

HOPE FOR SYRIA

Even in the face of war it is possible to stay and build. Here, the witness to what sustains life in a land disfigured by violence.

Children inside St. Paul's Parish in Damascus, Syria.

CHRISTMAS FOR BELIEVERS: ACTS OF HUMAN KINDNESS THAT MOVE HEARTS

This issue's editorial is the article by the President of the Communion and Liberation Fraternity, published in the Italian daily, Il Corriere della Sera, on December 23rd.

BY JULIÁN CARRÓN

Dear Editor: It's becoming more and more common for people to be amazed by simple, human gestures that we hardly pay attention to anymore, since to us they are so automatic and habitual. At a hospitality center for refugees, a volunteer calls a Pakistani refugee by name, and when asked what kind of pasta he'd like and if he wants meat or fish, the man is moved to the point of tears.

A girl sends a text to ask a Bulgarian man she recently met, "How are you?" and he's amazed that someone he hardly knows cares how he's doing. I could go on forever with stories like this. They may be simple actions like those described above, or more heroic ones, like the Germans and Austrians who rushed to welcome refugees arriving at the border, or the many people working on the Italian coast to help those arriving by boat each day. It seems like nothing compared to the enormity of the problem, but the effect of these actions is as earth-shattering to the recipients as it is insignificant and taken for granted in the eyes of we who see them happen.

Is a simple act of politeness enough to explain their surprise? Looking at a refugee this way, or reaching out to a stranger as described, requires something that has almost disappeared from our consciousness. Continuing to cry, the refugee spoke about the years he spent in another part of the world, where his employer never called him by name and all that eased his hunger was a bowl of rice. And now someone is calling him by name and even asking him what he'd like to eat.

For far too long, we've lost the awareness of the origin of this gaze on humanity, and this so often can lead to us being unfamiliar with the actions inspired by it. We need the other who, through his expression of wonder, gives us back the awareness of our history and what we bring to world. What generated this way of looking at others, of relating to them with dignity that awakens such amazement? It's certainly not because we are "better" than others. We simply belong to a history that began with the ancient people of Israel; a history that generated us, helping us to perceive the breadth of God's compassion for us, far beyond our own capacities, as the prophet Isaiah proclaims.


"Raise a glad cry, you barren one who did not bear, break forth in jubilant song, you who were not in labor." A God who, despite all of our mistakes, tirelessly repeats, "The shame of your youth you shall forget, the reproach of your widowhood no longer remember." Who doesn't want to be looked at this way? "For a brief moment I abandoned you, but with great tenderness I will take you back. In an outburst of wrath, for a moment I hid my face from you; but with enduring love I take pity on you" (*Isaiah 54:1,4,7-8*). This love and passion is for *your* life, not for the life humanity in general, but for *yours*. These words are said for my life, as Pope Francis reminds us: "For you, for each of you, and for me. It is a love which is powerful and real. It is a love which heals, forgives, raises up and shows concern" (July 10, 2015).

Our one possibility of not living in fear, of not being defined by our shame or our barrenness can only be grounded in our growing awareness that, “Though the mountains leave their place and the hills be shaken, My love shall never leave you nor my covenant of peace be shaken, says the Lord, who has mercy on you” (*Is* 54,10).

Do we realize that what’s behind these apparently simple actions is this history of God’s preference for us? It was this preference, experienced in being freed from Egypt, that allowed the people of Israel to treat foreigners in a way that was so unusual for that time period. “So you too must befriend the alien, for you were once aliens yourselves in the land of Egypt” (*Dt* 10:19). The culmination of that preference was when the Word became flesh; He came to dwell among us and now, through the Church, generates men and women who look at others dominated by concern for their destiny. Without the awareness of this gaze and its predilection for me and for you, there is no Christmas! We would be left with an empty ritual, like the many things we do that bring us no joy.

Christmas would no longer be this origin happening again, this event that started the great history of true humanity, which we are a part of, happening anew. Instead, it would be the tired repetition of a tradition incapable of moving our hearts or generating these human gestures that make such an impression on others. And so we are full of gratitude for the Pope, who understood our great need.

The Year of Mercy is that gaze happening again today, that love that comes to meet us wherever we are, just as we are. It happens through unfamiliar faces who, in their rejoicing, just like John the Baptist in Elizabeth’s womb, give us back our life and invite us to recognize God’s design—what “seems like nothing” but is God’s design—which for two thousand years has reached us through a face: “God—the mystery, destiny made man—makes Himself present right now to you and to me, to all those who are called to see and recognize Him through a face: a new human face we run into” (Fr. Giussani). A face that leads us to ask with a disarming simplicity, “What’s your name? How are you?” and moves others to tears.

Recognizing the way that God calls us—through the most unfamiliar faces—is the only way not to make God’s plan of mercy for us in vain, and the only way to continue to give witness to that gaze that truly frees us, in any situation. 

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"YOU ARE SPECIAL IN A NORMAL WAY"

 My wife and I run a veterinary clinic. In May of last year, a homosexual couple came in with a puppy they had just adopted. Puppies need a series of three vaccinations that are given twenty-one days apart and so, during that period, we got to know each other. Fabio, the younger man, very funny and entertaining, was more attached to the puppy, Emily. When he would come into the clinic, there was a gladness, a joy, a self-irony about him, so much so that it was a pleasure to talk with him. Emily's exam lasted five minutes, so for the rest of the hour we talked about ourselves. Before summer, Fabio told me that he worked in fashion, that he had a great job, and a partner, but that he was not happy. He said, "It's as if something is missing, as if I lived my life from a point of reaction, of defense. This leaves me unsettled. It would be beautiful to experience work and relationships as you and your wife do. You are special in a normal way. If I had killed someone an hour ago, you would not judge me for this, but for the need for happiness that I have. I love talking with you. You do not judge me for the choices I have made, but for what I have been and still am searching for." He told me that his mother, unbeknownst to him, had invited the parish priest to dinner one Sunday and he had given Fabio quite a lecture. Fabio added, "Talking with the priest I had a feeling that, before I could say anything about myself, I had to clean myself of something




