ON THE FRONTIER OF THE BUDDHIST-CHRISTIAN DIALOGUE



The author traces his journey into the frontier of the Buddhist-Christian dialogue from his youth, through his studies and practice of Buddhism, to his conversion to Christianity, and finally into the Focolare Movement and the Church's dialogue with Buddhism. As an example of being in the frontier of the dialogue in the Buddhist world, he presents his experiences and reflections during his early dialogues in Japan. In that context, he notes how many of the Buddhist figures with whom he dialogued found similarities between their views and those of Chiara Lubich and the Focolare Movement. His dialogues in Japan opened the door to intellectual and spiritual encounters with some of the great Buddhist thinkers of the twentieth century. The article then describes how he moved from doing dialogue as an individual in the frontier with Buddhism to being part of the ongoing dialogues of the Focolare, the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, and the Monastic Interreligious Dialogue. He gives examples from these dialogical experiences of similarities between certain Buddhist viewpoints and the unpublished mystical writings of Chiara Lubich that are commonly called "Paradise '49". In doing so, he describes the relationship that developed between himself and Masao Abe, and then Abe's relationship with the Focolare and Pope John Paul II. He also describes the positive reaction of the Dalai Lama upon hearing the views of Chiara Lubich.

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Early Journey to the Frontier of Dialogue

I had attended an independent Protestant church as a small child but my family stopped attending after a few years, so I was not baptized nor did I learn much about Christianity. It was not until the university that I began to develop and interest in the question of the existence of God. At the same time, I became interested in Buddhism and one of my professors, Ray Jordan, taught me Zen meditation. So, as I practiced Zen mediation, I also began a quest for a personal God, something that is not found in Buddhism.

One night while sitting in meditation, the thought came to me to pray to God which I had not done since I was a small child. Not knowing how to pray, I simply asked God whether there is more to this life than what I experienced—which at that time was filled with struggle. A deep peace descended over me. This experience opened a door for me, or moved me in a new direction toward the source of this peace that I understood to be God. It also happened at a time when I had to decide where to go for graduate work in philosophy. The choice came down to the University of Hawaii where I could study Buddhist philosophy, or another university where I could only study Western philosophy. One night, I was sitting in meditation at a place by the ocean. I had the strong and clear impression that God was asking me to go to the University of Hawaii and study Buddhism, and he would bring me back and use me for his "own purpose". So, my wife and I and our new-born son went to Hawaii.

I took coursework and did research on Buddhism and other Asian philosophies and religions from 1967 to 1971. Given the large Asian population, there are many Buddhist communities in Hawaii. So, I complemented my academic studies by practicing Zen meditation at the Diamond Sangha of Robert Aitken under the guidance of Yasutani Roshi from Japan. I quickly realized I had entered a frontier of a new world that was very foreign. There was chanting in Asian languages, walking meditation in a line outside, sitting meditation for long periods facing a wall, bowing to each other, to a statue of Bodhidharma, and to our mat on which we sat. A monk with a long stick would sometimes walk behind us and if we requested it by bowing, he would kneel behind us and hit us on our shoulders. We would then bow in gratitude for helping us keep awake and focus our practice. At times someone would tap with a wooden hammer in a certain pattern on a piece of wood hanging on the wall. Our practice, wrapped in incense, was punctuated with bells and gongs. At the conclusion, we would sit facing each other sipping tea in silence. I thought about leaving at the beginning of this experience, but again I had a sense that God wanted me to stay. Eventually, the formal practice with its rituals affected me in a positive way and I felt at home.

In 1971, I moved with my family to West Lafayette, Indiana where I took a professorship in the Department of Philosophy at Purdue University teaching Asian philosophy and religion. My family, work at Purdue, social life, and a small Zen group seemed to meet my needs. I did remember my experience in San Diego about "coming back" and being used by God for his "own purpose". However, that did not seem like a good idea to me at the time, and I resisted strongly. Then at one point I had a serious personal and professional crisis. As I struggled with it,

I felt the need for a personal relation with God. So, I stopped resisting and finally surrendered. I entered the Catholic Church on August 27, 1974.

Some months later, my wife and I were invited to meet with a person who was from the Focolare community in Chicago. As he told "the story of the Focolare" as well as his own personal story, we were both deeply moved by a moment of God. For me, the notions of God as Love, the present moment, love of all persons, unity, and Jesus forsaken resonated somehow with what I had found precious in Buddhism. I concluded that here was a spirituality that I could practice that was not a denial of the seeds of truth I had found in Buddhism, that we could practice together as a family, and that could contribute to a more united and peaceful world. Ann and I began going to Focolare meetings, and then went to a Mariapolis in 1976. It was at that week-long retreat that the "charism of unity" came alive for me.

