

JTRACES

“Others Do not Create Problems for Us; Others Make Us Aware of the Problems We Have”

INTERVIEW WITH JULIÁN CARRÓN

BY ÁNGEL L. FERNÁNDEZ RECUERO • PHOTOS BY LUPE DE LA VALLINA

JOT DOWN



Julián Carrón (Navaconcejo, 1950) completed his theology studies at the seminary of Madrid and was a student at L'École Biblique et Archéologique Française in Jerusalem. He was ordained a priest in 1975 and the following year received his license in Theology from the Comillas Pontifical University, with a specialty in Sacred Scripture. In 1984, he obtained his doctorate in Theology from the Theological Faculty of Northern Spain, in Burgos. He was a professor at the San Dámaso Institute of Theology, Religious Studies, and Catechetics and ordinary professor of New Testament Studies at the San Dámaso Faculty of Theology in Madrid.

Since 2005, he has been the President of the Fraternity of Communion and Liberation, the most important Catholic movement in Italy.

We meet up with Julián in the café at the Hotel de las Letras in Madrid, taking advantage of one of his quick trips to Spain. We speak about politics, reason, and science, and he explains the roots of the change that is taking place in Western society, with the Enlightenment as the key element. He also tells us how he lives Christianity in Communion and Liberation, and in what way this can be a key for our future. Julián is easy-going, friendly and clear, and he has a great power of conviction, even in front of a recalcitrant atheist like the one interviewing him.

In what sense is Western society facing an anthropological crisis?

We are seeing right in front of our eyes how certain pillars that we thought were immovable are crumbling. Let's think about immigrants, about the reaction of many people with respect to the phenomenon of refugees. Who would have imagined, only a decade ago, that we could put up walls

in Europe after having wanted for so many years to tear down the Berlin Wall. Let's think about the emptiness that dominates society, which can then be transformed, as we see, into terrorism and violence. Or we see how the United States and Europe react in front of the great challenges of our times. This situation generates insecurity and fear, as Bauman said.

Have values also crumbled? Is it a negative thing that these values crumble?

What are values? They are the qualities that make us better people. Freedom, generosity and solidarity are so precious and fundamental in our society. Values permit us to embrace the diversity of the other; they make our relationships with those who are different than us easier; they allow us to go out of our predefined schemes; in short, they make our lives more human, less hard.

How do we begin to build something new?

To build something new, the first thing is to understand what has happened, what is happening. This is not a crisis that compares to anything else that has struck Europe in the last few centuries; we are in front of a crisis that Pope Francis calls "a change of epoch." What is the difference with respect to other historical moments? This is a change that has to do with every level of human life, from the relationship of parents with their children or teachers with their students, to our relationship with migrants, to international relations. It seems to me that we are at the end of the world that was born with the Enlightenment. Quickly retracing history, Europe had known a religious unity as a consequence of the Christian presence; this religious unity went up in the air with the Protestant Reformation. When Europeans were tired of fighting each other for religious reasons, in the so-called "wars of religion," they needed to found a society on new grounds. If we no longer share religion, what do we still have in common that will allow us to live together? Reason, obviously. So what did the men of the Enlightenment think? Let us create a religion within the limits of reason,

as Kant says. Pope-emeritus Benedict XVI synthesizes this ingenious intuition of the Enlightenment very well. During the Enlightenment, in the epoch of the “clash of the confessions,” they sought to save the essential values (of life: the person, freedom, reason) by founding them on “an evidence that rendered them independent of the various philosophies and confessions.” In this way they wanted to ensure “the foundation of life together, and, more generally, the foundation of humanity.” At that time, it seemed possible because “the great basic conviction created by Christianity for the most part remained and seemed undeniable.” The common recognition of these values permitted them to overcome the division and conflict of the clash between religions.

What has happened since, from the Enlightenment till today?

This is the problem. Have these convictions resisted the changes of history? Pope Benedict, who is not a skeptic, affirms: “The search for a reassuring certainty, that could remain unchallenged above all of our differences, has failed.” If we don’t understand that this attempt has failed, we do not understand the nature of this crisis and its depth. That which is crumbling before our eyes is that which has sustained our life together in recent centuries, in the midst of all our challenges. I was very struck by the fact that the day after the election of Trump, the ex-director of *la Repubblica*, one of the most important daily newspapers in Italy, Ezio Mauro, wrote: “We thought that democracy would be the only surviving religion. Nevertheless, the rejection of the Arab Spring and the aggression of Islamist jihadism have made us understand that the thing to which we had attributed a universal value [democracy] has a perimeter and a limit that are exclusively Western.” The same thing is put forth

by another relevant figure of our time, Zygmunt Bauman: “I think that we are witnessing the thorough overturning of the principles of ‘democracy,’ which we thought were untouchable.” What does this mean? That the attempt to save the values of human life, which we all recognize, independently of the origin that generated them, has failed. Therefore the current crisis is not like other crises we have faced. We went through two World Wars, the Industrial Revolution, the technological revolution, and the foundations of this Enlightenment

conception of our life together have been able to stand firm in the midst of these changes. Today we are witnessing their collapse. The challenge we face now is to find new grounds for our life together.