dirty." Then he asked me, "How do you live this way?" I answered that I had encountered a group of friends who showed me this new and beautiful way of living; that everything is born of the charisma of Fr. Giussani, a man who spoke and continues to speak to my heart. Immediately he shot back, "He isn't at all like the priest from Sunday dinner, is he?" I gave him a copy of *Traces* and I invited him to the School of Community, which would begin again in September. The summer passed and I did not see him again. I didn't have any news of him until a few days ago when his mother, whom I had met during a previous visit, came into the clinic. She came with Emily in her arms and, crying, told me that Fabio had died. That awful cough that he had was not bronchitis, but a tumor that caused him much suffering and had taken his life and taken him from her. "You must help me take care of Emily. She was so important to Fabio. You must also give me the magazine that you gave him the last time he came to the clinic. He spent the last days of his life reading and re-reading it, to the

point that he wanted it with him in his casket. I want to understand what helped him in his suffering. I wasn't able to tell you when it happened, but now, since he talked about you as special people, I wanted to come and say hello and to tell you about the Mass of Remembrance for him." I told her that I would be there and that she was a lucky mother to have had a son like him.

Stefano, Rome (Italy)

BEFORE THE EXERCISES: PIZZA AND BEERS

 We belong to a small parish in Summer Hill, a neighborhood in Sydney. Gathered around a table with fifteen pizzas is our haphazard community, which for some time now meets for School of Community. Some participate in person at the parish, but almost half are connected by Skype from Hobart, New Castle, Adelaide, and Brisbane. Many have flown in to be around this table, including Fr. John, who came directly from New Zealand to lead the Fraternity Exercises. At 8:30, we put away the leftover slices of pizza and begin to greet those who are arriving. "We thought to begin the Exercises with a moment open to everyone," explains Fr. John, opening the meeting with the twenty or so people there. The projector displays the image of Fr. Giussani, who smiles in front of the familiar graphic of the "X," because Christianity is not an effort on our part, nor the application of rules or programs, but an historic encounter with an interesting, mysterious Presence, here and now. One of us explains, "Sometimes I



IN THE DELIVERY ROOM

JANNATUL'S LABOR AND THAT GAZE OF LOVE

I arrived in the delivery room. I began to take care of Jannatul, a Pakistani, who'd had two previous miscarriages and a stillborn child at thirty weeks. Abandoned by her husband in her pregnancy, she lives with her mother. She was here alone. She'd decided not to tell anyone that she is in labor. She didn't want her family to relive the pain of the last delivery. She told me, "When I have a living child in my arms, I will call everyone and I will surprise my mother." I didn't agree with her choices. She had been in labor for two days and was suffering. I tried to convince her that it is better to be accompanied by loved ones, but she would not listen to reason. She continued to hang up on her mother, who has not heard from her in two days. She didn't want any pain medication because she said it could hurt the baby, regardless of the fact that I'd explained that it wasn't so. At a certain point, we realized that the only solution was a Cesarean section, which she refused because she thought it could be dangerous. All of her objections made me angry and seemed foolish. Suddenly, I looked at how I was in



front of her and I realized that I was not treating Jannatul the way I treat other women. A great sadness came over me. I stopped and looked at her story, and at her pain. Slowly, slowly, from within, came a gaze of love, an embrace that conquers all of those feelings and the instincts of impatience and irritability. I begin to treat her differently. She noticed and began to listen to me. "If you think that the Cesarean section is the best solution, then I accept." I called the doctor to let her know. She said, "She accepted? We've been trying for three hours to convince her. What happened?" I began to prep her. She was more docile. I was too. We were almost ready and I saw that her cellphone was ringing for the umpteenth time. The display flashes "Mom"; her mother was still looking for her. I said, "Jannatul, in a half hour, you will have your child. Do you want to call your mother?" She burst into tears and said, "Yes, yes, yes!!!" In the operating room, her mother held her hand and attended to the birth of her first grandchild.

Lucia, London (Great Britain)

try to explain Christianity in words and I bore even myself. An evening with you around a pizza and some beer says so much more," because the method is something else. Fr. John continues by citing the well-known passage in John's Gospel, "Teacher, where do you live?" "Come and see." The disciples maybe didn't eat pizza that day, but from John

and Andrew on, the Christian formula is the encounter with a human face, with a human circumstance, fragile, yet so attractive as to draw us here today and to move those present. Fr. Jim, a young priest who has come to get to know us, after listening to the experience of School of Community, says, "I have only one question: Where can I find these

books?" At the end of the evening, we say goodbye with full hearts and the desire to meet again. As I carry out the pizza boxes, I am surprised by the idea that within this friendship, something so banal can be valued and loved as part of a divine; a very human story that has continued for 2,000 years.

Beatrice, Sydney (Australia)

FLOWERS IN WARTIME

Gunshots out in the streets. Assistance to families. Contemplation and prayer in a tortured land, where the search for a glimmer of beauty seems madness... It's life at the Trappist Monastery of Azeir, Syria, built by Christians, Shiites, and Sunnis. What kind of dialogue gives life in the midst of conflict?

BY PAOLA BERGAMINI

The firing of the machine guns. The five nuns have heard them nearby, within yards of the walls of their house. In the area the monastery overlooks, near the Maronite village called Azeir, halfway between Homs and Tartus, there have been several clashes between the rebels and Assad's forces during the past four years. It's a strategic position to hold: at the heart of Syria, between the sea and the mountains of Lebanon. For this reason, the nuns feared they would be asked to move out of concern for their safety, but it never came to that. They only spent three nights away, in an apartment offered

to them by the parish priest in the village below. Aside from that, they remained at the monastery, on their land and inside those walls, with war just on the other side.