As I contemplated the charism of unity, I wondered about the inspiration I had to go to Hawaii and study Buddhism and that God would bring me back and use me for his own purpose. I learned that the Focolare was involved in dialogue with other religions, and I was aware of the new field of Buddhist-Christian studies beginning at the University of Hawaii. I decided to talk to someone in interreligious dialogue, and contacted my friend, Raimondo Panakkar, who was famous for his work in the dialogue with Hinduism. He suggested that since I had practiced Zen Buddhism and had studied the history of Buddhism, now that I was taking up a Christian spirituality, it would be good to study the history of Christian spirituality. I won a grant to take a year off for studies with the Jesuits, Dominicans, and Franciscans at the Graduate Theological Union at Berkeley, California. The grant included a practicum. Therefore, after formal studies in 1977-78, my family and I went to Loppiano, the little village of the Focolare that was also a school of formation for the Focolarini. I worked in an electric meter shop, went to talks by the person responsible for the men's formation, and listened to tapes of Chiara Lubich's talks. It was an extraordinary experience. Sometimes I would go out of the house and look around trying to comprehend what I was "inside"—it was like being inside a spiritual atmosphere that I could not wrap my mind around.

Then Chiara came to visit Loppiano. Meeting her for me was a meeting with Jesus Forsaken and risen, whom I have tried to follow for the rest of my life. I wrote a letter to Chiara asking if she wanted me to help with her dialogue with Buddhists. She sent me a message saying that she did and wrote out some guidelines for me to follow. It was shortly after that when I accepted my vocation to be a married focolarino. Just as with becoming a Christian, it was a great struggle. Before taking the step, I could not sleep at night and finally wrote down on a piece of paper a list of the many reasons I should not become a married focolarino. I read the list to a friend. He asked me, "Is someone pressuring you to become a married focolarino?" I thought about it and answered "No". I then understood that the pressure was coming from inside myself – from God. But he left me free. I finally said "Yes".

A group of Hindu members of the Gandhian Movement came to Loppiano for a visit near the end of our stay. I thought, "OK. This is my first chance to try dialogue". When the Hindu guests got off the bus, I went over and began talking to some of the men. I let them know that I was a professor who taught Hinduism

and would be glad to talk to them about our religions. They looked at me in silence and moved away. I noticed that one focolarina went up to a Hindu woman and they seemed to be best friends. I asked how she knew this woman. She said that she did not know her… she was just loving her. I was surprised and a bit angry. "I am the person who knows Hinduism and they want to talk to this woman who knows nothing!" That night I decided that I would follow this focolarina's example and just love the guests and not talk about religion. That is what I did as I drove people around the city and answered their questions. I emptied myself of my knowledge and ego and made myself one with them, caring for their needs.

On the last night, I was at a dinner table with a group of Hindus and one young focolarina sitting across from me. She motioned to me, "Let's keep Jesus in our midst". I nodded. Soon the conversation stopped. The elder at the head of the table said, "I feel the presence of God here". The other Hindus nodded in silence. I understood that my self-emptying love had contributed to conditions for Jesus in our midst. The focolarina affirming that she was ready to keep Jesus in the midst with me brought God's presence among us… and the Hindu guests felt it. Then we went to see a video of Chiara. A Hindu woman sitting beside me asked me about a crucifix on the wall beside the movie screen. I told her something that I do not remember; but it had to do with his kenosis of love making himself one with the suffering of all humankind. She said to me, "That is like the self-emptying of our ego selves so that we find the divine inside and discover our unity outside with all living beings". I was surprised by her profound words. I realized that the Focolare way of dialogue is to love first; love by losing everything to be one with the other. Then, the unity becomes a presence of light that brings about his dialogue.

I returned home and for the next six years lived the Focolare spirituality as best I could while I researched the Buddhist-Christian dialogue. Then a Buddhist-Christian conference was held at the University of Hawaii in 1984. I presented a paper comparing the spiritual life of both traditions where I mentioned the thought of Chiara Lubich[1]. I tried each day to live intensely the Focolare method of dialogue. Each time I arrived by car at the conference site, I would stop and greet the parking lot attendant in order to be the first to love before reaching the conference and to remind myself that I was to treat everyone equally with love at the conference from parking lot attendant to famous Buddhist and Christian scholars. I spent so much time with the Buddhists that when we were in groups they would talk about internal Buddhist issues with me present like I was one of them. In fact, at one point Hans Küng came up and invited me to lunch thinking I was a Buddhist.

