

COMMUNION AND LIBERATION INTERNATIONAL MAGAZINE

2014

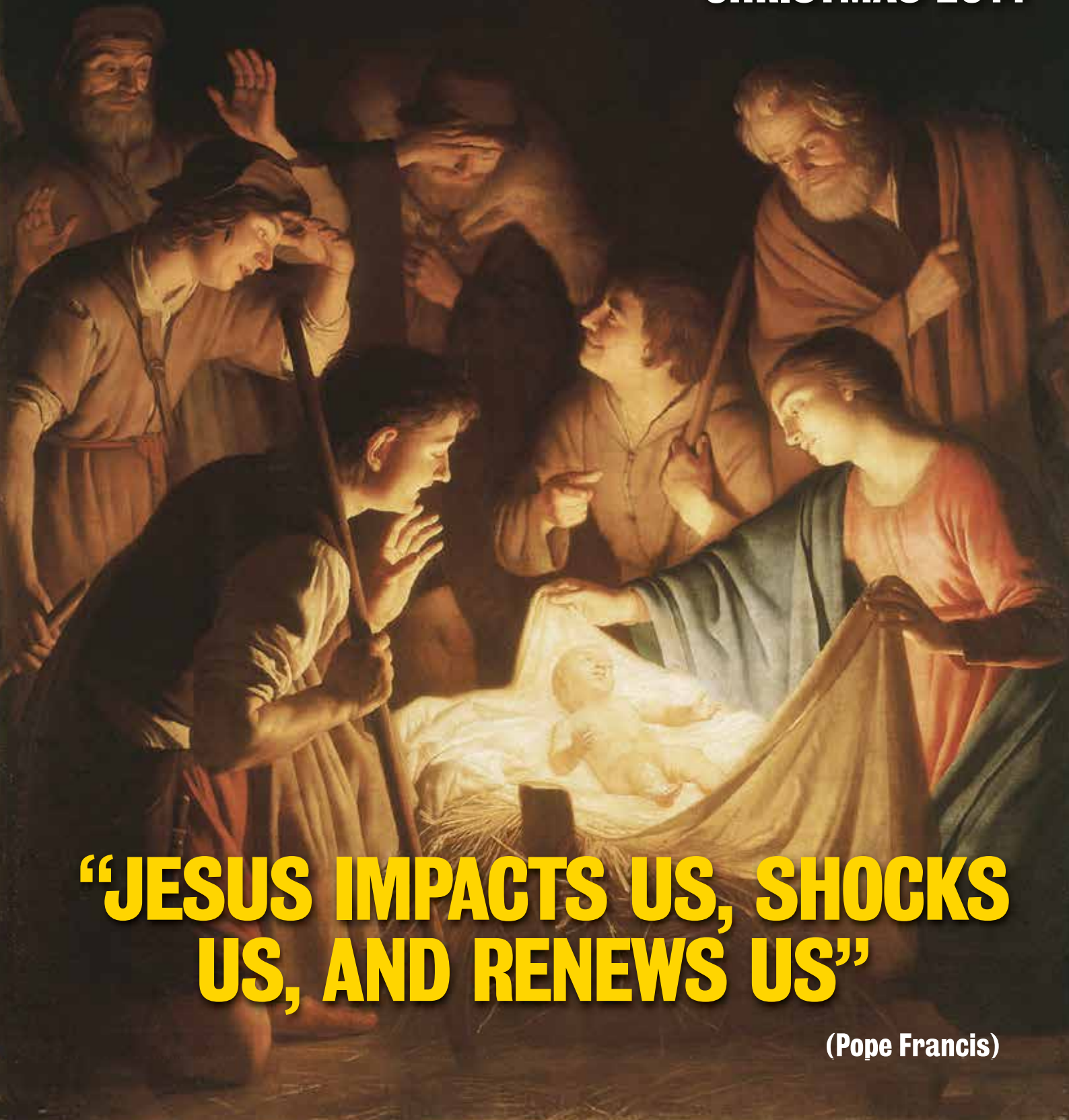
# TRACES

11

VOL. 16

LITTERAE COMMUNIONIS

CHRISTMAS 2014



**“JESUS IMPACTS US, SHOCKS US, AND RENEWS US”**

(Pope Francis)

PAGE ONE

## IN THE COLLAPSE OF EVIDENCES, THE GENERATION OF A SUBJECT

Notes from Julián Carrón's talk concluding  
the Spiritual Exercises of Priests, November 5, 2014.

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CHRISTMAS 2014

For me, faith was born  
of an encounter with Jesus.  
It was a personal encounter  
that touched my heart  
and gave new direction  
and meaning to my life.  
It is not something  
external or imposed, but  
rather that which comes  
from within and  
is self-evident.  
Jesus, in fact, impacts us,  
shocks us, and renews us.