That period of "gunshots out in the streets" is brought to life by the words of Sr. Marta, the mother superior of Azeir. While she was in Italy for a month, we went to meet her with some friends from Florence who have grown close in the past few months. We met at Valserena, the monastery where the whole story began. Sr. Marta recounts, "We knew not to wander off the property after 5:00 p.m. But in the last few years there was never any outright threat against us or

against the village. Of course, we didn't know this in the beginning, so we were a bit frightened. The Lord never gives a load that is too heavy to carry. He has carried us there, to a place where it was possible for us to 'remain,' and we have become a presence for everyone there. We are 'their nuns.' For all of them, not just Christians."

Now the situation seems calmer. But what is the meaning of a Christian presence of prayer and contemplation in a land martyred by war, in a part of the world where most people are Muslim (mostly Alawite, an offshoot of Shia Islam, and the rest Sunni)?

From the moment they arrived five years ago, people from the neighboring



villages have been able to work the land and build the monastery. Sunnis, Shiites, and Christians work side by side, digging out the foundation, mixing cement; they gather stones for the chapel and other buildings that are added on one by one. And if the material runs out...then they invent more projects in order to provide more work for everyone: walls, paths, soil drainage...

The monastery is as self-sufficient as it can be: there is a well providing water, a garden, and a power generator. They often run out of gas... in which case it's necessary to be patient, jumping through hoops to get everything done during the hours when there >>

» is power. On the other side of the Mediterranean, Valserena provides constant support. The bare essentials are sent to the area, mostly through Lebanon. The biggest problem, partially due to sanctions, is the currency exchange: everything has become very expensive, especially for the inhabitants of the villages.

In response, the sisters try to help out the families. For example, they pay college tuition for some young people, or for their transportation to the universities. But this is not why they have become “our nuns.” It is their very presence, a testimony of a way of life that does not give up on hope. “It’s simple: we’re here,” says Sr. Marta. And people are amazed just by the fact that they are there, namely in three ways: “Community life, that is, being there as a community; the liturgy, that we are learning to celebrate more and more in Arabic, is captivating apart from the language itself; and the serenity with which we seek to face daily life. Planting flowers, looking for a glimmer of beauty in the context of war, may seem like madness, but in reality it reflects the fact that joy comes from something else. This is our witness: when life finds its full meaning in the relationship with Christ, it is possible to remain and to build even in the midst of destruction.”

This is the situation today. In order to understand what has drawn these Italian nuns to Syria and what their presence is generating, it is necessary to take a step back. After the assassination of the seven monks in Tibhirine in Algeria in 1996, there has been a desire among Cistercians to carry on this legacy: the witness of a life dedicated to God in a non-Christian context. In the

Trappist community of Valserena, this desire developed into the decision to open a foundation. Where? Providence shows the way.

WHY HERE? The sisters got in touch with Fr. Frans van der Lugt [Van der Lugt is the Jesuit who would later be killed in Homs on April 7, 2001], who invited them for their first visit to Syria, to Homs and to Aleppo. Sr. Marta and Sr. Monica, abbess of Valserena, departed for the unknown land. They were introduced to the reality of Syrian life, where they met both Muslims as well as Christians of various rites. Sr. Marta recalls, “Fr. Frans and some bishops welcomed us with kindness and they supported our prayerful presence. They valued and explicitly asked for our way of life where they are.” In 2005, four nuns moved into an apartment located in a low-income neighborhood in Aleppo, inhabited primarily by Armenians and Muslims. With the help of the Sisters of St. Dorothy, they formed a relationship with this new reality and began to study Arabic. “We experienced true ecumenism. For example, it took one year to find out that some of our friends that we saw every day in our Latin rite church were Orthodox Christians. Christians of various rites didn’t mind participating in moments of prayer of different denominations. Who knows how many times we went to adoration at the Greek Catholic Church, or the Armenian or Syriac Churches.”

During those first years, Syria was a place where it was possible to coexist peacefully. Sr. Marta and the other sisters looked for a place to build a monastery. There were several options to choose from. Then came a sign pointing to the hill in the central part

“When life finds its full meaning, it is possible to remain and to build even in the midst of destruction.”



AT WORK. Some moments in the construction of the monastery. Below: the land and the building have provided work for various people from the surrounding villages for the last five years.



of Syria. It was a place that was very beautiful, simple, and not touristic. Nearby there were two Maronite villages, but the Muslim presence, both Shiite and Sunni, was very strong. The sisters established themselves there in 2010. War broke out three months later. “Had we stayed in Aleppo, our superiors would have asked us to come back.”

In an amateur video recorded this past spring for their friends in Florence, you can see the hill, the sea in the distance, the flowers and the workers. There are also the cloistered nuns (five, one more had come in the meantime) who are picking olives and praying the liturgy in Arabic. Then, at a certain point, in the background, you hear the sound of gunshots. War had arrived. They were in need of everything; they had concrete needs... “We cannot forget it, and this is why we also help some families in Aleppo,” says Sr. Marta. “But the material assistance is not enough. There is a deeper need, especially among the youth. This dramatic situation reveals the question about whether or not it



IN THE GARDEN. Thanks to the various projects, the monastery is self-sufficient.

is reasonable to stay, about the fundamental motivations for living.”

One day she received a visit from a young man she had met in Aleppo. Sr. Marta said to him: “It must be hard for you over there.” Smiling, he said, “Actually, now we understand what it truly means to live as Christians.” She took these words with her into the chapel. Before the altar, they become a prayer: “Lord, this painful and absurd situation is an occasion to find the truth in relationship with You. For all, Christians and Muslims alike.” This is where we can start building.

A DEEPER ANSWER. Another young man from Aleppo, joined by a friend, asked the cloistered nuns if they could come with a group of scout leaders to receive guidance in spiritual formation. “They live in a decimated city. When they leave their home, they don’t know if they will make it back. But they have this desire to grow spiritually. For this reason, we say it is not enough to bring food and water, [which are] important nevertheless, a priority: it is

the fullness of life, its dignity that must be nourished.” There is a young man from Damascus, whose father was killed by a sniper. In this crisis, he feels the need for a deeper answer for his life. The request for spiritual direction came from this. “We still have some language barriers, but we often help each other with English. And especially with our hearts. That way, you can always communicate.”