The fruits of this first journey into the Buddhist-Christian dialogue were so many it was clear that God was indeed using me for his purpose. I received many invitations to lecture in Japan and other parts of Asia. I was also a member of a small group of scholars who created the Society for Buddhist-Christian Studies and its journal, *Buddhist-Christian Studies*, of which I became Associate Editor. John Cobb and Masao Abe invited me to join what was called the Abe-Cobb

1) D.W. Mitchell, *The "Place" of the Self in Christian Spirituality: A Response to the Buddhist Christian Dialogue*, Japanese Religions 13 (1984), p. 226. In «Nuova Umanità», 39 (1985), pp. 9-33.

Group. This was a group of the theologians from Europe and America led by John Cobb, and the Buddhist scholars from Japan led by Masao Abe. Later, I was chosen to be director of the group and we changed the name to the International Buddhist-Christian Theological Encounter.

On the Frontier of Dialogue: Discoveries in Japan of Similarities between Buddhist Philosophers and Chiara Lubich

During my lecture tour of Japan, I met with Gishin Tokiwa, then Professor of Zen Buddhism at Hanozono University, and President of the F.A.S. Society. I had met Tokiwa in Hawaii and had already known about the F.A.S. Society and its famous founder, Shin'ichi Hisamatsu. Hisamatsu and the F.A.S. Society reminded me of Chiara and the Focolare .

Hisamatsu was born in 1889 and attained Enlightenment in the Zen tradition in 1915. During World War II, in 1942-43, students at Kyoto University who were in crisis over the war went to Hisamatsu for guidance. "The students and the teacher became one", according to one of the students, Masao Abe whom we will discuss later[2]. As one, they sought for what it is to be a human being, and how they could live this "oneness" together as true human beings are meant to live. They sought together the guidance of Hisamatsu as to how to awaken to their true selves, "joining hands as brothers and sisters", free from any discrimination against others, vowing to "construct a world in which everyone can live truly and fully". In 1958, Hisamatsu named their organization the F.A.S. Society. "F" stands for "Formless Self", meaning spiritual awakening to our true self beyond all that divides persons in order to work for the peace and unity of humanity. "A" stands for "All Humankind", which means this unity is a universal basis for solving social problems facing all humanity, rather than from the perspectives of one class, group, nation, or race. "S" stands for "Creating a new history on the basis of a reality that is supra-historical". The super-historical basis is a foundation of unity that transcends the ups and downs of history.

Hisamatsu called this ideal a "post-modern age", and he worked for it until he died in 1980. He sought to build a community united in its destiny as one living family through the overcoming of individualism. The modern world, he said, is built on individualism, nationalism, and rational individual selfhood. A post-modern age would be built on a broader compassionate and luminous standpoint of unity by a communal spirituality that can produce a new and united human community. This spirituality needs what he called an "active love" that gives oneself to others as gift, rather than a "passive love" that seeks to be loved by others as an object. This active life is like a "fire". Here is what he says about this fire of love:

> "It will be warm and congenial. If we spread this warmth externally, in the same way as a charcoal fire lights in one spot and spreads, everyone in this room will become warm. When each of us become a

2) M. Abe, *A History of the F.A.S. Zen Society*, «The Eastern Buddhist» (1984), p. 5.

charcoal fire, this warmth can extend to those around us, the places we find ourselves, and the places to which we go".[3]

Gishin Tokiwa invited me to speak to the F.A.S. Society in Kyoto after reading about Chiara Lubich in my papers and getting to know me. He saw similarities between the F.A.S. Society and the Focolare. One night we went to the building where the F.A.S. Society practiced meditation in a large Zen monastic complex. There were no lights in the complex and as we walked down the street we could only see the dark forms of the temples like huge ghosts in the night. The building where we met did have candle light. But the walls only came up half way to the ceiling so that the wind blew through from the outside. It was the dead of winter and very cold. When I gave my talk, I could see my breath. My comments were on the similarities between Hisamatsu and Chiara. It was well received and the editor of their famous journal, *The Eastern Buddhist*, asked if they could publish my paper. It was the first paper written by a Christian to be published in this Buddhist journal[4].