Francis

It is an Other who takes initiative in our life, thus it is an  
Other who saves our life, leads it to the knowledge of truth,  
leads it to affection for what is true, leads it to love for reality.  
If you accept this announcement as a working hypothesis,  
then you return to breathing freely, everything becomes  
simpler, you say bread is bread and wine is wine, life is life  
and death is death, a friend is a friend, you become happier,  
and everything becomes even more of a reason for wonder.  
The more you seek to live this, the more you understand the  
disproportion and walk humbly, because this Other who  
intervenes catches me in every moment, catches me again and  
again, re-launches me, and will complete the work He began:  
He enables us to reach our destiny.

Luigi Giussani

COMMUNION AND LIBERATION

# A STRANGE PRESENCE

BY LUIGI GIUSSANI

**S**o then, what are we here for? The reason is dual, and the second is the consequence of the first; one could say, immediate or contingent consequence of the first. The first is: we are here to say... We were walking along a road, we heard someone talking, an ideologist who was speaking, but who was more than an ideologist, because he was a serious fellow, called John the Baptist. We stayed there to listen to him. At a certain point, one who was there with us began to leave and we saw John the Baptist stop to look at that fellow there who was leaving, and at a certain point he started to cry out, "There is the Lamb of God." Well, a prophet speaks strangely. But the two of us, who were there for the first time, we came from the countryside, from far away, we left the group and set out on the heels of that man, just like that, out of a curiosity that was not curiosity, out of a strange interest—who knows who put it inside us. He turned around at a certain point and said, "What do you want?" and we replied, "Where are you staying?" and He answered, "Come and see." We went and we stayed there all that day to watch Him speak, because the words He said we didn't understand, but He spoke in a certain way, He said those words in such a way, He had such a face that we stayed there to watch Him talk.

When we left, because it was evening, we went home with another face, we saw our wives and our children in a different way; it was as if there were a veil between us and them, the veil of that face, and our minds could find no rest. That night neither of us slept well, and the next day we went again to seek Him. He had said a sentence that we repeated to our friends, "Come and see one who is the Messiah who was to come; He is the Messiah, He said so Himself: 'I am the Messiah.'" And our friends came and they, too, were magnetized by that man. It was as if we said to each other, in the evening, when we gathered close to the fire with the four fish we had caught the night before, "If one does not believe in a man like this, if I do not believe in a man like this, I shouldn't believe my eyes anymore."

**We are in the world to cry out to all mankind**, "Look, a strange presence is among us; among us, here, now, there is a strange presence: the Mystery who makes the stars, who makes the sea, who makes all things... has become a man, was born of the womb of a woman..." We are in the world, because to us and not to others it was made known that God has become a man. There is a man among us, one who came among us two thousand years ago and who has remained with us ("I will be with you all days, to the end of the world"). There is a man who is God. The happiness of humanity, the joy of humanity, the fulfilment of all the desires of humanity is He who brings it to its conclusion; He brings it to its conclusion for those who follow Him.

**The contingent consequence of looking at Him**, of watching Him speak, of listening to Him, of following Him, of saying to everyone, "He is here, He is here among us, the God made man..."; the contingent consequence for those who say this, is that they live better—better. The problems of their humanity are not necessarily resolved, but they live them better. They love their spouse more, know how to love their children more, and to love themselves more; they love their friends more than the others, look at strangers with a generosity and tenderness of heart as if they were friends, and come to the aid of others as they can, as if their needs were their own needs. They look at time with hope and therefore walk with energy. I

(from *In cammino, 1992-1988*, [On the Journey], Bur, Milan, pp. 221-223)



## THOSE UNEXPECTED HOURS AT STEPHANIE'S SIDE

“**H**ope does not go forward by itself. In order to hope, my child, you have to be very happy, you have to have obtained, received a great grace” (Charles Péguy). After transferring three patients, I hear, “Lucy, Stephanie is yours, in Room #29. Her chart is on the table.” The midwife hurries away without any further instructions. I begin to leaf through the pages that tell the story of this pregnancy, of the diabetes, of the two emergency Cesarean sections for Stephanie’s two other children, the four miscarriages, her depression, and attempted suicide. All of these facts speak of a non-hope, of a non-life. I have already catalogued this woman in Room #29 as selfish, as someone who likes to play around with life, but who has gone beyond the limit. For me, all of this is too much. “Hi, Stephanie, I’m Lucy and I am your midwife for today.” I introduce myself in my usual manner, but inside I feel bitterness and anger. Stephanie’s case is complicated: she has diabetes and her glycemic numbers are through the roof. Her labor has begun too soon: she has already had two C-sections and her baby’s lungs are not yet fully developed. We must work to stop her contractions. Her case required me to stay beside her, chasing after her doctor, administering her medications, calling the various specialists, explaining to her what is happening. I dedicate my hours, my work, to her. At a certain point, I find myself smiling at Stephanie, because in taking care of her I have discovered that Someone has torn down my measure, my prejudice, and has opened my heart.