While they were speaking of mercy, of God’s love, with a group of young people, one girl burst out, “But no one ever told me about God this way... True, they may have said to me: it is right to do this, it is wrong to do that. But what you are saying is different.”

Among the images in the video, one can see some of the buildings still under construction. They resemble the *trulli* huts in Puglia. They will become ten rooms for anyone who wishes to join this life of prayer. Day by day, in the relationships that grow, in the people’s requests, it becomes clear that witness occurs through their lives. Sr. Marta continues, “At this particular point in time, our vocation

has taken on a missionary aspect. To walk with our brothers and sisters along their spiritual journey is what the Church of Vatican II asks of the monastic world. You need only remember, for instance, Pope Paul VI’s beautiful letters to the monks. To be a monk is to live, as much as possible, the relationship with Christ, which becomes the meaning of your day. This, you share. In silence. Listening and engaging in dialogue.”

Dialogue: another key word in the experience of these cloistered nuns, who daily encounter people of a different faith and talk with them about their beliefs. In dialogue, there is no naivety (“I must be clear about who I have in front of me, I must truly know him”). There is no arrogance, either (“I am certainly right, and let’s hope that God enlightens you, too”).


LETTING DOWN THE GUARD. The mother superior of Azeir underlines, “The center is always the human person, a mystery in which the Holy Spirit is in action. In a dialogue, in the encounter with another, I become more aware of my own religious identity. But I also know that you have your own journey, your own relationship with God. It is not our effort, our being merciful, welcoming, good, and open, that generates dialogue; it is God. He is the center; He generates the unity among us. It is by looking at God honestly and justly, each according to his or her own path that He has marked, that we can encounter each other. This makes us free: it frees us from fear of each other; it allows us to let down our guard. It is a long journey, but it is possible, and it is the task that is given to us. Even in the face of this war, decided by political leaders feeding the mutual fears.”

Yes, it is possible. It is already happening today, in many daily encounters. Even in a Syria so disfigured by violence. **T**

JCL LIFE

**THERE IS SOMEONE WHO
LOVES LIFE**





**“Let yourselves be probed
by the heavens that look to you.”
That was the invitation
to the 5,000 university
students gathered in Rimini
for the annual Spiritual Exercises.
The words by Giussani,
an oncologist’s testimony,
and the lessons with Julián Carrón
were accompanied
by the kids’ questions.**

BY MAURIZIO VITALI

It is late on Friday evening, the vigil of the Feast of the Immaculate Conception, in a wintry Rimini, which has little in common with that of the postcards and the throngs of summer tourists. In the immense hall of the Expo Center, nobody makes a sound. Everyone enters in silence, expeditiously, one by one, in order to take one of the five thousand seats, letting their souls be bathed by the powerful music of Beethoven, and their gazes be filled with the paintings of Millet, projected on the big screens; scenes of the solid and obedient daily gestures of peasant life, among them the scene of the *Angelus*. Good; very >>>



“C'è un uomo che vuole la vita
e desidera giorni felici?”

(Salmo 33)



THE ASSEMBLY. Some moments from the Spiritual Exercises in Rimini, with Fr. Julián Carrón.

» good. Today, once again, Fr. Giussani's education to beauty takes root; for the person and for society there is nothing more important. And soon the hall is full of the five thousand, and the university students are bent over their notebooks and tablets, taking down the words of Fr. Julián Carrón, the successor of Fr. Giussani in the leadership of CL. It is obvious that they want to learn. This is good too.

But to learn what? To gain possession of the right knowledge and techniques needed to make their way in life, to avoid suffering too much, to keep from being cheated, to exercise power, to lack for nothing? No. They desire to learn to be women and men. This is exactly what Fr. Julián is talking about. He is leading a reflection on the title of the Triduum: “Is there a person who wants life and desires happy days?” The answer, which everyone would say is affirmative, is actually not a given at all. “It is an enormous question,” writes a young woman in a letter. “The desire to be happy is

the truest thing about me. But often I live as if it were not.”

So, is there something that can reawaken us from our distraction and scepticism? “Jesus Christ,” someone bursts out. “No! Reality!” Carrón immediately corrects the person. Reality. Sometimes it is like an electric shock. As a survivor of the Bataclan massacre in Paris realized, “life hangs by a thread, and taking seriously this new life that has been given to me is the way to savor it.”

COMPULSIVE GAMBLER. On Saturday morning, Carrón has breakfast with a small group from Lecce, a double espresso in company, a half hour of open-hearted dialogue. “How can I look at myself with tenderness?” “Keep this question alive during the day, try to stay attentive to what happens and see if you discern some useful clues in experience.” His answers are never definitions, but suggestions for the piece of road you have to travel yourself. Nobody can do it for you. And so one goes on, in this way.

As we hurry to the Expo Center for the lesson, I talk a bit with Marcello and Antonio, from Lecce. “The Baroque architecture in your city is fantastic.” “Just think, it was all built during the 200 years of the violence and massacres by the Ottoman Turks, in the time of the 813 martyrs of Otranto. The people of Lecce responded to the barbarities with beauty, because Christianity is a recognizable evidence of beauty.” Imagine that. Marcello and Antonio are also active in a university students' residence. They tell about a series of thefts, and how suspicion fell on a certain young man. They talked to him about it at length, and after two hours of lying and denying, he broke into tears, admitted he was the thief, and asked for help. He was a compulsive gambler. He opened up because for the first time he felt neither condemned nor spurned, as happened with those dearest to him, but instead, looked at with gratuitous tenderness. With the help of the two friends, he even decided to get therapy, something he



would never have considered before.

