

Who are Chiara's "two or three"?

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This paper examines Chiara Lubich's radical reinterpretation of Jesus' promise in Matthew 18:20: "For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them." Drawing from Lubich's mystical insights during the "Paradise of '49" and her extensive talks spanning several decades, the study analyzes her revolutionary understanding of who can experience Christ's presence and under what conditions. Lubich's interpretation challenges traditional ecclesiastical boundaries by proposing that Jesus deliberately left the identity of the "two or three" anonymous, extending the possibility of divine encounter beyond conventional religious categories. Through analysis of her writings and speeches to diverse audiences—from Catholic bishops to Muslim communities and Buddhist teachers—the paper demonstrates that Lubich envisioned "anyone" as potentially capable of experiencing Christ's presence, regardless of denominational affiliation, age, or social status. However, this universal accessibility is coupled with demanding spiritual requirements. Lubich insists that Christ's presence manifests only through reciprocal love modeled after Jesus' complete self-emptying—a love willing to extend to the point of death. The paper explores this paradox between universal possibility and rigorous conditions, revealing how Lubich's vision offers a theological foundation for authentic interfaith dialogue. The study concludes that while Lubich's "two or three" can include people of various faiths and ages, the essential requirement remains constant: mutual love characterized by total self-sacrifice. This interpretation provides a pathway for experiencing shared divine presence that depends not on formal religious identity but on the transformative quality of human relationships.

Introduction

Chiara Lubich (1920-2008) was an Italian Catholic laywoman whose profound spiritual insights and global ecumenical vision transformed the understanding of Christian unity in the twentieth century. Born in Trento, northern Italy, during World War II she experienced what she called the "Paradise of '49"—a period of intense mystical illumination that would become the foundation for her life's work. From this experience emerged the Focolare Movement, an international organization dedicated to promoting unity among all peoples, which has since spread to over 180 countries and encompasses members from various Christian denominations as well as followers of other world religions.

At the heart of Lubich's spirituality lies a revolutionary interpretation of Jesus' promise recorded in the Gospel of Matthew: "For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them" (Mt 18:20). While this verse has traditionally been understood within the context of Christian community and worship, Chiara's insights from the Paradise of '49 revealed a far more radical and universal application. Her interpretation challenges conventional boundaries of who might experience the presence of the divine and under what conditions such presence might be realized.

The significance of Chiara's understanding extends far beyond theological speculation. Her insights about the "two or three" have practical implications for how we understand human relationships, religious dialogue, and the very nature of Christian unity. If Jesus' presence can be experienced by a broader range of people than traditionally conceived, this transforms our approach to ecumenical dialogue, interfaith relations, and social reconciliation. Her interpretation of these words has informed decades of practical work in building bridges across religious, cultural, and social divides.

Chiara's Insight from the Paradise of 1949

Throughout her life, Chiara consistently returned to this foundational insight, developing and refining her understanding through countless talks to diverse audiences—from members of her own Focolare Movement to Catholic bishops, Protestant leaders, Muslim communities, Buddhist teachers, and Hindu scholars. Her reflections reveal both the expansive possibilities and the demanding requirements for experiencing what she understood as "Jesus in the midst."

This examination of Chiara's thought on the "two or three" draws from her mystical writings during the Paradise of '49 as well as her extensive corpus of talks spanning several decades. It seeks to illuminate both the breadth of her vision—who she believed could experience this divine presence—and the depth of her understanding regarding the conditions necessary for such an encounter to occur.

In the following pages an analysis will be presented of how Chiara spoke about who the "two or three" are among whom Jesus promised to be present in the words that St. Matthew reports: "For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them." (Mt 18:20). The focus will be on how she thought about who it is to whom these words of Jesus apply, since the answer to this question has profound and wide-ranging consequences in terms of the nature of our relationships and on how we understand the "all" in Jesus' last will and testament: "so that they may all be one" (Jn 17:21). To understand Chiara's thinking on this topic, her insights about it from the Paradise of '49 and her thoughts on it as shared in talks given throughout her life will be the basis.

To begin with, in the Paradise, Chiara speaks about Jesus in the Midst as follows:¹

This word of Jesus: “Where two or more are united in my name, there am I in the midst of them” is to be commented upon via another: “Love one another *as* I have loved you.” (Only God can comment upon God; for this reason only the Church, which has the *Holy Spirit*, can interpret the Gospel.)