Do the Arab and other cultures need to pass through this Enlightenment phase in order to understand democracy the way we understand it, and recognize its true value?

I am impressed by the loyalty with which Pope-emeritus Benedict XVI recognized that when Christianity was

transformed, against its nature, into a state religion, it was to the credit of the Enlightenment to re-propose the original values of Christianity and restore reason to its proper role. Other religions and cultures are called to make this journey that Christianity and Western culture have made, albeit in their own way. The tensions that many Arab countries are experiencing demonstrate the difficulty of this journey.

In your book, *Disarming Beauty*, you connect terrorism in Europe to the great emptiness that reigns in many young people. How are these two things connected?

For me, it has been very interesting to read some of the great French intellectuals who explain this. We

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who are on the outside can think that what happened is simply a problem of foreign religious extremism. Nevertheless, many young people who committed these acts were born in France—they are second or third-generation French—they had received their education in France as citizens of the Republic. Still, they came to a point where they could not find in French society something that was more interesting than violence. This should make us think. What were their lives like that this violence could develop? And this does not happen only, as some analysts insist on maintaining, with Muslims: some of these people have parents who are French, or Italian, or Spanish, and they leave to join ISIS. The Muslim parents of these kids have had the same difficulty that many Christian parents and children have, that is, they haven't been successful in passing on their religion in an attractive way. It is not only their problem. Secularization has resulted in the inability of Christians in the West to transmit Christian faith in an attractive way. It has happened to us and to them, and from this same emptiness, a fascination with terrorism can be born. Either people find something that makes life worth living, or, if they don't find it, they abandon themselves to extremism.

What is this concept of “disarming beauty” (other than a wonderful title for a book)

The title of the book came as a response to these terrorist attacks. When they are understood with the depth with which we spoke about them, these gestures of terror are a challenge for the whole of Western society. I asked myself if, when these people come to Europe, where theoretically they encounter a Christian culture and a Christian presence, do we Christians have anything to offer them. With the expression “disarming beauty” I wanted to say: “We, Christians, do we believe in the fascination that the disarming beauty of the faith can exercise?” With the phrase “disarming beauty,” I propose a Christian presence that would be sufficiently attractive so as to make life more interesting for everyone.

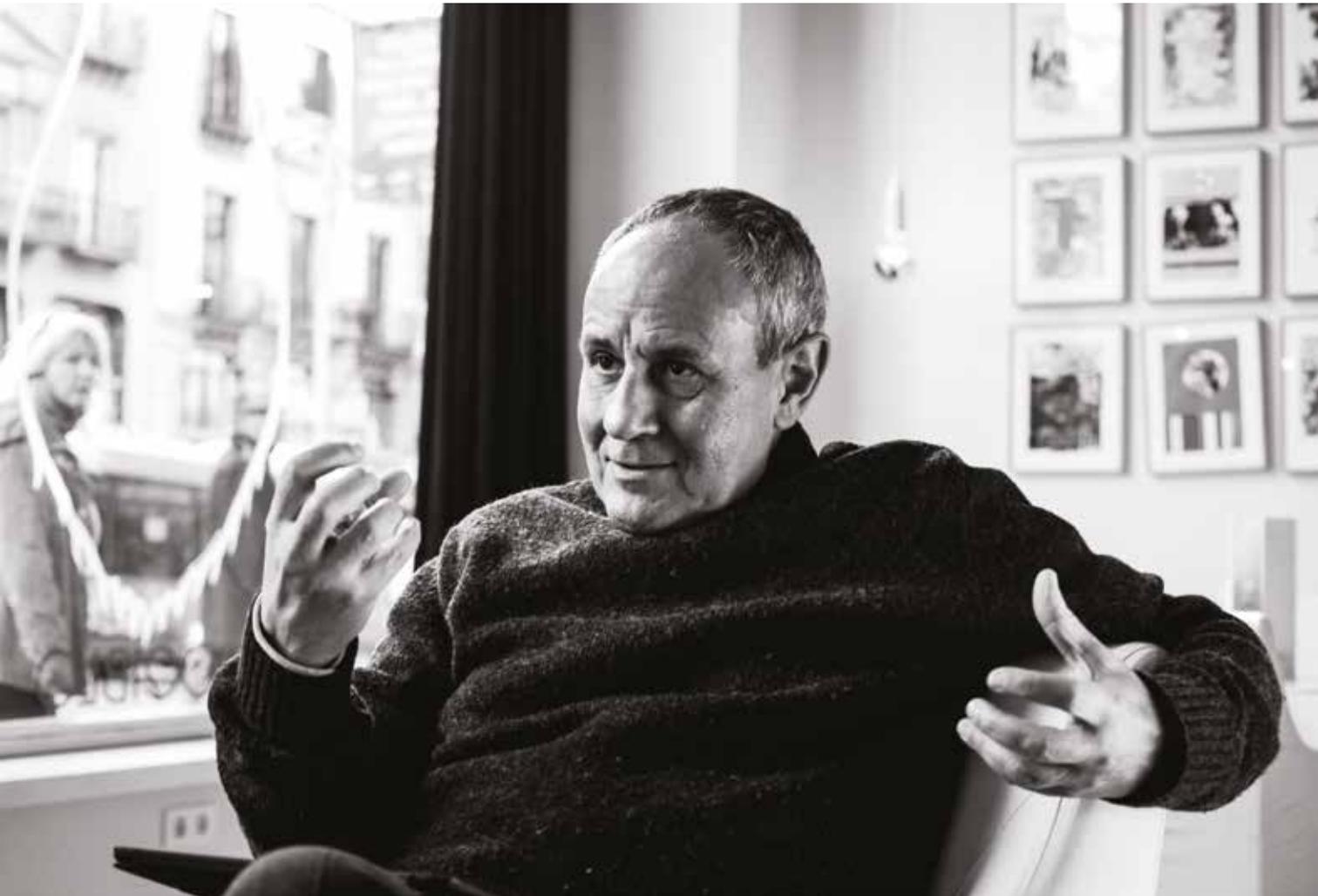
Does Communion and Liberation have an experience of the power of this “disarming beauty”?