He is if he changes. The answer exists. But how can it be waited for? Human beings cannot build an infinitely spanning bridge to reach heaven. But 2,000 years ago in a little village of Palestine a man dared to say, “I am the way.” From that moment on, the radical alternative for all of history has been whether or not to accept the fact of Christ. In the conference hall, Fr. Giussani appears on an enormous LED video. For two and a half hours, students watch a video of talk he gave in 1994, “Recognizing Christ.” His words help everyone to profoundly identify with the souls and movements of the first people who ran up against Jesus, who were amazed by His exceptionality, and who followed Him. Giussani says that unless we immerse ourselves in these things, and “identify” with these people, we cannot understand them. The five thousand university students lift their eyes from their tablets and notebooks; they stop writing, because they cannot help but watch him speak, as it was for John

and Andrew that afternoon in Galilee, at Jesus’ house. Today, Giussani, with his charisma, bears witness with the extraordinary persuasiveness that Christ is present and can be encountered today, exactly the same way that He could have been back then. Christ happens today, as Giussani reads in the letter from a man dying of AIDS, who says he is free, at peace, and useful (“Two thousand years burned away in this testimony”). He is present today in the story Giussani tells about a young teacher in Uganda who endures unbearable situations. He is present in young Edimar, who refuses to continue his life of gang crime, and pays for his conversion with martyrdom. He is present in the young Missionary of Charity sister who picks up dying people from the street with the awareness that she is doing this for Jesus. This way Giussani describes very powerfully, evocatively, and movingly, a new person and a new world in which everything is charity.

But now comes the good part, that is, the work, because what Giussani

spoke about is not a matter of magic, but of a journey. Even the most powerfully expressed message has no lasting impact if the listener is left with a merely sentimental repercussion. In the hotels, the young people gather to hash out questions to be posed at the Assembly. Everyone identifies immediately with the desire for happy days, and everyone is deeply struck by Fr. Giussani. There are those, like Clelia, who are impressed by the reasonableness of the journey indicated, which embraces all that is human. Others, like Chiara, are moved by the perception that every word of his expressed a lived truth, and that he spoke “to me as if he were living and present.” Some, like Andrea, Tommaso, and Nicolò, returned from their thankless work directing traffic in the Expo Center parking lots, invaded by a silence full of wonder.

FEAR AND OPENESS. But this is not the case for everyone. Many of the questions express doubt and fear about actually being able to attain and >>



THE TESTIMONY. Left, Carrón with Marta Scorsetti, a physician and member of *Memores Domini*.

» hold on to the answer to one's desire for happiness. Doubt eats away at you. With each question, Carrón acts like a good father, clarifying and correcting, warning against sliding into a logic that is not in line with the journey indicated by Giussani, who does not suggest that we should "deliver" the answer, but instead be open to reality with simplicity of heart, so as to recognize it when it comes to us.

The Assembly. The first to speak asserts somewhat aggressively, "It seems like a contradiction to say that to enjoy something you have to experience missing it." Carrón answers, "It may seem so, but experience shows us that there is no contradiction. Let's stay with the method of experience." A young woman observes, "The more I know Christ, the more I long for Him." Carrón responds, "Just think what a sad day it would be when you felt no longing for the man you love." The mike is passed to a young Albanian woman. "I am agnostic. I was invited to come and I am happy to be here. However, I think that reason cannot accept the Resurrection. Entrusting your life to an Other means losing your freedom." Carrón responds, "With reason alone, we would also think the same way you do. Those who have never had the grace to run up against a fact that corresponds so exceptionally

to their expectancy cannot believe it. The man born blind never believed he would see again. But it happened. Therefore it is better to remain open to all the possibilities rather than deny them from the beginning. If you are open, and if God so chooses, it will also happen to you and you will be able to recognize it." Another person asks, "The disciples were physically there with Christ. But what about us? What can we do?" "You can record the signs of His presence in those who testify to Him today: from there you begin to recognize Him."

AT DINNER. Carrón continues the dialogues at dinner was well, with the national responsables of the CLU. The conversation differs little from the one that morning with the younger students from Lecce: it does not focus on how to organize the whole inner-workings of the association, as instead sometimes happens with these kids. Instead, they speak about life and the verification of the correspondence of Christ to the needs of our nature. They speak about how to recognize Christ present in the way He changes life, or better, they ask with humility to be helped to travel their personal journey.

Marta, alias Dr. Scorsetti, is a lovely young woman, director of a highly

advanced oncological radiology unit, and a university professor. When she was little more than 20, she dedicated her life entirely to God and today continues to live in a *Memores Domini* house. Carrón asked her to talk about how Christ makes Himself present in her days as a woman, a *Memores* member, and as a professional.

TURQUOISE EARRINGS. From the stage of the enormous Expo Center hall, she talks about herself with the transparent clarity of a person who does not lie, and the affectionate tone of an older sister who dearly loves these young people. As she talks about things she has seen happen, she is radiant with gladness. In many patients, shrivelled and hardened by pain and disappointment, she has seen an unexpected bounty of good emerge and blossom, sometimes also through her own gestures, great or small. Every time someone is transformed in this way, every time she sees their humanity reawakened, she wonders, moved, amazed and glad, "Who are You, O Jesus, who loves us so much?" to the point of being overcome with joy.

Once, during the hour of silence they observe in the *Memores* house, her heart dove into prayer but her mind scurried about elsewhere, distracted by the desire for a pair of turquoise earrings that would go so well with a certain dress. The next day, a patient came to her to say goodbye and thank her for her care. She brought a gift as a memento of their friendship. It was incredible: a pair of gold and turquoise earrings, fit for a queen. "This is the tenderness of which Jesus is capable. It's really true: 'in our eyes gleams the strangeness of a sky that isn't ours.' So, friends, let yourselves be looked at, loved, and probed by the heavens that look to you and ask: 'And you, who do you say that I am?'" **I**



The elderly tribal chief who met Fr. Giussani. The business executive who's "always joyful." Life at St. Kizito Clinic. And Godfrey, who says, "If I don't do School of Community, I'll die." The Nigerian metropolis is the second stop on our journey in Africa, with its threats from Boko Haram and the slums. This is where a group of bored young Christians rediscovered faith.