Therefore the two of us, for example, are united in the name of Jesus, if we love one another as he has loved us.

Now, from this you will understand how even those of us who live in the focolare² do not always have Jesus among us. For this to be so, it would be necessary that in every moment I love you (supposing just the two of us were living in focolare) as he has loved us and that you love me back *in the same way*.

He has loved us to the point of dying for us and, still more, of suffering his forsakenness.

Not always, or rarely, does love for our brother or sister require such sacrifice, but if that love which I ought to bear for you (that act which is the expression of love) does not have behind it *intentionally* the way of loving by which he loved us, I do not love like him. If you do not do the same, you too do not love like this, so we are *not* united in his name and Jesus *is not* among us.” (verses 1230-1237).

The inspiration Chiara had already in '49 is that Jesus is present when two or three are united for the purpose of carrying out his will and in the way that he wants, which in turn is spelled out in John 15:12: “love one another as I love you”. Here the “as” is to the point of forsakenness and death, which needs to be the intention even if it is not asked for in a given moment. If the “two or three” don’t all love one another as Jesus loved, they are not united in his name and he is not present among them, regardless of the apparent and well intentioned nobility of the acts the two or three are involved in. Importantly, Chiara also refers to insufficient conditions for the presence of Jesus in the midst, which include friendship, “good, religious purposes”, a “particular mission” and even being in focolare together. It is only if “I were to love you as He loved us and you [were to] love me back in the same way”.

The Conditions for Having Jesus in the Midst

Speaking to a group of focolarine in 1962,³ Chiara again emphasises that it is this reciprocal love that is the condition for having Jesus in the midst, and adds that a pre-requisite for that is to be empty, which is also the way in which Jesus loved us to the point of dying for us: “One has Him if we are empty: two people empty of themselves have, by that very fact, through mutual love, Jesus in their midst.” Such a focus on reciprocal love as the condition for having Jesus in the midst is a consistent theme in Chiara’s thought and is most often presented along the lines of the following sequence from '75,⁴ which follows the account from the Paradise: “we have Jesus in our midst if we are united in his name. This means if we are united in him, in his will, in love which is his will, in mutual love which is the supreme will of Jesus, his commandment.” She repeats this model when speaking to the focolarine and married focolarine in 1995⁵ and again in 1999,⁶ to catholic bishops in 2001,⁷ at the Hindu-Christian symposium in 2002⁸ and at an ecumenical meeting of bishops in 2003.⁹

In another excerpt from 1949, Chiara further clarifies the how of mutual love:¹⁰

“And mutual love was not sentimentalism. It was the constant sacrifice of one’s entire self in order to live the life of the other; it was the perfect renunciation of oneself. ‘If anyone wants to follow me, let him deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me’ (Mt 16:24); it meant bearing one another’s burdens... To be one with the other person meant to completely forget oneself. It was to lose everything, even one’s own soul, in order to live the other’s sorrows and joys, so as to show Jesus our love: to be crucified with Him living in the other, and with Him be joyful.”

On this backbone of reciprocal love being what makes “two or three” united in Jesus’ name and therefore having him among them, Chiara also reflects on whether there are any other circumstances relevant to the fulfilment of Jesus’ promise. In 1964, speaking to focolarine candidates,¹¹ Chiara approaches this question by first realising that “we are never sure that he is in our midst”, since a pre-requisite for that is to be in a state of Grace, which is unknowable. Nonetheless, Chiara notes that “we say candidly that it seems to us we had Him among us many times – I don’t know if it was because we were in a state of grace, or someone else there among us was”, where it is the presence of Jesus himself who brings and assures a state of grace. Experiencing Jesus’ presence means that someone (at least and always also He) was in that state, which is enough for Jesus to be experienced as present.

¹ Chiara Lubich (2002) Vita Trinitaria, Nuova Umanità XXIV (2002/2-3) 140-141, pp. 135-137.

² This Italian word means “hearth” or “fireside” and refers to the small intentional communities that are central to the Focolare Movement.

³ Chiara alle focolarine interne: “La nostra via ‘Il Focolare’”, Grottaferrata, 23 dicembre 1962.

⁴ Chiara to the European focolarine “Second theme on Jesus in our midst”, Rocca di Papa, December 6, 1975.

⁵ Chiara to the meeting of the single and married focolarine: “The second theme on our collective spirituality”, Castel Gandolfo, December 9, 1995.