Yes. In reality, our Movement was born as an attempt to respond to a widespread indifference to the faith. Luigi Giussani perceived it in the high school students of Milan in the early 1950s. Many of them, who had abandoned the faith, felt themselves challenged by the attractiveness with which he communicated Christianity, as a proposal to reason and to freedom. Since then, many have remained fascinated. And we see the power of the fascination of this beauty in our current circumstances. I can think of so many people who meet us in the university or in their workplaces, when they run into the phenomenon of a distinct humanity that has been born of faith. I think of the charitable works with which we try to respond to the educational needs of kids who are having difficulty in school, offering them help in the afternoons, with the collaboration of many teachers who freely give of their time. When they feel accompanied, many of them—including many Muslims—have the possibility to encounter a place that changes their lives. Their lives don't change through moral exhortation. They have to see that somebody helps them, that somebody cares about them, that somebody gives them an opportunity to learn. And then they become part of something, they have stronger relationships. This makes possible what seemed impossible, because these kids are from that same second generation that generates so much violence. The problem is what they encounter when they come to live among us.

Do you believe in the capacity of faith to attract those young people who cannot find meaning in their lives?

Yes, provided that Christianity is presented in its true, original nature—because this is the second fundamental question: What is Christianity? Many times what we understand as Christianity is nothing but a series of ethical rules, or some sentimental aspects, or a religious formalism that is not capable of fascinating or attracting anyone. I know people who haven't had any relationship

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to faith in their family or in their tradition, and when they come in contact with a living Christianity, they have no problem opening themselves to the faith, giving into the desire not to lose the beauty that they are living.

Our generation has perceived the public presence of the Church in Spain as linked, for all practical purposes, to fights over sexual morality and the right to educate children. Why has what should be a universal announcement been reduced to this form? What does the Church need in order to be a different presence?

It is the question that the English poet T.S. Eliot asked years ago: “Has the Church failed mankind or has mankind failed the Church?” Only one thing is needed for the Church to have a different presence: that Christians make use of this circumstance—because this crisis is an opportunity—to discover what the nature of Christianity is. Christianity is, in the first place, the recognition of God who became man, and who remains present in history through the changed lives of those who follow Him.

How is this communicated?

Here is the key point. Those who met Jesus were so surprised by what happened when they were with him that they exclaimed: “We have never seen anything like this.” They experienced such a fascination that they followed after Him. A religious sister told me that, while she was hospitalized, she saw among the nurses one who was distinct. She started to investigate and found out that this nurse was living a particular Christian experience. The same thing happened a week later with a doctor that caught her attention. This discovery led her to ask them to help her run a hospital that she was building in Ethiopia. And she justified her request saying that she wanted

the Ethiopians to be able to encounter people who communicate the newness of life that is born of faith through the way they go about their work. If it is not like this, if it doesn’t happen just like at the beginning, Christianity will interest no one.

Christianity as an experience instead of as an ideology...

This is clear. Only a Christianity that is an experience can be transmitted today. The founder of our movement, Father Luigi Giussani, always insisted that the nature of Christianity is an event. Kant told us that “one can calmly recognize that if the Gospel had not taught universal ethical laws—the values about which we spoke—in their integral purity, reason would not have known them in their fullness. But, now that they exist, each one can be convinced of their validity by reason alone.” Like many others in the Enlightenment, Kant acknowledged the educative and pedagogical work done by the Church in order to transmit these values. But, once they have been recognized, men no

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longer need to belong to the Church in order to keep them alive. Reason suffices in order to recognize their validity. What is happening today in front of our eyes? We see that reason no longer suffices by itself to maintain these values in a living way. When the values that we knew through an historical fact were separated from their origin, they were changed into an ideology. This is the failure that we are facing. Just like when we turn off the heater, and it stays warm for a little while. But, disconnected from the source of its energy, the warmth does not last, and sooner or later the entire house gets cold.