Tokiwa became a close friend and collaborator. He stressed the Zen distinction between our "ordinary way of being" and our "original way of being". The former is tainted by the failings of ourselves and the world in which we live. The latter is free from those negative conditions of life. This original way of living, according to Tokiwa, is shown to the world by two women: Maya, the mother of the Buddha, and Mary, the mother of the Christ. In Buddhism, there is the term *tathāgata-garbha*, or "womb of the Buddha". Lady Maya was the womb of the Buddha. The word *tathāgata* is a title of the Buddha that literally means "Thus come into the world". So, as Maya is the womb by which the Buddha thus came into the world, so Mary is the womb by which the Christ thus came into the world. For Tokiwa we all have the *tathāgata-garbha* within ourselves. That is, we can all be like a womb that brings the Buddha or the Christ into the world following the model of Maya or Mary. How are they a model for us? They both were empty of themselves, loving, compassionate, free from the distortions of the world. If we become like them, then we too can discover our original self and become the womb or place where Buddha or Christ can be born into the world. For Tokiwa like for Chiara, there is a communal element. When human beings together realize their collective womb of mutual self-giving love, they will realize that they can be the collective womb of the "unity of all beings". And this will liberate humankind from the painful history we have lived with all its terrible wounds, to a post-modern history of love, liberation, peace, and unity. About Mary, Tokiwa writes, "Mary is not just a woman, is not just a specific person, but Mary stands for all human beings, all humanity… The same humanity that always gives rise to this suffering and causes suffering… can be the mother of the Son of God, this is

3) D.W. Mitchell, *Spirituality and Emptiness: The Dynamics of Spiritual Life in Buddhism and Christianity* (New York: Paulist Press, 1991), p. 157.
4) D.W. Mitchell, *Unity and Dialogue: A Christian Response to Shin'ichi Hisamatsu's Notion of FAS*, «FAS Society Journal» (1986), p. 69.

my point of view"[5]. All human beings can "live Mary" and out of suffering give birth to a new humanity.

For some time before my trip to Japan, I had been in correspondence with Keiji Nishitani. He was one of the most famous Japanese philosophers of the 20th Century. At one point, I sent him some meditations by Chiara. When it came time to visit him during my trip to Japan, Tokiwa accompanied me to his home. We sat down and had an extraordinary conversation. In fact, part of it was published in what is now the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue's *Pro Dialogo* journal with the title: "Compassionate Endurance: Mary and the Buddha: A Dialogue with Keiji Nishitani"[6]. At one point, he said to me, "I have read the writings of Chiara Lubich. I think that we are both saying the same things. We are both working for the same thing". He then turned to Tokiwa and said, "You know she was in Trent, Italy during World War II, and during the bombings she went to the bomb shelters. There she had her conversion"[7].

Nishitani writes a great deal about *kenosis*. So, I mentioned that in the Focolare we talk about "being Mary". We empty ourselves of our ego so that Jesus is born in us. In our true humanity we can be a "womb" of new spiritual life. This self-emptying reflects the essence of God who is a dynamic Trinitarian activity of kenotic love. We also empty ourselves before others in order to reflect this love of God to them and become united to them, reflecting a communal image of the Trinity. I asked Nishitani, "You speak of the movement from 'self-centeredness' to 'other-centeredness' that reflects the compassion of ultimate reality. Are the notions of Chiara and yours similar?" He answered, "Yes they are". I then asked, "If we do this together with others, are we creating what you call 'a field of force' that gathers all humanity in its true 'Home Ground?'" He answered:

> "Yes, and when we attain deeper realization of unity, we find the fundamental truth of community… or what has been called circuminsessional interpenetration. This is to be aware of the fundamental way of being, unity. Here in unity, each person can realize his or her true self. But the true self is always other-centered so it also means to become aware of… the true freedom of our being. To discover our true self is at the same time the realization of true unity. It is, in fact, the self-realization of the unity itself".[8]

The self-realization of the unity itself! In Chiara's terms, when we experience unity, it is the self-realization of the unity of God-Love among us. Nishitani went on to say that the historical necessity of today is to open a broader foundation, communication, and perspective where in his words, "We can see each other as brothers and sisters". He then asked me if the self-realization of unity among Buddhists is Buddha in the midst, while among Christians as Chiara says, it is Jesus

5) D.W. Mitchell, *Spirituality and Emptiness*, p. 190.
6) *Bulletin of the Vatican Secretariat for NonChristians* XXI (1986), pp. 296-300.
7) *Ibid*., p. 296.
8) *Ibid*., p. 287.