⁶ Chiara to the meeting of single and married focolarine “Paradise and Unity”, Castel Gandolfo, December 29, 1999.

⁷ Chiara to a group of bishops who are attending the Synod “The spirituality of unity and the spirituality of communion – answers to 3 questions”, Castel Gandolfo, 14 October 2001.

⁸ Chiara to the Hindu-Christian Symposium: “Union with God and with Brothers and Sisters in the Spirituality of Unity”, Castel Gandolfo, 15 June 2002.

⁹ Chiara to the Ecumenical Conference of Bishops: “You are all one in Christ Jesus” (Gal 3:28) The presence of Christ in the midst of his disciples and the dialogue of life”, Rocca di Papa, November 26, 2003.

¹⁰ “Gesù in mezzo” nel pensiero di Chiara Lubich, Judith M. Povilus, Città Nuova Editrice 1981.

¹¹ Chiara alla Scuola femminile: “Gesù in mezzo”, Grottaferrata, 26 febbraio 1964.

Chiara then proceeds with speaking about having been lead by the Holy Spirit to analysing whom Jesus had in mind when saying “two or three”:

“those divine, mysterious but magnificent words that Jesus said: “Where two or more....” The fact that Jesus doesn’t specify, but leaves the “two or more” anonymous, is really a mystery, but a mystery that can also be explained. Why didn’t Jesus say: “Where two or more of my disciples, where two or more saints, where two or more Catholics, where two or more Christians, where two or more men?” Where two or more: he doesn’t specify.

During these years, for me, pope,¹² this anonymity was like having a goldmine and always drawing forth new things, because I could apply this “two or more” to others.

So where two or more, anyone, it wasn’t necessary to be saints in order to have Jesus among us, which is the greatest presence, because he is God. Two or more pope were enough, so we could have his presence right during the early days; you can too: you are small, newly born, but Jesus didn’t say: “Where two or more mature pope,” no: “Where two or more....” This anonymity is something... for me, it’s something extraordinary, because Jesus... in that phrase.... I think we should sometimes read the Gospel considering what Jesus did not say, rather than what he said, because in this case, he didn’t add anything to the “two or more....” So anyone: two or more deputies or important dignitaries; two or more men, miners; two or more....”

Chiara here makes the discovery of an anonymity that is mysterious and to be explored, deepened, understood. Jesus’ “two or three” are a “two or more, whoever they may be”. She then proceeds to give a detailed account of the barriers that have fallen as a result of the revolution brought by these words of Jesus, starting from the seemingly irreconcilable local differences between the people of Chiara’s native Trent and the neighbouring Rovereto and expanding to ever greater and more diverse spheres:

“So we saw barriers fall, we saw an exasperated local pride fall, like that between Rovereto and Trent. We saw nationalisms and racisms fall, we saw all these things fall: “where two or more.”

Jesus did not even exclude where two or more who are generally considered to be opposites. We saw all social classes, even the most... joining together.

And there was another sight, not produced by us, you know, pope, but by the “two or more”, by this word of God which wasn’t understood before. We saw the formation of a Christian community very similar to that of the early Christians, where there was the plebian and the patrician, the rich, the poor, the Roman and the Jew joining together.”

Finally, in that same talk in 1964, Chiara concludes that “I can’t explain Jesus in the midst, pope, because you can’t explain God. I understood it throughout these years when I felt that he was present.”

Since Jesus’ presence among “two or three” is ultimately ineffable, while open to being experienced with strong conviction, it also leads

Chiara to a sense of caution and of not taking its possibility for granted. Less than a month after the talk to focalarine candidates, she speaks to focalarini candidates about her hesitation to reciprocate a declaration to have Jesus in the midst with a group of Protestants:¹³

“I remember when I went to the Protestants for the first time, in Germany, and these Protestants said they had understood ‘Jesus in the midst,’ popi. Oh! And I was a bit concerned, because—I thought—now they’ll tell me that Jesus is in the midst, and I’ll have to say: no, or I’ll have to say: yes. And I thought: I really don’t understand anything here. Is He there or not? I thought: if they are in a state of grace and ready to die for us, even if they’re not Catholic, Jesus should somehow be in the midst—in some way—perhaps veiled, like in the clouds, under the clouds, but He should be there.”