I’ll start from your words: “Christian faith not only does not fear the full use of reason, but rather demands it.” Does this reason that you

invoke continue to be subject to a morality established 2,000 years ago?

The faith is not subject to anything but the recognition of the attraction that another person exercises on me. Just like when someone falls in love. When someone falls in love, he begins to give space to the existence of another person, because he perceives this other as decisive; when one falls in love, he begins to change his individualistic ideas. I begin to have this other person present in the way I think about my time, my money, the way I use the things I have. That is, an ethic is the consequence of an event that happens in my life. No one says: “I fell in love and unfortunately now I have to go out with the girl with whom I fell in love.” To go out with this girl that I love is the normal ethical consequence of an event. If I have no desire to go out with her...that means I probably am not in love with her! No imposition will have the same strength of conviction as the event of falling in love. The same thing happens with Christianity. Christianity is an event of this caliber. Those who encountered Jesus were surprised when they saw themselves living their daily life in a different way. It is a new way of living ordinary things.

And don't science and art have the same, or even greater, attraction as faith in giving meaning to life? Are they compatible?

Science and art express, each in its own way, the desire of man to enter into the depths of reality. Rightly, therefore, the highest point of scientific investigation and of art is the sense of mystery, an access to something that in the final analysis cannot be conquered. It has always impressed me that a scientist like Einstein would say that the most beautiful experience that I can have is the experience of mystery. It is the fundamental emotion that is en-

countered at the heart of true art and true science. Whoever has not known it and does not ask about it, whoever does not marvel, is like a dead man, and his eyes are darkened. Therefore, art and science have an immense value. The problem is when life presses on us with all its demands for meaning. This is where one has to see whether science and art have the capacity to respond to these demands, to illuminate a painful circumstance, to give me the energy to live and not to despair. Christianity is the announcement that the true depth of reality has become an event in the life of man.

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I am thinking about the great challenges in contemporary science, like genetics, artificial intelligence or our understanding of the mechanics of the brain, and all I see on the part of the religions is opposition to their development...

I don't think that religion as such has objections; the issue is that there are problems that have to do with who man is, with his dignity, etc. It has to do with ethical problems that we all face. For example, when

the possibility is raised of creating a robot that can have a certain amount of autonomy, we all throw our hands up, because this could unleash effects over which we have no control; it therefore becomes a problem that has to do with life and with the type of society we want to create.

The Church and contemporary art are two beauties that seem totally estranged and that only interact in a conflictual way. How can the Church and contemporary art meet each other again?

I don't think the Church has any mistrust of beauty. A work of art has the power to make our human experience vibrate. A song, a poem, a painting awaken in us a nostalgia and a joy that we would not know in any other way. Therefore faith and art

are not only not incompatible, but a taste for beauty is something that belongs to the man of faith, the man who is aware of himself. As Saint Thomas Aquinas said: “Beauty is the splendor of truth.” Art is the search, not guaranteed *a priori*, for beauty and it has need of men who can let themselves be questioned by the truth. It is this tension toward truth that qualifies the work of art, regardless of the outcome, which can be debatable.

Not only are they not against each other, but historically there have been times in which the Church has inspired incredible works of art, even by artists who did not have faith, and nevertheless, that does not happen so much these days. Why is this dialogue lacking? How can the Church return to this?

The fact that historically it has not been like this, just thinking of the enormous cultural patrimony of the Church, shows that there is no opposition in principle between Christian faith and the arts. We can think of Gaudí and his Sagrada Família. It may be the case that sometimes the recognition of one or another artistic expression can be difficult. I cannot speak generically for the whole Church. We belong to a Movement where Giussani always invited us to read poetry, to listen to music, to be enthusiastic about great artists like Giotto or Caravaggio. For example, he proposed that we read Leopardi, which was something of a scandal for a certain clerical mentality. Giussani began to learn his poetry by heart when he was thirteen years old, and for a whole year he did nothing but read Leopardi. For him, they were the form of relationship and of familiarity with the mystery.

What freedom, what security must one have in what he holds, in order to enter into dialogue, even with someone that is completely alien to him?

Freedom in dialogue comes from the esteem one has for the human experience that each person lives. This esteem permits one to enter into relationship with the richness of the experience of another person, in order to enrich his own perspective. Why are the two of us speaking? Because we are interested in knowing each other, in exchanging the perspective with which we face the challenges of life, regardless of the responses we would offer to those who are reading this. We are interested in each other. The other is a good. We can say with Terence: “Nothing

human is foreign to us.” And when one has this certainty, he has no problem entering into dialogue.