in the midst? We both said that we could not answer that question. But Nishitani said that "We are now at a crossroads to something new. Buddhists and Christians are meeting at the crossroads of history". The important thing is not what we call this unity, Buddha or Christ, but rather that we gain a new global vision to embrace all humankind in unity. The unity needs to be found, he said, both in the "heart" and the "hearth" using Chiara's word "Focolare". He concluded, "The hearth is the center of the whole family (of humankind), and the heart is the center of the body".[9]

Finally, I asked Nishitani, in light of Chiara's emphasis on Jesus Forsaken and Unity, what was his view of the role of suffering in love and unity? He answered that by overcoming our ego-centeredness, living compassionately for others becomes the fundamental ground of our lives. Then we find a unity in which the suffering of others is our suffering. We identify with all who suffer, as Jesus did on the cross. We discover the truth of suffering. This takes compassionate endurance for us human beings. He concluded, "Mary is a model of this compassionate endurance for all of us. Following her way with endurance, we find true wisdom".

Ryusei Takeda, professor at Ryukoku University in Tokyo, is a leader in another form of Buddhism in Japan, Pure Land Buddhism. This form of Buddhism does not focus on meditation and enlightenment, but on faith in Amida Buddha who can bring the qualities of Nirvana into a person's life and take that person to his Pure Land after death. He invited me to present a paper on prayer at his university and we became close friends. I mention him to introduce a type of Buddhism that is devotional rather than meditational. To explain, let me tell you the story Takeda told me.

He was living in Hiroshima when the atomic bomb was dropped on that city during World War II. He was one of those little children you see in photos who ran into the river to escape the burning radiation. He did survive, but was badly affected by the radiation. The existential question he asked was "Why did this have to happen to me? Why couldn't I have been at my aunt's home in the country when the bomb was dropped?" When he asked this question to his priest, the answer was that this was his karma—his fate in life. He needed to accept it and live compassionately for others. But he said that this cry of "Why" consumed his life like having his hair on fire… he could only think of his own condition and not that of others. One day he went to the temple and before the statue of Amida Buddha, he said that he could not solve this "Why?" It had become one with him, his life. So, he gave it all to Amida Buddha. He surrendered his "Why?" into Amida's hands. At that moment, he felt the love and acceptance of Amida for him just as he was, burned by radiation. Along with that love came light, a light that allowed him to see himself and others with Amida's eyes of love. Only with the love of Amida for him could he accept himself. And when he did this, he could begin to love others. That was the new life that Amida brought to him. Takeda said that he sees this as like where Chiara speaks of Jesus Forsaken's "Why?" put into God's hands.

9) *Ibid*., p. 299.

Returning Home: Dialogue in the Focolare and in the Church

After the trip to Japan in 1986, my family and I spent four months in Grottaferrata, Italy near the international center of the Focolare Movement. Early on, I met Enzo Fondi and Natalia Dellapiccola, co-responsibles for the Focolare's interreligious dialogue. Natalia asked me about myself, my life, my family, just about everything. Then she said to me: "So you want to follow Chiara in this dialogue with Buddhism?" I answered, "Yes". "Then you need to know that if you follow Chiara in this way, it will involve a deep relation with Jesus Forsaken. Are you sure you want to do this?" I said, "Yes, I am". I felt her eyes embracing me like a mother. I was home… and over the years, I would travel to Rome and Asia many times participating in the Focolare's dialogue with Buddhism.

I also met Giuseppe Zanghì, one of the early academic leaders in the Focolare Movement. We had a conversation about Asian religions and he invited me to meet him every other week. At our first meeting, he asked me if I had ever heard about "Paradise '49". I said I had not. So, he said, "I am going to read you sections of Chiara's unpublished writings from this mystical period of her life". As he read, I found my mind and my soul being filled. I could only hold so much and we had to conclude. For days I would process what I had heard, ponder it deeply, and relate it to Buddhism. At our next meeting, I would show him my drawings and writings about what he had read before. He would agree or correct me. Then he would read some more. This continued until we departed for home. What he read became the basis for the first book I wrote in the Buddhist-Christian dialogue: *Spirituality and Emptiness: The Dynamics of Spiritual Life in Buddhism and Christianity*.[10] In this book, I related the writings of members of the Kyoto School—including Hisamatsu, Nishitani, Abe, and Tokiwa—to Christian Spirituality with a focus on *kenosis* as understood and experienced by Chiara Lubich.