A tension arises here between Chiara’s deep conviction of it being reciprocal love, modelled after Jesus’ self-emptying and self-nourishing example, that brings about unity in Jesus’ name and therefore his presence, and the lack of full unity among Christian churches. To resolve this tension, Chiara detaches herself from her own ideas and submits them to authority, only to receive them back with the confirmation that allows her to act in unity with the Church:

“Then I remember that Monsignor Vanni called me, and I said: it’s better to go through the authority, the teaching bishops. So I said: ‘Monsignor, I’m going to visit those Protestants you know about—who were also very... very good people, very upright—and they’ll ask me to place Jesus in the midst as we speak. Can we hope to have Jesus in the midst?’ ‘Of course, my daughter, in some measure, He is there.’”

Chiara then proceeds to underline her certainty of Jesus’ presence in the midst with the group of Protestants she knows and goes on to insist that being in a state of Grace is neither guaranteed for Catholics nor is it inaccessible to Protestants or even “pagans”, as a result of which one needs to be careful with judgment:

“In fact, when we meet with those Protestants, I could say with certainty that Jesus is always in the midst, popi,¹⁴ in the moments... when we’ve placed Him there, because at first you talk, you observe... That group I know—I’m speaking of a certain group—the ones who will come to Rome, well, it seems to me that He is there. And then, they begin to understand many things about the Catholic Church. That’s it, popi. Whereas maybe He’s not... maybe He’s not there with a Catholic. And you’ll say: ‘What? Scandal!’ But, popi, there are Catholics who are not in a state of grace—we know this—and there are pagans who are in a state of grace, because if they are upright... Do you see how it is? So here the issue... we have to be careful in making judgments like that.”

Chiara later returns to affirming this possibility of the presence of Jesus in the midst with non-Catholic Christians when speaking to

¹² “pope” is a characteristic affectionate form of addressing her friends that Chiara Lubich often used; it comes from the Tridentine dialect and means “children” or “kids” (feminine), but it is kept here untranslated to preserve the original’s warmth, familiarity, and emphasis.

¹³ Chiara alla scuola maschile: “Prime considerazioni su Gesù in mezzo - Risposte a 15 domande”, Grottaferrata, 21 marzo 1964.

¹⁴ “popi” is the male plural of “pope”.

superiors general in 1987,¹⁵ to members of the Parish and Diocesan Movement in 2002,¹⁶ where she underlined that “Yes, they have somewhat different interpretations, but loving one another belongs to everyone, and having Jesus in the midst belongs to everyone,” and to internal members of the zone of Ireland in 2004,¹⁷ where she emphasises that his presence among Christians of different denominations is possible even when key differences remain:

“Once, at the beginning of the Movement, I asked a bishop: ‘But do we have Jesus in the midst even with a Lutheran, with an Anglican?’ ‘Of course we do! It’s baptism.’ Baptism makes you another Christ, it enables you to love; we can’t have the Eucharist together, because that’s something different—it’s the Church that will decide when we can share Communion—but we can have Jesus in the midst. And that is already a great deal, a great deal! It’s not that they’re on their own and we’re on our own. And then the Scriptures, the Holy Scriptures as I was saying, the Councils—the early Councils, we were all together; and so also the Fathers, etc. And we feel joyful in knowing we are all rich: he, the other... we all share in this beautiful heritage.”

When Chiara speaks again about Jesus in the midst to focolarine at the beginning of December ’75,¹⁸ she returns to the ideas from ’64 of broad access to his presence, saying that “It’s enough to have good will and to put Jesus in the midst.” and then proceeding to explain how he is present even among the “little ones” like the gen 3 and even the gen 4, and that he may be “clothed differently”:

“Among the Gen 4 and the Gen 3, I’m certain that Jesus is in the midst, because I can sense it from their expressions. However, while in this case I don’t see a socio-political boundary, I do see the limit of age. And I can say that even a socio-political culture, an age, an era, may have given different ‘coverings’ to Jesus in the midst. That is to say, there is a child Jesus, an adolescent Jesus, a slightly older Jesus... He is always Jesus, but the child Jesus didn’t preach, didn’t speak—yet He was God. In Mary’s arms, He was that little baby. In the same way, we have Jesus in the midst even among the very little ones, as long as they understand Him, or at least sense Him a little bit [...] What matters is that Jesus is there; whether He’s clothed in a beautiful mantle of a Pontiff, or that of a king, or that of a newborn child—it is Jesus.”