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Zygmunt Bauman said that in today’s world barriers and walls are not useful. Do you share his opinion?

I find Bauman’s observation very interesting with respect to the challenge of immigration. We can build all the walls we want and try to send everyone back where they came from, and when we’ve sent away everyone we don’t like, we will begin to realize that we still have not laid the foundation for facing our problems. The emptiness that the immigrant encounters when he arrives here was not created by him. The other makes us aware of the fact that our society has nothing attractive to offer as an alternative to terrorism. But this doesn’t just happen today with what we call Islamic terrorism. In Italy, as also in Spain, we have seen years of terrorism, that have generated so much violence, which had nothing to do with Islamic terrorism. The connection we often make (between terrorism and religion) is very superficial.

One of the effects of terrorism is that the other becomes a threat, with the advent of the idea of “post-truth” and the necessary complicity of the

media. How do we break out of this fallacy?

That fallacy is only broken if one does not respond to the threat of the other with the same coin. I believe that the other is a good, because regardless of whether or not you agree with his ideas, or with how he perceives you, the other always helps me to mature. Many times I have come home wounded because the things another person said bothered me, and the next day I woke up with those things, and I couldn't read the newspaper or listen to a friend or read something interesting without feeling the pain of that wound.

This does not mean that the other person was right. Sometimes he wouldn't be right, but that was not the issue. His provocation helped me to be awake, to be attentive, to have open questions with which I could look for answers that otherwise would have passed by totally unnoticed. And in that sense, every situation like this has been a good for me. And this does not mean that it's all a bed of roses, all honeyed, but that the relationship with the other is always a dramatic relationship, even with the people you love.

Why? Because they challenge me, because they are not just an extension of myself: they are an other, and otherness always provokes you. A crisis, Hannah Arendt says, always causes us to return to the questions, and therefore can be an occasion of growth.

Are you more on the side of Hobbes or of Rousseau?

It is difficult to decide, because it seems to me that both of them defend real, but incomplete, aspects of the human experience. Historical man, that is, each one of us, carries within himself a wound. I like the image of a child in the arms of his mother, with that openness, that curiosity, that desire to stay close to his parents. The problem is that the child thereafter lives in a social context that often does not allow this curiosity

to continue. Owing to the wounds of our evil, of our problems and of our incomprehension, of the evil done by others, suspicions are born. I remember years ago when I went camping with a group of kids at a residence set up by the City of Madrid, a place that welcomed kids that had experienced problems with their families. The kid who had arrived most recently hit his mother. I remember the difficulty the teachers had in entering into relationship with them, because the relation of trust with which they were born had

already been perverted. They had experienced so much suffering that they were unable to respond to the generous attention of others, and the only thing they could do was defend themselves. That position was not natural to them; it had taken over as a result of a disturbance in the relation of these kids with reality. When one is wounded, he becomes defensive. The question then is finding a place that heals these wounds.

We Europeans are heirs of Christianity and its values.

Could the Christian “goodness” championed by the left, be the Achilles heel of our Western society in the face of the geopolitical problems that we have?

It depends on exactly what one means by Christian “goodness.” When I was presenting the book *Disarming Beauty* in Brazil, I was accompanied by a judge, who told me that years ago, he had to judge a person for a crime; he condemned him, and when he gave the sentence, this person said: “Look, your honor, I am not prepared to go to jail.” And the judge told him: “I am sorry; nobody is prepared to go to jail. You have committed a crime and if you do not make an appeal, you have to go to jail.” To which he responded: “I do not deny the crime nor dispute the sentence, but

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I have such a mess in my family that, if I do not arrange things before going to jail, it will get even worse. If you give me ten days, I can arrange a few things in my family, and afterwards I will serve my sentence.” The judge was shocked and told him: “Seeing the sincerity of your position, I will give you thirty days.” At the end of those thirty days, the condemned man came before the judge. The judge was so amazed that, instead of sending him to the police to be handcuffed and thrown in jail, he gave him the address of the jail so he could get there on his own and serve his sentence. We can think that this way of acting is naïve, but, in fact, in Brazil there is a system of jails where there are no police. We cannot think that this is naïve: these jails have lowered the percentage of second offenses from 80%, which is where the normal jails are, to 15%, and all because of the fact that the heart of man is challenged, just like this judge did. No one believes this, but the data are there. This system is so valued that in the recent peace accord signed between the Government of Columbia and the guerillas, in which they have to reintegrate thousands of terrorists (because, if not, there would not be peace in Columbia for centuries), the system of jails they adopted is this one. This does not mean that this type of center would be valid in every case. When you give yourself in trust, the other can deceive you; but if we do not begin to move like this, we cannot generate a new reality, a new society, a distinct form of relating to each other; we will always be enclosed in our system, and then it will be impossible to change anything. Therefore, I understand that for many Christianity appears to be something naïve. We have to know if we can begin to look at people in another way, so that people can begin to think that it is possible to live in a different way, that a totally unique way of being in reality is possible.