It was also during this time in Italy that Enzo introduced me to Fr. Marcello Zago, the Secretary at what is now the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue. After Fr. Zago got to know me and my work and ideas, he introduced me to Cardinal Arinze, President of the PCID, and to Fr. John Shirieda who was responsible for Asia. We became friends. Later, Cardinal Arinze would invite me to the first three international dialogues of the Catholic Church with Buddhism. They were the dialogues held during the pontificate of Pope John Paul II. The first was in Kaohsiung, Taiwan. I was asked to help in the organization and to present the opening address. At the conclusion of the dialogue, Cardinal Arinze asked me to write the official document overnight for the last meeting the next morning. He added, "Now you need to write something that all the Buddhists will vote for and that I can take back to Cardinal Ratzinger and he will approve it too". No pressure!

I will mention just one story that brings up a frontier topic yet to be discussed in the dialogue. On the evening of the opening session, we participants were seated in the front row of a huge auditorium with thousands of Buddhists behind us. On the stage in front were political and Catholic leaders of Taiwan,

10) See footnote 3 above.

Cardinal Arinze, and other dignitaries. We had just arrived in the middle of Typhoon Gary. I had not eaten and was exhausted and shaken from the flight and landing in the typhoon. Suddenly, I felt frightened. How could I give my opening address later that night? Gently my gaze was "moved" from the dignitaries to a statue of Guanyin Bodhisattva – a Buddhist celestial being of mercy. In my mind, I heard the words, "The self you are worried about does not exist". Suddenly my anxiety "flew" out of my mind and I was relaxed. This is called a "blessing" that is not uncommon in Buddhism. It was the second I had experienced in my life. This brings up a topic on the frontier of dialogue with Mahāyāna Buddhism that has yet to be addressed, namely, the relationship between the celestial Buddhas and bodhisattvas and God and the angels, saints, and the "elemental spirits" about which Paul writes.

The second colloquium was held in the jungle outside Bangalore at a Benedictine monastery in 1998. I was asked to deliver a paper on "Kenosis in Christianity", since Cardinal Arinze knew of my work in that field.[11] Also, Michio Shinozaki of the Rissho Kosei-kai (RKK) was asked to speak about the *Lotus Sutra* tradition. He noted that the One Dharma (ultimate truth) is itself a "power of integration"[12]. It integrates all words, laws and phenomena like a father uniting his children[13]. Like Chiara, he notes that in Tendai Buddhism, the foundational Japanese sect for RKK, "the sounds of streams and winds, and the looks of the moon and flowers teach the Buddha's Dharma..."[14]. This integration is one of unity in diversity, "an unexpected gift" beyond what we normally seek and experience. In my own paper, I noted that for Chiara there is the power of integration of God-Love in the process of creation that brings about an interrelatedness of all things[15]. For Chiara, like Tendai and the RKK, this interrelatedness is experienced in nature. Here are her words from her experience of Paradise '49:

> "When we arrived in the mountains… I felt that I could discern, because of a special grace from God, the presence of God beneath things. Because God is present, sustaining all things. Therefore, if the pine trees—which I saw—were golden by the sun, if the brooks flowed into the glimmering falls, if the daisies, other flowers and the sky were all decked in summer array, stronger than all this was the vision of a Sun beneath all creation. In a certain sense, I saw, I believe, God who supports, who upholds things. God was preparing me for what would happen. And the fact that God was beneath things meant that they were not as we see them; they were all linked to one another by love; all, so to speak, in love with one another. So, if the brook flowed into

11) D.W. Mitchell, *Have this mind among yourselves, which was in Christ Jesus who emptied Himself taking the form of a servant (Phil. 2:5-7): Christian Kenosis*, «Pro Dialogo» 100 (1999), pp. 139-156.
12) M.T. Shinozaki, *The* Lotus Sutra *as the Final Revelation of the Buddha and its Attitude towards Other Scriptures*, «Pro Dialogo» 100 (1999), p. 92.
13) *Ibid*., p. 93.
14) *Ibid*., p. 95.
15) D.W. Mitchell, p. 155.

the lake, it was out of love. If the pine tree stood high next to another pine tree, it was out of love".[16]

The third colloquium was held in 2002 at the beautiful headquarters of the Rissho Kosei-kai in Tokyo. There I was asked to speak about "The Laity and the Church"[17]. By this time, the participants knew each other well and the hospitality of the Rissho Kosei-kai was very gracious. I felt like this was the right place to complete the sequence of colloquia, namely, at the site where Chiara spoke many years before, opening a new relation between the Niwano family, herself, the Focolare, the RKK, and the Church.