The Demanding Nature of Reciprocal Love

However, Chiara does not say that Jesus is present among any “two or three”. Already in the Paradise, Chiara gives examples of insufficient conditions, and this is a theme she returns to towards the end of December ’75. For her, it is about the state of these “two or three” and their commitment to reciprocal love, rather than who they are in terms of some general categories (age, nationality, religion, social status, ...).

First, in a meeting with a group of gens she is asked the following question:¹⁹ “Can we have Jesus in the midst even with people who don’t know the Ideal, when on our part we put in place all the conditions to have Him—can we build a little Church even with them?”, to which she answers:

“You can’t, you can’t; the other person must be willing, must meet the same conditions—just as we or you who are speaking do—must be willing to die for you, and also to love you even if you were an enemy. And this love between the two must be declared, that is: ‘We want to have Jesus in the midst.’ Otherwise, a person may remain standing strong, may have the presence of God within themselves, but that particular presence—‘where two or more are united in my name...’—requires more. Otherwise, we would be dissolving the words of Jesus. Because Jesus didn’t say: ‘If one... and someone who doesn’t know this...’, no, He said: ‘Where two or more are united in my name, there am I.’ So it’s necessary... It can’t be done.”

Here a careful reading is needed, since the question has two parts: the first about people who do not know the Ideal and the second about the conditions for his presence only being met by some, while Chiara answers only the second part. The question she answers with an emphatic “no” is not whether it is possible to have Jesus in the midst with someone who doesn’t know the Ideal, but to the question of whether it is possible for him to be present when the “two or three” are not all ready to give their lives for each other, i.e., if reciprocal love, in the way that Jesus loves, is missing. Note, however, that Chiara here adds the declaration of the desire to have him present as a condition.

Second, the next day, answering the questions of focolarine and focolarini candidates,²⁰ Chiara is again asked about whether “everyone is capable of putting Jesus in the midst.” and her answer here too is a “no”:

“No, you have to know how to do it; it requires practice. You need to start with the first points of spirituality, and then, and then, know well, have already made the choice of God, already have a sufficiently deep interior life—well, sufficiently deep, like yours—and then know that you must do God’s will, then know that love is everything in Christianity, and then mutual love, the new commandment; and on this mutual love, you can have Jesus in the midst through mutual love. But not just anyone can do it—you have to prepare for it. [...] To have Jesus in the midst, it is necessary to live ‘Jesus forsaken,’ that is, to be nothing, to be love. So ‘Jesus forsaken,’ even though it must be lived—for itself, I answer another question—as a spouse, yet afterward it becomes the means to have Jesus in the midst. Do you understand this? When we have Jesus in the midst, we live Mary.”

Here Chiara presents a whole list of what may look like conditions (“choice of God”, “know that love is everything in Christianity”, ...).

¹⁵ Presentazione del Movimento dei Focolari con riferimento al suo ruolo nella Chiesa, nel mondo laico e in particolare nel mondo dei religiosi. Grottaferrata (Villa Cavalletti), 29 maggio 1987.

¹⁶ Chiara al congresso internazionale del Movimento Parrocchiale e Diocesano: “Gesù abbandonato, via maestra per una comunità in dialogo”, Castel Gandolfo, 20 aprile 2002.

¹⁷ Chiara agli interni/e della zona dell’Irlanda: “Risposte a 7 domande”, Dublino, 22 febbraio 2004.

¹⁸ Chiara alle focolarine interne europee: “TV Tema su Gesù in mezzo a noi”, Rocca di Papa, 8 dicembre 1975.

¹⁹ Chiara ai gens: “Risposte a 12 domande”, Frascati, 29 dicembre 1975.

²⁰ Chiara ai focolarini/e esterni: “Risposte a 15 domande”, Rocca di Papa, 30 dicembre 1975.

However, they all lead to two key points: “mutual love” and “to be nothing”, which is how Jesus loves. Both the additional conditions here and the explicit declaration of Jesus in the midst presented as a condition the previous day can, however, be read as an unpacking of what reciprocal love and self-emptying mean for the groups that Chiara spoke to on these two occasions: gens and focolarini and focolarine candidates. This, instead of a reading that imposes such conditions on all, is more consistent with everything else Chiara has said on the subject. Seen from this perspective, the additional conditions become means for attaining reciprocal love and for loving in the way that Jesus loved that are part of how some live their vocations and follow the will of God for them, rather than being conditions imposed on all.