BY LUCA FIORE

THE NEWNESS OF LAGOS



“Did you find anything beautiful in Lagos?” It’s a trick question. -You can see it in the defiant smile. Outside the window is a shapeless mass made up of 18 million inhabitants. It’s as if the ocean never existed. The well-off neighborhoods built on the oil industry are looking run-down, though the garages still hold Porsches and Bentleys. That’s not to mention the slums which, as you pass on the “super-highway,” exude sinister fumes of smoke outlining the bright sky. The beaches of Ikrodo are covered with a blanket of plastic bags and bottles. Boko Haram, who in the Muslim-majority north have been killing Christians (and Muslims), has started to make its presence felt here as well. The city is filling up with refugees, and the police have already had to intervene in several attacks. How can I respond honestly without being rude? Just tell the truth and answer: “the people.”

The CLU students from UNILAG, the University of Lagos, are sitting in the shack that serves as the community headquarters. Abraham, who is 21, tells the story of how he met the Movement through Tete: he’s one of the people who one day thought, “I want to be happy like him.” Anthony met the community singing in the choir at his parish, and Collins, through dancing. They, like Florence, were bored young Christians who one day encountered a new way of living their faith. With them is Leda, who didn’t come from a Christian family and even said, “We always thought that the Church was just a place where they ask you for money. Then, one day, I heard them speaking and I thought, ‘They’re talking about my life.’” Dolapo arrives late and sits down silently. He has the statue-like physique of an Olympic runner. From the look on his face you can tell something happened. We find out he’s failed an important exam for the fifth time. After a few songs, someone finally manages to make

him laugh with a joke. This little group seems like a drop in the bucket that is this expanse of Nigeria, with its 170 million inhabitants. This is a breeding ground for international Islamic terrorism in the heart of Africa, with President Muhammadu Buhari, elected last May, who even received votes from Christians who previously insisted upon respecting a rule of alternating Muslim and non-Muslim leaders. In the oil-rich South, where local newspapers report little of Boko Haram’s massacres, they are plagued by the mostly “underground” tensions among the various ethnic groups inherited from the Nigerian-Biafran War.

THE EPICENTER. In the fall, the CLU students organized a viewing of “The Beautiful Road,” CL’s 60th anniversary video. It was the first public event organized by the community’s college students, who have been together for a number of years. Thirty people came. Abraham hadn’t understood that he would be the one introducing

THE WEIGHT OF HUMANITY.

On the left, clockwise: a woman in the Muslim neighborhood of Idi Araba; a small Fraternity group; Joy and her daughter. Above, clockwise: Roland; a child at St. Kizito clinic; Barbara and Alda in the village of Ikorodu.



the evening. He improvised, and it worked out. "In this companionship, I am happy. I would like the same for all of you."

Barbara is often with them. The *Memore Domini* from Rimini, president of the NGO *Loving Gaze*, has been in Lagos since 2005. She's been the responsible of the Nigerian CL community for a few years now. The kids affectionately call her Babi. She lives with Alda, who is also from Rimini, Alba from Reggio Emilia, Fiorenza from Milan, and Lucia from Verona. Their house is the epicenter of the life of the community, including for Guido, the general manager of a multi-national company that builds infrastructure related to the oil industry. He is responsible for 4 million employees, keeps late nights at work, has many fires to put out, an armored SUV, and security detail to get him around the city. His family stayed in Ancona, and he invited himself to dinner at the *Memores* house as soon as he arrived. "When I call him, he's always incredibly busy, but he's always

joyful," Barbara tells us. "One time I asked him, 'Guido, how do you manage to be so happy?' And he says, 'Well, I'm happy because you called me!'" At the last Assembly, he said this to everyone: "In my work, I can make mistakes that have dire consequences, but when it happens I'm not wounded by pride; I'm pained because of the thousands of families involved. To bear through it you have to live all circumstances in front of Christ, in the relationship with Him. Otherwise, they crush you."

Charles, an engineer, is also responsible for many workers. Sometimes at the end of School of Community, he takes out his smartphone and shows video clips of his employees laughing, joking or singing. "My bosses tell me I'm stupid to treat them well. They're convinced that if I do, they'll take advantage of me. But how can I treat them like animals? I am loved and wanted. I know, they *could* not get it and cheat me. But I want to risk on their freedom."

The other axis around which the

community turns is St. Kizito Clinic in Jakande, a slum where a million people live. Everything began there in 1989, when Chiara Mezzalira started treating women and children amidst the shacks. Her arrival led to the founding of the *Memores* house and marked the beginning of AVSI's work, which later led to *Loving Gaze*. That's when engineer Stephen Okagbue met CL. The elderly tribal chief, his eyes bright, regaled us with tales of his encounters with Fr. Giussani in La Thuile.

THROUGH THE BURQA. Today, the clinic is operated by *Loving Gaze*, which also manages another small health center in the Muslim neighborhood of Idi Araba, as well as collaborates with two schools: St. Peter and Paul in Lekki and St. John, for the children of the fishermen in Ikorodu. Alda is the health director of the clinic. She was recently invited to a conference in Idi Araba, the only foreign and non-Muslim attending. They don't see many people like >>



ESCAPING BOKO HARAM. Above: Bitrus, born in Jalingo, in Muslim-dominated northern Nigeria. He met CL through Sr. Caterina Dolci. Right: Elvis, social worker for *Loving Gaze*. He lives with his wife and daughter in the Jakande slum, where he follows up with various families who have visited St. Kizito clinic.



» her in the neighborhood, and in fact, as the meeting came to a close a few mothers came up to ask to take a picture. It was just a few days after the attacks in Paris. Alda expressed her awareness of this: “At that moment, what I desired was that they could realize the value of their lives. I hoped that, through the opening in their burqa, they could see something. I felt the need to really look at them for what they are, to be able to communicate to them what a good they are.”