When I returned to the United States from Italy in 1986, my career in dialogue resumed in a deeper and more focused way based on my conversations with Zanghì. By this time I had become Associate Editor of *Buddhist-Christian Studies*. I was also, as mentioned above, a member of the Abe-Cobb Group and in that context developed a life-long friendship and collaboration with Masao Abe. He was one of the leaders of the Kyoto School, student of Hisamatsu, and colleague of Nishitani. In both the Society and the Abe-Cobb group, I began presenting papers in accord with the Focolare spirituality and its foundation in Paradise '49. This caught the attention of Masao Abe. He was completing his ground-breaking essay in the dialogue entitled: *The Emptying God: A Buddhist-Christian-Jewish Conversation*.[18] This long essay by Abe compared the Christian notion of God and the Buddhist notion of Emptiness. This essay was followed by responses by some of the top theologians in the world.

The key element of Abe's position was that *kenosis* is found in both Buddhist and Christian thought. He wrote that God empties Godself in a *kenosis* of love in creating the world and in redeeming humanity, and bringing humankind to a new spiritual level of attainment. This emptiness understood as the dynamic source of the world holds nothing back. If it did, it would not be fully love—holding back something for itself is selfish. So, if God is truly kenotic love, God must empty God Self fully as creation; making God fully one in love with all of creation. In short, if God is fully love, God would empty out God's transcendence as total immanence. There is nothing to God beyond creation.

Abe knew that I too was working with the notion of *kenosis* from Chiara's thought. So, he sent me his manuscript prior to publication to help me write a book that in part would respond to his Buddhist position. His book appeared in 1990, and my book, entitled *Spirituality and Emptiness: The Spiritual Life in Buddhism and Christianity*, appeared in 1991[19]. In my book, I replied to all the leaders of the Kyoto School from the founder, Kitaro Nishida to Masao Abe. At relevant points, I brought in the positions of Chiara as I understood them from my work with Zanghì. In fact, I used to send my manuscript to him for his input. It was a work done in unity with him. Our argument was that there is an inner Trinitarian

16) Chiara Lubich, Unpublished Talk at Castel Gandolfo, December 20, 1999.
17) D.W. Mitchell, *The Laity and the Church*, «Pro Dialogo» 113 (2003), pp. 277-288.
18) Abe's essay is entitled: *Kenotic God and Dynamic Sunyata*, John B. Cobb and Christopher Ives, eds. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1990), pp. 3-65.
19) See footnote 3 above.

kenosis – an *ur-kenosis* – that is the basis for the *kenosis* of creation, redemption, and sanctification. This inner *kenosis* of the Trinity is necessary for the outer *kenosis* of God in creation. If it were emptied out, the foundation would be lost and also Christian hope would be lost. We would not have a transcendent God to be with for eternity.

Given my relation to Abe, he came to my university from 1991 to 1993, when he retired to Japan. My conversations with Abe began with discussions about Pseudo-Dionysius's notion of "dazzling darkness". Abe said that these words best describe the Zen experience of ultimate reality. The dazzling light of Nirvana is identified with the darkness of our suffering world. We discussed how this identity could be seen in Jesus Forsaken. The *kenosis* of God on the cross does not destroy the dazzling luminosity of God but identifies it with the universal suffering of humankind taken on by Jesus forsaken. This is the highpoint of kenotic love. With this conversation, our dialogue took a new turn. Abe expressed an interest in meeting the Focolare community where this kenotic reality is lived. He saw a similarity between his thought and that of Chiara, and also a similarity between the communal spiritualities of the Hisamatsu and Chiara.

In 1992, I introduced Abe to members of the Focolare Movement in Chicago, and later that year he received the Luminosa Prize for his work in dialogue. This is a prize given by the Focolare at their retreat center in the United States, named Luminosa, to a person who has made significant contributions to dialogue. While in Luminosa he was impressed by the life of the spirituality. Plans then began to be made to take Masao Abe and his wife Ikuko to go to Rome to meet Chiara and the pope. Abe also asked to meet with Cardinal Ratzinger. He said that the Catholic theologians he talked to were not in agreement about different issues and he wanted to know the true teaching of the Catholic Church. In March of 1993, the Abes traveled to Rome. Enzo and Natalia hosted them; however Chiara was in Switzerland undergoing medical treatment. Abe did meet with members of the Abba School, and he and his wife toured Loppiano. Upon their return to Rome, they went to the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith where Abe discussed his philosophy with Piero Coda and Jacques Servais, S.J. Abe was impressed at the openness of the church to his notion of *kenosis* while pointing out both similarities and differences. At the end of the meeting, Cardinal Ratzinger joined them. He had just returned from Hong Kong and wanted to tell Abe that he understood the historical significance of his interreligious work. This confirmation was of great importance to Abe.