The Universality of the Two or Three

Such an interpretation is also consistent with how Chiara speaks about Jesus in the midst later, starting with answering the questions of focolarine and focolarini candidates in 1994,²¹ where she speaks about “putting Jesus in the midst of all people, all groups, all things.”:

“What is needed, in short, in a collective spirituality is to have Jesus in the midst and to have Him always there. If Jesus is not in the midst, it’s like a monk outside the monastery—a monk who betrays his spirituality—and even if he is physically inside, it’s as if he were outside. For us, Jesus in the midst is indispensable; it is indispensable at the beginning, and indispensable at the end of the spiritual life, because we must build not only the inner castle—though that too, because unity with God is needed, union with God, and God comes first of all—but also the outer castle; that is, to put Jesus in the midst of all people, all groups, all things.”

The following year, speaking to married focolarine and focolarini,²² Chiara underlines this “all” by giving the example of Buddhists, who have grasped his presence and who have “discovered the ‘how,’ by which the presence of Jesus among us is established.”:

“So, here, with this mutual love, we must reveal this ‘how,’ say this ‘how,’ so that Jesus Forsaken reaches even the farthest corners of the earth. It needs to be explained.

Recently, Buddhists came to visit us at Loppiano and also here. They naturally found that these people are different from everyone else in the world. That great master had visited countless nations and met all kinds of people, but he said: those people are something else!

It’s because they discovered the ‘how’ by which the presence of Jesus among us is established. Since these people are very pure, they perceive the divine, and so there they sensed the presence of God among us, of Jesus, as we would say, in our midst. But why? Because we know that ‘how,’ which, among other things, is... it’s fascinating to be able to live the life of the Trinity on earth, and

many would want to know it—how to do it? So, we need to reveal this ‘how.’

In 2002, she also speaks about Jesus in the midst to Muslims,²³ as a basis for praying together for overcoming terrorism:

“We must all come together, all of us in the universal brotherhood, united in prayer so that terrorism is truly overcome. We can do it—Jesus says that where two or three are united in His name, in His love, whatever they ask will be granted.

So what must we do? Prayer. We must all come together, all of us in the universal brotherhood, united to pray that terrorism will really be defeated. We can do it—Jesus says that where two or three are united in His name, in His love, whatever they ask will be granted. And we are far more than two or three, we are many, so certainly we must put in our minds... start from here with the idea: we, with Chiara, with the Focolare members, and among ourselves, all united in prayer.”

The next year, Chiara then speaks to the general council²⁴ and gives the example of the Muslim movement lead by W.D. Mohammed as one of a movement that “sympathises” with us putting into practice some aspects of our spirituality, calling out Jesus in the midst specifically:

“For example, now our W.D. Mohammed has resigned as head of that society but has remained as spiritual leader, and he spoke—and if you remember, even in the greetings he sent me, to Saint Chiara—he had rather strong words; he basically says that everything I nurture in you, the Focolare members, the Work of Mary, they take it as their own, for their Movement. And from what they say, even the... —where are you, Serenella? Here—from what the American pope say, who are writing to me even now because many faxes keep arriving, it’s really like that; it’s not just him, it’s... also his followers, these Imams, these others. That is a Movement of sympathizers; because if a sympathizer is someone who lives one aspect—for example, Jesus in the midst, or God as love, or the will of God, as we see it—then there are many sympathizers, but we can’t say how many... how many. Do you understand, popi?”

Conclusion

In conclusion, the answer that emerges to the question of who it is that Chiara has in mind when she speaks about “two or three” having Jesus in their midst, is a resounding “anyone”. An “anyone” whose identity is left anonymous by Jesus himself. An “anyone” whose mystery is to be deepened, explored and experienced. An “anyone” that in Chiara’s experience has included the broadest range of individuals, from friends in her native Trento, via even the inhabitants of the neighbouring Rovereto and then to the most diverse population of the world - Protestants in Germany, Anglicans in England, Muslims in New York, Buddhists in Thailand, Hindus in India. An “anyone” that ranged from infants barely able to speak, via youths growing up in a

²¹ Chiara alle Scuole: “La spiritualità collettiva - Risposte alle domande”, Loppiano, 29 novembre 1994.

²² Chiara all’incontro delle focolarine e focolarine sposate: “Il tema sulla spiritualità collettiva, con invito a donarla al mondo”, Castel Gandolfo, 9 dicembre 1995.