Roland is a tall young man, with a beard and an intense gaze. He met the Movement when he was in college. Today he runs a small business and works in real estate. He also knows how to sing. Not speaking a word of Italian, he recently learned to sing Mina’s “La Mente Torna.” He sang it at the beginning of a School of Community Assembly. “This song tells us that when the person you love comes, you find yourself again. This is exactly the experience I have with Christ. When I recognize him, I return.”

In the North, after Sr. Caterina Dolci’s return to Italy for safety reasons, the only leader left in the CL community is Fr. Peter Kamai, the rector of the seminary in Jos. It’s almost impossible to get together. Both because of security concerns and the difficult transportation situation. The same is true in Port Harcourt, an industrial center in the southwestern part of the country, where Tere, Rose, and Emeka live.

RISKS AND A MUST. In September, Rose Busingye, the community’s visitor, came to Lagos. After that, Barbara recounted that it was like the work of the School of Community blossomed again for many. Up to the beginning of the summer, there were only a few groups and they struggled to meet regularly. Then came the Ebola scare, and after that, fear regarding what might happen during the presidential election, with a civil war lurking around the bend. And finally the outbreak in one of the great contradictions in the largest oil-

producing country in Africa: a fuel shortage. In the city, weeks went by without gasoline. A mile-long line outside the gas station for a fill-up, which may even be impossible.

Now, for some, getting together to work on Fr. Giussani’s books has become a must. Thus, smaller groups have been born in various parts of the city, making it easier to meet. There’s one in Lekki, one in Ikoyi, one at St. Kizito, one made for Guido and one or two others who meet after 8:30 p.m. (it’s usually dangerous to go out at night, but they find ways to avoid the risks), and there are others. Godfrey talks about his challenges at work and with his girlfriend. “At first, you think you’re capable, then everything falls apart. Only inside the relationship with Christ can you face all the things that happen. Only looking at Him frees me.” So much so that one time he said to Steve, “If I don’t do School of Community, I’ll die.” Steve responded, “Me too.”

Bitrus was born in Jalingo, in the mostly Muslim northern part of the



UNILAG. Above, some students in the community after a meeting in the University of Lagos. Right, the houses in the slum of Jakande, where one million of people live.



country. He met the Movement years ago thanks to Sr. Caterina. Running from Boko Haram, he arrived in Lagos where he now works as a custodian at St. John school in Ikorodu. “CL has really changed the way I live. I learned to see that Christ is present, even now. He is here, even when bad things happen. He is the center. When I think I’m at the center, things get complicated.”

Jakande slum started 25 years ago, settled by the hundreds of thousands of people who were kicked out of the Marocco neighborhood, evicted by the government’s rezoning of the area for new development. Today a white person passing through the makeshift houses is looked at with suspicion; they could be government agents gathering information for a new real estate development. This is the depressed context in which the doctors and staff of St. Kizito work. The ideal behind the clinic, which offers basic medical care, is health education. The education, however, is also for the staff themselves. It’s not just a question

of best practices (though the clinic is an excellent example), but of discovering a new way to look at others and oneself.

THE VALUE OF ELVIS. To demonstrate, two stories are worth telling: one about Joy, and one about Elvis. Joy came to St. Kizito as part of the cleaning crew. She was very young and had escaped from a backcountry village where her family had promised her in marriage to an older man. Through her coworkers, she met the CL community and started to spend time with them. “The Movement became my life. It made me become what I am. It taught me to see things in a deeper way.” Today she is 33 and is a single mother with a young daughter. “Without these friends, it would have been even harder. African women are expected to get married young and not to have children outside marriage. But there was no one among my friends in the Movement who judged me. I felt loved. Today I can love my daughter thanks to the love

that I received. I am a happy mother. I am happy.”

Up until a few months ago, Elvis did clean-up at a construction site. He was referred to *Loving Gaze* for a job as a social worker for St. Kizito. He lives in the slum Jakande. His wife sells goods at a little stand made of wood, built not too far from one of the foul-smelling pools of runoff. He is Christian and attends an Apostolic Church. Now, he walks amidst the shacks in his neighborhood to check in on the children who’ve attended nutrition classes at the clinic. “Working for *Loving Gaze*, I learned that in order to do what I do, I have to think about the value of the people that I meet. To do this, I had to learn that I too have a value. I was born into a difficult family. They hit me. What I did was never right. I grew up thinking I wasn’t worth anything, and I hated myself. Instead, here they helped me discover who I am and what I am called to do in life. I have a value! This really transformed my life.” **T**

CULTURE

MARILYNNE ROBINSON





IN SEARCH OF AN INCALCULABLE BEAUTY

The importance of Grace, forgiveness, and community are at the heart of a challenge that starts from those quotes from the Gospel that don't ask us to do "superhuman feats, but to know what is human." The portrait of a Pulitzer writer that, with her novels, pushes President Obama to make a pointed question about faith.

BY ROSE GEBKEN

“I

realize I have always believed there is a great Providence that, so to speak, waits ahead of us.” So begins a letter from one character to another in *Lila*, the most recent novel from American author Marilynne Robinson. The author of the letter—a preacher who is writing to the woman who will later become his wife—continues: “A father holds out his hands to a child who is learning to walk, and he comforts the child with words and draws it toward him, but he lets the child feel the risk he is taking, and lets it choose its own courage and the certainty of love and comfort when he reaches his father.”

This picture of the relationship between a child and its father contains many of the themes that Marilynne Robinson explores over and over throughout her works—both her fiction and >>

» nonfiction. In Robinson’s fiction, her characters serve as human, fleshy vehicles for Robinson to examine felt questions of mercy, identity, home, belonging, education, and relationships between human beings, as well as their position toward the world they inhabit.