The fact that God strips Himself of His power as God and becomes a human being who can be misunderstood, despised, this is something that challenges human reason.

“One does not try to escape from love,” responded one of the inmates, who had tried to flee from every other jail, to a judge who asked him why he didn’t try to escape from his present jail; because it was in that jail that he encountered a different gaze on his life.

When we interviewed Javier Prades, he told us that Christianity is the most persecuted religion on the planet. To what can we attribute that?

I imagine that the causes are very distinct. Sometimes we Christians have committed errors and for that reason a certain animosity can be justified. But it seems to me that assigning persecution to the errors of Christians does not sufficiently explain the problem, because in the majority of cases, the type of violence that is unleashed is suffered by innocent people. To put a bomb in a church full of people who are completely defenseless or to kill a French priest because he is celebrating a Mass cannot simply be motivated by the errors committed by Christians. The appearance of God made man, unarmed (to save men), the fact that God strips Himself of His power as God and becomes a human being who can be misunderstood, despised and crucified, this is something that challenges human reason. As a consequence, a presence like this can provoke a violent reaction in someone who does not want to accept the challenge that Christianity makes to history, just like with Christ. Why? Because Christianity claims to save our life, not because it wants to impose itself with violence, but because it promises something that corresponds so much to what the human heart desires that a person is really affected by it; and so, either one is grateful for having encountered this response, or an enormous violence is created, because a person rejects it and has

to justify in some way the rejection of that which provoked him.

Do we need to return to a confessional State or a Europe based on Christian laws?

I think that the Church has made a huge journey, from the time of Constantine up to the Second Vatican Council, which allowed her to become more and more aware that the only way to communicate the Christian faith is through freedom. Not because the Church has said, “Since we haven’t been able to convince men of the truth of Christianity, at least we can defend religious freedom,” but because the Church has gone deeper into the nature of truth. If you’ll let me, I want to cite an affirmation from Vatican II, which is fundamental to our understanding of this: “The truth cannot impose itself except by virtue of its own truth.” That is, the truth does not need any other external support except the fascination of the truth, the attraction of the truth. Therefore, the great challenge before the Church today is not to return to a confessional State, but to witness the faith in such a way that it can challenge man’s reason and freedom. This is how Christianity began. Reason and freedom are decisive for Christianity because Jesus did not want people to believe in Him in a gullible, naïve or forced way. Christian faith requires the use of reason and freedom. Without those, it will not be the least bit interesting. Therefore, only in a free space will Christian faith be able to interest men today, because for modern man (and in this the Enlightenment has played a foundational role), there is no greater good than freedom. No one today can even think of proposing something or imposing something that goes against freedom.

When we interviewed Juan Manuel de Prada,

he told us, “The one holding the frying pan by the handle is the one who is allowed the luxury of molding reality according to his ideological premises.” How can the Church overcome the temptation of hegemony, of using power to affirm the faith?

The temptation of hegemony can only be overcome by going deeper into the nature of faith, not as a consequence of a new strategy to convince the other. There is no other way. “The truth cannot impose itself except by virtue of its own truth.”

Christianity first spread in the Roman Empire under persecution, without any type of hegemony, and few periods in the Church’s history have been so missionary, so capable of spreading the faith. Therefore, Christianity is right at home in a free space, because then we Christians cannot support ourselves with any type of power, but only with the beauty of what we live.

Tell us what Communion and Liberation is and how it is different than other movements.

Communion and Liberation is a movement that was born in Milan in the 1950s, when Christianity was triumphant, when all the great Christian institutions and associations were full of people. Luigi Giussani, our founder, began to see that high school students, who came from Christian families, who had received First Communion, who participated in the activities of the parish, and who had been confirmed, often came to school, in the majority of cases, without faith. He realized that this could not be attributed simply to a disinterest in the faith, but to the fact that none of these kids had been presented the faith in a way that showed its relation to the interests of their lives. He wanted to show from the very beginning the pertinence of the faith to the demands of life, to the real problems of life. And this

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This, simply, is Christianity:
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but to help us face our problems.



caused many of those students to begin to come to grips with the faith in a new way, despite having already decided that it didn't interest them. Since then, all that Giussani did in the movement as a whole was offer to everyone we met during all these years the possibility to perceive the human advantage of faith, in order to face the problems of daily life that we all have. Christianity is really so simple: Christ came, not to complicate life, but to help us face our problems and give us a companionship without which everything would become much more complicated.

How does one go from Navaconcejo, in Extremadura, to where you are now?

It is a mystery; it is the last thing I would have thought could happen. When Giussani began to say that the guidance of the Movement would have to be a friendship between Italy and Spain, no one thought that anything like this would happen, not even us. We saw such a great disproportion between the minuscule community in Spain and the great dimensions of the Movement in Italy, that something like this didn't even occur to anyone. After we met, Giussani began to insist that I lend a hand, and I, of course, always offered him my availability. In the end, he brought me to Milan.

