ecumenical movement, which began a century ago, arose from a realization that Christianity needs to offer humanity a more united and more powerful witness to the message of Jesus.

### *A Love Story*

In her way of viewing the Church and in her efforts to “be” the Church, through her charism of unity Chiara Lubich offered important ideas for living in this era of change. From the very beginning of her spiritual adventure, her approach was anything but passive. She encouraged an approach to Church that spoke of sharing in its life and generating it into life. She never considered it an institution outside or above the people. On the contrary, she discovered it (and brought many

others to the same discovery) as a living reality, an event of communion, an interweaving of deeply personal relationships. In short, she discovered the Church, to use Pope Francis's words, to be a "love story." In this way, as a woman and a lay person, she made a significant contribution to a modern-day understanding of the Church.

This is evident already in her letters from the 1940s, when she was in her early twenties. When asked about the Church, her replies were clear: she was convinced that all the baptized are called to take personal responsibility for the Church, that the whole people of God has to be on the front lines. She contributed to bringing about this change of perspective by promoting a spirituality of communion and unity. She reached out to people of all ages and of every social condition and vocation, inviting them to commit to living a radically gospel-centered experience, and to do so not just as individuals, but all together, indeed, as "Church," *as a people*.

### *Many – One*

After the initial years of the Focolare Movement,<sup>1</sup> when Chiara and her companions focused on living the gospel in a radical way, in 1949 they experienced a period of light and spiritual insights that was to be fundamental for this new community. Some of what they deeply understood in that period anticipated aspects of Christian life later highlighted by the Second Vatican Council. In particular, Chiara understood that participating, through Christ, in the life of God who is one and three, can bring many to live as one "soul." She un-

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1. The Focolare Movement is considered to have been founded in 1943.

derstood that this is the deepest reality of the Church.

Of course, all of this corresponds clearly with biblical perspectives. It's enough to consider Acts 4: 32, "The whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul." Or Paul's admonition for Christians to be "in agreement" and "of one mind" (1 Cor 1: 10; Phil 1: 27; 2: 2), urging them to have the same sentiments towards one another (Rom 12: 15-16; 1 Cor 12: 26).

We also find this idea of being one soul in some of the early theologians of the Church. For Origen and Ambrose, for example, Christian maturity is about becoming a "Church soul."<sup>2</sup> Likewise, as we can see in his rule and other texts, Augustine proposed the ideal of living with others in deep unity of soul. In later centuries, Thomas Aquinas spoke of the Church as "almost one mystical person."<sup>3</sup>

Perhaps focusing on the Church as "soul" might seem to be paying too much attention to a specific detail of it. But for Chiara, considering the Church as "soul" is not simply highlighting the Church's spiritual profile or its intimate unity, but rather is underlining what the people of God is called to be within society. We read in the anonymous "Letter to Diognetus," which dates back to the second century after Christ, "What the soul is in the body, so are Christians in the world."<sup>4</sup> Therefore, what emerges is the fact that the Church should not live for itself, but rather should act as a leaven in society, as a Church that "goes out," a Church with a very precise lay profile.

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2. See Origen, *In Cant. hom.* 1, 10: *PG* 13, 46. See also Ambrose, *Exp. in Ps.* 118, 6, 8: *CSEL* 62, 112.

3. See *STh* III, 48, 2, ad1: "Caput et membra quasi una persona mystica."

4. *Epistle to Diognetus* 6, 1.

*A Key Word: Charisms*

Chiara Lubich's writings on the Church collected in this volume help us to reflect on an experience of Church that speaks of vitality and dynamic relationships. Her approach is clearly "charismatic," both in terms of the role attributed to the Holy Spirit in the lives of all believers, and also in terms of those particular gifts, called "charisms," that God has distributed to the Church throughout the course of the centuries, always in response to the specific needs of each era. In some cases, these charisms have an impact on the whole people of God. They direct the whole Church towards new goals or provide a new countenance to the Church in response to the needs of the time.

Certainly, the vision of the Church that Chiara proposes is far from spiritualistic. She underlines in practical, everyday terms what it means to be true sisters and brothers of one another, "sharing the same body and the same blood,"<sup>5</sup> to the point of a total communion of material and spiritual goods. She strongly underlines not only this, but also the need to remain anchored to the ecclesiastical ministers through whom Christ is present in the people of God as the "head" of the body. However, he is not present as one who "commands," but rather as one who generates and re-generates his "body," that is, all of us as "Church."

From the very beginning of the Focolare Movement in Trent, Chiara recognized the specific role of the apostolic charism in the Church. She saw a particular grace at work in the bishops especially, in "Peter," that is, in the pope, who has, as she affirms, the gift of "representing the Church in one person." In this

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5. Cyril of Jerusalem, *Cat. myst.* 4, 3: PG 33, 1100