Marilynne Robinson has now been the recipient of numerous literary prizes and distinctions, most notably a Pulitzer Prize for her novel *Gilead* (2004) and the 2012 National Humanities Medal. She is the author of four novels: *Housekeeping* (1980), *Gilead* (2004), *Home* (2008), and *Lila* (2014). Robinson currently lives in Iowa City and teaches at the Iowa Writers’ Workshop, a residency Master of Fine Arts program in creative writing at the University of Iowa. Born in Sandpoint, Idaho, Robinson was raised as a Presbyterian and later became a Congregationalist. She is known for both her fiction and non-fiction collections of essays on the topics of democracy, religion, American history, and human thought. Her five collections of essays include: *Mother Country: Britain, the Welfare State, and Nuclear Pollution* (1989), *The Death of Adam: Essays on Modern Thought* (1998), *Absence of Mind: The Dispelling of Inwardness from the Modern Myth of the Self* (2010), *When I Was a Child I Read Books: Essays* (2012), and *The Givenness of Things* (2015).

WITNESS. As a thinker, Robinson identifies herself with often contradictory positions—for example, she treasures her life within her religious community, but also fiercely values her participation in her academic community. Among many current writers and thinkers who seem motivated solely by sowing vitriol, Robinson offers a refreshing portrait of a writer who draws from diverse traditions and worldviews. Her hon-

esty and willingness to risk both encourages and challenges her readers. “For Robinson,” says an interviewer from the *New York Times*, “writing is not a craft; it is ‘testimony,’ a bearing witness: an act that demands much of its maker, not least of which is the courage to reveal what one loves.” And Robinson herself seems perfectly comfortable with the challenge.

In a recent interview with President Obama, he asked Robinson about one of her seemingly contradictory positions: how she reconciles her understanding of Christianity as inclusive and open, when the outlook of many Christians in the U.S. seems to be exclusive, resistant to challenging viewpoints. She answered, “When people are turning in on themselves—and God knows, arming themselves and so on—against the imagined other, they’re not taking their Christianity seriously.” Robinson continued, emphasizing the paradoxical and difficult nature of Christian life: “Christianity is profoundly counterintuitive—‘Love thy neighbor as thyself’—which I think properly understood means your neighbor is as worthy of love as you are, not that you’re actually going to be capable of this sort of superhuman feat... It’s supposed to be a challenge.”

ABOUT HER

Marilynne Robinson, 72 years old, was born in Sandpoint, Idaho (USA). Novelist (she won a Pulitzer Prize in 2005) and essayist (the most relevant, *The Death of Adam*), she belongs to a Congregationalist Church. Her last novel, *Lila* (2014), is the third volume of a trilogy: *Gilead* (2004) and *Home* (2008).



As a fiction writer, Robinson has a strong capacity to embrace paradox and tell stories in strange ways. She risks confusing her readers by asking them to work harder in order to understand. For example, in *Housekeeping* she writes: “The house flowed around us.” Of course, a house is not actually made of fluid material. And yet in that particular scene Robinson’s words make poetic sense and tell us clearly about the atmosphere and setting.

There is a clear link between Marilynne Robinson’s essays and her fiction. In “Imagination and Community,” she writes, “As individuals and as a species, we are unthinkable without our communities.” In her novels, particularly in the overlapping storylines of *Gilead*, *Home*, and *Lila*, we see this connection played out in the lives of the characters. *Gilead* is written in the first person, from the perspective of John Ames, a 77-



THE INTERVIEW. Robinson with Barack Obama: their long conversation was published in *The New York Review of Books* in November.

year-old Congregationalist preacher who is writing his memories for his young son, whom he will not live to raise. In *Home*, we hear a third-person account of the Boughton family, whose father is a close friend of John Ames. The narrative is told primarily from the perspective of Glory, Boughton's daughter. *Lila* is also written in third person and is the story of mercy and love as experienced by one woman, Lila, when she comes to the town of Gilead and finds a home with John Ames, and eventually gives birth to his son.

PRODIGAL SON. In *Home*, the daughter Glory is the character who embodies the “good son,” from the story of the prodigal son; she would be the one who should reject the mysterious workings of God, who generously welcomes home the prodigal son who does not deserve

mercy. And yet her name—Glory—refers directly to the power of God. Robinson sets up a predictable relationship between characters, and then works to defeat her readers' expectations. Somehow, God is very much at work in the life of Glory, just as much as in that of Jack, who is based on the “prodigal son” figure. The way that Robinson constructs the characters and narrative, readers see that grace and mercy are also manifest in Glory's life.

At several points throughout *Home*, Jack wonders if there is still a possibility of mercy for him, when he has taught the entire town to mistrust him because of his past actions (including lying, stealing, and arson), and he is unable to give his father the consolation of professing religious belief. But Jack also cannot lie about his disbelief in order to make his father feel better. We see in Jack's action an honesty

and desperate clinging to the remnants (or re-awakenings) of his conscience, while at the same time searching for something more. Why?

Robinson herself answers Jack's doubt in her essay “Son of Adam, Son of Man,” from *The Givenness of Things* (her most recent collection of essays): “Say that the one earthly thing God did not put under our feet was our own essential nature. The one great corrective to our tendency toward depredation would be a recognition of our abiding sacredness.... The divine image in us, despite all, is an act of God, immune to our sacrilege, apparent in the loveliness that never ceases to shine out in incalculable instances of beauty and love and imagination that make the dire assessment of our character, however solidly grounded in our history and prospects, radically untrue.”

SACREDNESS. This view of the sacredness of the human person informs all of Robinson's work. In her interview with President Obama, Robinson said, “I believe that people are images of God. There's no alternative that is theologically respectable to treating people in terms of that understanding... it's being human that enlists the respect, the love of God being implied in it.”

Through an exploration of Marilynne Robinson's fiction, readers can come to grow in a greater knowledge of themselves, their neighbors, and the world around them. And through this knowledge, can also find access to a greater communion and love. In “Imagination and Community,” from *When I Was a Child I Read Books*, she reminds us: “The great truth that is too often forgotten is that it is in the nature of people to do good to one another.” Reading Robinson's works, readers do rediscover this truth. **T**

ARTIMONDO

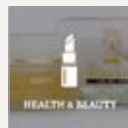
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