Did the attraction or interest in Communion and Liberation come to you through your studies, because you were an expert in Sacred Scripture, or was it through a personal experience?

It was a personal experience. When I was ordained, I was sent to a small town near Madrid. There, I saw how the population was growing in the small towns around Madrid, with the problem of internal immigration, the imbalances, the difficulties, etc. I saw that some of the things I

had received, and to which I had kindly adhered during my years in seminary, were not sufficient for facing the challenges that were in front of me. This is what made me get interested in the Movement: it made a proposal for living Christian life in which it wasn't necessary to censure anything that happened; a way of being in reality in which I wanted to participate. The first sign that there was a change was in the way I taught, the way in which I stayed with the students in the religion class I taught in the high school. What I experienced when I first met the Movement permitted me to challenge those students. I saw that what had begun to happen to me could be interesting also for others.

In what way is the Christian faith lived today in CL?

Faith, as Giussani says, is the recognition of the presence of Christ here and now, of His presence in a human sign. And the path that Giussani proposes is fundamentally what he called the personalization of the faith. The only possibility for faith to be seen as useful is that each

one can compare it with his life, that is, that life, its difficulties, its circumstances, which none of us are spared, can begin to be lived with a dignity, with a gratitude, and with a light that it did not have before. Therefore, what we attempt is to accompany each other in this process of maturation, so that the people who meet us in the environments where we are, at work, in the family, in our friendships, or in the charitable work that we do, can realize that today Christian faith is lived “in the open air.”

The individual and his realization have marked the human progress of Western society. How is a total faithfulness and communion with the Catholic Church and her pastors compatible with progress?



The first sign that there was a change was in the way I taught, the way I stayed with the students in the religion class I taught in school.

A few days ago, I was at a meeting with a large group of Italian university students, and a person asked me a similar question: “Affirming Christ is the most important thing, but doesn’t that disqualify reality or make it less interesting?” I simply answered him with another question: “Have you ever been in love?” He responded: “Yes,” and I said: “And, when you fell in love, did reality become more or less interesting?” He answered immediately: “Things were much more attractive!” Christianity introduces into our lives an attraction that causes everything to become more interesting, including human progress. You are aware of the fact that you are in love. Every fact, every circumstance, even the most banal, for example, making dinner for the person you love, becomes an event. Giussani loved to repeat this phrase of Romano Guardini: “In the experience of a great love, all that happens becomes an event inside that love.” Therefore, within the story of a great love, which Christianity is, everything acquires a relevance that otherwise it would not have. We see it in the experience of human love: when love becomes clouded in people’s lives, what before was a possibility to say: “How I love you!,” through the gesture of cooking dinner, becomes only an obligation, or a weight to complain about. “While you go to work, I have to stay here cooking for you...” That gesture loses all the density of which before it was full.

How has CL understood desire within the Christian tradition?

I just finished preaching a retreat to 4,000 university students with the title “To You Is Directed All My Desire.” To whom can we say this? To whom can I direct all my desire? Because, for most people, desire is something that has to be mastered or controlled. And not only now: before Christian-

ity, in the classical world, *hybris*, our disproportion, was something dangerous, because to have a desire beyond one’s limits could lead to insanity. Therefore, the decisive issue was to master desire, to reduce it and keep it within limits. Moderation was a virtue. On the contrary, the only one who is not afraid to face the desire of man with all its potency is the Christian. Thanks to the encounter with Christ, the Christian is not afraid of the immensity of human desire, unlike what happened in Antiquity. Why? Because Christ

embraces the whole of desire. It is only in this embrace that our desire is revealed in all its power and depth. A passage from the Gospel that Giussani constantly quoted says: “What would it profit a man if he gain the whole world, and then lose himself?” We have interpreted this phrase many times in a moralistic way, as if it indicated the top of what Jesus demands, when in reality it is the most moving gesture of Christ who sees and embraces the human heart in all its profundity: “Look, your heart is so big that only the Mystery

made flesh can answer it.”

When I hear you speak about falling in love, about love, I want to know if you have ever been in love.

Although I entered seminary when I was a kid, I have been in love. But because of the awareness I had of desire and the experience I had of Christ, where I found an affective fullness that no other thing gave me, I could channel and face my desire, without censuring it or sublimating it, but challenging it. If I had not had this personal experience, I would not be able to speak to university kids in this way, proposing an entire weekend centered on desire, pushing them not to reduce their desires, not to conform to the crumbs they

Is there something that lives up to the nature of desire? This is the challenge that our society faces. It had it already before Christ, it had it after Christ, and it will have it in the future.

are often given. Because the problem is this: How does our society answer the desire of an adolescent? Most of the time by giving them things that cannot interest them for long. It is normal that when you are little, you think that what the King gives you is all that you want. But after a while, we realize that the house is full of dolls and toys that no longer interest us. Later on, we can change out these toys for phones, for new gadgets, and then even for other people... but the problem is if there is something that lives up to the nature of desire. This is the challenge that our society faces. It had it already before Christ, it had it after Christ, and it will have it in the future.