²³ Chiara all’incontro degli amici musulmani: “Risposte a 13 domande”, Castel Gandolfo, 3 novembre 2002.

²⁴ Chiara al Consiglio generale: “Presentazione del testo corretto degli Statuti generali dell’Opera” (I parte), Rocca di Papa, 24 settembre 2003.

socio-cultural context dramatically different from hers, through her fellow *focolarini* and *focolarine*, to members of the hierarchies of the Catholic and other Churches. At the same time, and with equal vehemence, the universality of the “who” is accompanied by a narrow specificity of the “how”. While it could in principle be “two or three” of any characteristics, Chiara insists that Jesus is not among “two or three” regardless of how they relate to each other. Not everyone knows how to be or is in the way that is required for Jesus’ presence in the midst to be felt. And here Chiara offers a single way: “we have Jesus in our midst if we are united in His name, but ‘name’ is synonymous with Him; that means if we are united in Him—united in His will—and His will is love, and His supreme will is mutual love.”

Chiara Lubich’s interpretation of Jesus’ promise to be present among “two or three” represents one of the most radical and hopeful visions of unity to emerge from the twentieth century. By insisting that Jesus left the identity of the “two or three” deliberately anonymous, Chiara challenged centuries of ecclesiastical boundaries and opened possibilities for experiencing divine presence that transcend denominational, religious, and even cultural divisions. Her insights suggest that the divine encounter promised in Matthew 18:20 is not the exclusive privilege of any particular religious community, but rather depends on the quality of relationship and love that exists between people, regardless of their formal religious identity.

This vision carries profound implications for our contemporary world, marked as it is by conflict, misunderstanding, and fragmentation. Chiara’s understanding offers a practical pathway for dialogue and reconciliation that goes beyond mere tolerance or peaceful coexistence. By proposing that Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, and

Christians can experience a shared divine presence when they love one another with the radical self-emptying love exemplified by Jesus, she provides a theological foundation for genuine interfaith encounter. Her work with diverse religious communities—from Protestant churches in Germany to Muslim movements in America to Buddhist teachers in Thailand—demonstrates that this is not merely theoretical speculation but lived experience with transformative social consequences.

Yet Chiara’s vision remains challenging and demanding. While she extends the possibility of experiencing Jesus in the midst to “anyone,” she simultaneously insists on the most rigorous conditions: mutual love that reaches to the point of complete self-sacrifice, the willingness to die for the other, and the emptying of oneself in service of the beloved. This paradox—universal accessibility coupled with demanding requirements—reflects the tension inherent in any authentic spiritual path. It suggests that while the divine presence is available to all, it can only be realized through the most profound transformation of human relationship and consciousness.

In an era when religious differences often fuel division rather than dialogue, or are used as a pretext for them, Chiara Lubich’s insights about the “two or three” offer both a vision of what is possible and a concrete method for achieving it. Her legacy challenges religious communities to move beyond exclusivity toward a recognition that the sacred can be encountered wherever human beings love one another with genuine self-sacrificing commitment. This remains perhaps one of the most hopeful and practically relevant contributions to the ongoing human quest for unity across the barriers that too often divide us.

Appendix

	1960	1970	1980	1990	2000
general council					also sympathizers 24/9/03 Muslims 24/9/03
focolarini/focolarine	mutual love 23/12/62	mutual love 6/12/75 the littlest ones 8/12/75		Buddhists perceived it and know how 9/12/95 mutual love 9/12/95 mutual love 29/12/99	
focolarini/focolarine candidates	anyone 26/2/64 also non-Catholic Christians 21/3/64	not just anyone 30/12/75 interior life 30/12/75 mutual love 30/12/75		to all people 29/11/94	creates universal family 13/4/01
gens		only with those who know the Ideal 29/12/75 declaration 29/12/75 mutual love 29/12/75			
parish movement					non-Catholic Christians 20/4/02 despite differing interpretation 20/4/02 mutual love 20/4/02
internal members					Lutherans, Anglicans 20/4/04 baptism 20/4/04 even without the Eucharist 20/4/04
superiors general			mutual love 29/5/87 non-Catholic Christians 29/5/87		
Catholic bishops					mutual love 14/10/01
Ecumenical bishops					mutual love 26/11/03 baptism 26/11/03
Muslims					all of universal brotherhood 3/11/02
Hindus					mutual love 15/6/02 tutti 15/6/02