The Pontifical Council for Interreligious dialogue took the Abes to a semiprivate audience with Pope John Paul II. I quote Abe about this encounter with the pope:

> "The pope warmly took my hands into his own and uttered a single Japanese word, Arigato. He went on to express his deep gratitude for my dialogical work as 'a fellow pilgrim'. When the pope turned to Ikuko, she told him that his presence was a great encouragement for her life. To this the pope said, in an overwhelming attitude of love, 'Let us carry the Cross together'. We were deeply moved by the Christian

spirituality manifested by the pope. Thus my visit to Rome was a landmark for my career in Buddhist-Christian dialogue.[20]

I would add that upon their return, the Abes said that when the pope spoke about carrying the cross together, he "entered the deepest part of our being". Abe also said that he found a "spiritual kinship" of family with the Focolare community in Rome, and from that time on he referred to himself as "a Buddhist friend" of the Focolare.

Finally, my experience on the Buddhist frontier expanded after the publication of my first book. I will mention just one example. The Monastic Interreligious Dialogue (MID) of the Benedictine tradition along with the Dalai Lama and other Buddhist and Christian monastics from around the world had a roundtable discussion of my book in 1993 at the Parliament of the World's Religions in Chicago. At that event, the Dalai Lama asked MID to host a longer dialogue at Gethsemani Abbey in Kentucky, U.S.A., the Trappist monastery of Thomas Merton who had been a good friend of the Dalai Lama. I was asked by MID to help them organize this week-long encounter, set the topics to be discussed, and to choose the Buddhists to attend. The Gethsemani Encounter took place in 1996 and I gave the opening address on "God, Creation and the Spiritual Life". In that address, I discussed the Chiara's views from Paradise '49. For example in talking about creation, I noted:

> "This creative formation is guided by the fact that all creation, from beginning to end, preexists in the infinite mind and loving heart of God [the Word]. God's creative and loving power continuously pours forth enabling the world to be in his love and to function in its freedom. This pouring forth of the creative Spirit of God takes place, our Scripture says, through the Word of God… so that all creation is inherently good and is a gift to be affirmed and loved… [A]ll beings are created in a single 'communion' of love… of 'being for others'… To realize this fact of our communion, or the unity of creation in God, is to reach maturity in the spiritual life".[21]

Concerning God, I again drew on Paradise '49:

> "The Father empties himself out in total self-giving love into the Son. The Son does not cling to this loving affirmation but empties it back into the Father with total self-giving. Both the Father and Son are fully 'in' the dynamic of this mutual love and unity which just is the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit does not cling to this mutual indwelling of the Father and Son, but returns all to the Father and Son. In this way, all

20) D.W. Mitchell ed., *Masao Abe: A Zen Life of Dialogue*, Charles E. Tuttle, Boston 1998, p. 381.
21) D.W. Mitchell and J.A. Wiseman, OSB eds., *The Gethsemani Encounter: A Diologue on the Spiritual Life by Buddhist and Christian Monastics*, Continuum Press, New York 1997, p. 29.

three abide in total non-obstructing freedom and mutual containment of indwelling".[22]

After I finished, the Dalai Lama, who was sitting on the Abbot's chair behind me, stood up and put his hands together over his head. This is the highest honor one can receive in Buddhism. Later, he told me that he greatly enjoyed my talk and that if God is "infinite love" then he could accept that understanding of God. After the event, I was asked to edit the proceedings and publish a book entitled, *The Gethsemani Encounter: A Dialogue on the Spiritual Life by Buddhist and Christian Monastics*.[23]

I would conclude with a final story about the Dalai Lama. At Gethsemani Abby, the dialogue took place in the Chapter Room. When we would go to or come from the Chapter Room, we would pass through the church. The Dalai Lama would always stop in the church and bow in reverence before the tabernacle. On the final day of the dialogue, when he was passing through the church for the last time, he bowed deeply before the tabernacle. Then as he approached the door of the church, he stopped, turned around and with a huge smile, waived goodbye at the tabernacle.

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22) *Ibid*., p. 31.
23) See footnote 15 above.