CL defines itself as a Christian, and not just a Catholic, movement. This does not only happen in CL, because everywhere, when one wants to speak about the beautiful side of religion, one speaks about Christians, never about Catholics. Why do people use this term Christian instead of Catholic?

It is certainly not because of any desire to separate ourselves from Catholicism, because if we have shown anything during the years of our existence, it is a total bond with the Pope and with the Catholic Church. There can be no doubt about this. When we speak about and insist on using the word Christianity, it is not in order to separate ourselves from Catholicism, but to return to the natural origin of Christianity, which is “Catholic” by definition, that is, universal, for all.

Is the “liberation” of Communion and Liberation the same thing that liberation theology speaks about?

The question is which kind of liberation responds to all of man’s hopes. Evidently, this kind of liberation is wider and deeper than material or eco-

nomical liberation; it affects the totality of man’s life. This is revealed in experience. Therefore, in order to understand, we have to start from experience, from when we felt free. And you feel free when a desire that you have is fulfilled. If you have a child who wants to go to a party and you say no, his freedom feels crushed; instead, if you say yes, he is thrilled because his desire can be fulfilled. The problem of freedom is that man doesn’t just want to go to a party, but wants to be free, wants to see his immense desire fulfilled in every mo-

ment of his life, in daily life, in his life besieged by routine. What makes liberation possible, so that I don’t end up, as Eliot says, losing the life in living? Some people think it is the liberation from poverty. This is, clearly, part of the response. But it is not enough. How many people do we know who have their fundamental necessities satisfied and still are not happy? The problem is whether or not you find something in life that satisfies your desire to such an extent that it frees you from everything else. Liberation is communion

with Christ, which has become something we can experience with Christ present in the Christian community, which, when lived authentically, proposes itself to the world as a real factor of humanization.

Can one have freedom by not having any bonds?

No. Although sometimes we may think this is possible, with time we discover that having no bonds is not enough to be free. These days, we have divested ourselves of every chain, but people are not more satisfied because of it. People begin to realize that in order to be free, it is not enough to have no constrictions. We need something for which it is worth using our freedom. It has to do with finding some motive for which it is worth mov-

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ing, involving yourself with someone or something. If they cannot find this, people begin to fear their freedom. It is interesting to see how Kafka already said this: “Men are afraid of freedom and responsibility. So they prefer to hide behind the prison bars which they build around themselves.” Bauman also said that this fear of freedom is what defines our society now, as we see in front of the immigrants. Why? Because our interpersonal relationships have been lost and this has left man even more defenseless. And this generates fear. So, what makes it possible to restore and rebuild confidence in relationships, so that we can begin to live a more human life again? This is the challenge that presents itself today.

In *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis says that we are immersed in an economy that kills and excludes. Do we need economic models that are more social and based on solidarity?

Certainly. We need a more human economy, an economy that responds better to the common good. Why are the common good, ecology, solidarity so important? Because each person contributes in generating the type of humanity and society that we want. For many years, we were indifferent about the countries of the Third World. Now that there are so many problems and we begin to see that they pose a risk, we realize that it would have been more adequate and we would have lost far fewer lives if we had shared with them, created riches in their countries, instead of just harvesting all their resources. If we would have collaborated with their development and generated a sustainable society, we wouldn't be trying to build walls now.

Pope Francis has met with internal resistance to his proposal which are a bit progressive, and

when I read your book [*Disarming Beauty*], I thought that you have also encountered this resistance in your own movement. Is that true?

In some cases, yes. The Pope has represented and represents a revolution. In a reality of our size, not everyone has reacted with the same immediacy, as we see in the life of the whole Church. We are not any different. Everything depends, in my opinion, on what we said at the beginning: if we understand the nature of the challenge. One can only understand Pope Francis if he under-

stands the nature of the challenge we are facing. If we don't understand this, we think it's only a question of emphasis, of the fact that the Pope is Latin American, and we stay on the surface.

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How is the relationship between Pope Francis and CL?

Very good. We had the opportunity to meet with him a few years ago. He just sent us a letter.

What significance does this letter have for you?

This letter is a gesture of tenderness from the Pope, who makes it clear that he follows us closely. The Pope told me, in front of everyone, that for him, reading Giussani when he was Archbishop of Buenos Aires, was a help. He has a great sympathy with our way of perceiving Christianity as an encounter, as an event. What is more, this sympathy is precisely at the origin, in his specific way of perceiving reality. On the other hand, the Pope accompanies us on the path that we must walk, inviting us constantly to return to the origin, so that the Movement can give the contribution for which the Holy Spirit raised up this charism in the Church.

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