**Lucia, London (Great Britain)**



## THE BEAUTY OF THE PENULTIMATE NOTE

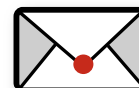
**T**he beginning of this school year was marked by the awareness of being accepted and loved now. It was a privileged moment in which I was reminded that my colleagues and my students are also accepted and loved. The benevolent gaze that God has upon them is the same gaze that he has for me. I teach music and I suddenly realized with clarity that “I am not” when I do not recognize You there in the off-pitch notes of the flute and the harsh over-singing of my students. At middle school I must explain how to play a piece a few measures at a time. We plod along with patience; no one is left behind. Each one follows his own tempo until finally everyone reaches the end together, actually a little before the end, the last two notes. And there, suddenly, a “beauty” bursts forth that causes someone to say, “What a beautiful note! Let’s play it again!” We begin again but this time we play straight through. At the next to the last note, they linger, as if to enjoy a little longer the note that moments before had unexpectedly made them happy. It is like hiking, when at the last bend in the trail, you can see the

mountaintop and you stop for a moment in awe of such beauty. That note, the penultimate note, is called “appoggiatura,” an embellishment in musical terms. My students do not yet know the term or its definition, nor do they need to know it in order to experience this gift of beauty.

**Fabiana, Italy**

## THAT WHICH WE HOLD MOST DEAR

**D**ear Father Carrón, I just paid the Common Fund, which my wife and I haven’t paid for some time. Unfortunately, I had to update our monthly contributions, and reduce both of them to a tenth of what we had always contributed since our enrollment in the Fraternity. I lost my job a year ago, and at the age of 55 it is not easy to find another job, especially in these times of extreme crisis. In addition to being unemployed, I have some remaining economic issues from the previous job. We came to this decision after reducing or eliminating all the superfluous expenditures. We were forced to make this decision since our situation has not changed and we do not know how much longer we must rely on the little savings we have left. We kept



the contributions, even if only symbolic, to remember that, in spite of everything, we can still hold on to what is dear to us.

**Name withheld**

### **NOT EVEN THIS DUST BELONGS TO YOU**

I work for a cleaning company and because of the economic crisis they have reduced our hours at work. Particularly, the contract with the police headquarters in my city has been seriously affected and I now have to clean the entire building in two hours instead of eight. I recognize that I have two options: either I stick it to whoever made this decision and leave the place dirty, or I roll up my sleeves and take up the chance to make the place livable, at least. So, I stepped up my work, because for me cleaning is the chance to make what I find beautiful. The police officers have recognized this and now they have started cleaning too. They have re-polished the floors, put plants in their offices, and hung curtains in their windows. Now, before I arrive they straighten up a bit to allow me to clean better and they empty the wastebaskets. How is something like this born? I remember an example that Fr. Giussani made once to a friend who was complaining that he had too much to do. Taking his handkerchief from his pocket and wiping it on the table he said, “Not even this dust belongs to you.” This is what drives me to love my job. When I walk into the police headquarters and I meet the cops, they are the face of Christ for me, because every time I go there it’s not merely to do my job so I can leave and go home, but rather I’m there to understand what Christ is proposing to me. And so, every day is a holiday.

**Antonella, Italy**

## THE CHRISTMAS POSTER

# THE LIGHT OF BABY JESUS

by Giuseppe Frangi

Toward the end of the first decade of the 1600’s, a handful of artists from Utrecht, in Holland, were summoned by their patrons to Rome where they were swept away by the novelty of Caravaggism. Among these artists was Gerhard von Hontorst, who would later become known by the Italianized nickname of Gherardo delle Notti (Gerard of the Nights). This nickname needs no explanation: his painting “The Adoration of the Shepherds,” today on display at the Uffizi Galleries in Florence is emblematic of a style that makes the most of nocturnal “special effects.” This large canvas, painted in 1620 in Florence, has an important history. It was commissioned by the nobleman Piero Gucciardini for the Cappella Maggiore of the Church of Santa Felicità (where the famous “Deposition from the Cross” by Jacopo Pontormo resides). In 1836, arguing that its location was too dark, the Director of the Uffizi convinced the Gucciardini heirs to transfer the painting to the Uffizi Galleries, to give it more visibility. In 1993, it was placed on the landing of a staircase facing Via dei Georgofili, where it was directly affected by the impact caused by the explosion of a bomb placed during the attack of May 21<sup>st</sup> that year.



**Today what remains** of the canvas is a “lyrical fragment,” as the title of a beautiful book about its restoration describes it. The image therefore tells of a painting of which today there exists only a trace (although an identical replica is conserved at the Wallraff Museum of Colonia). One recognizes the work of a Caravaggist who has adopted a very different use of light from that of the Master. Here the source of light is the Child himself, according to a fortunate novelty introduced a century before by Correggio. The beauty of the composition, the delicate nature of the gestures (in particular, that of Mary, who raises the blanket to show the Son to the shepherds), and of the gazes, makes this a very fortunate and widely popular image. Roberto Longhi, the great art historian and the true discoverer of Caravaggio, loved this image and had a smaller and more intimate version of the same subject in his own collection.

# “Maintain the *Freshness of Your Charism*, Respect the *Freedom of Each Person*, and Always Strive for *Communion*”

The address at the conclusion of the Third World Congress of Ecclesial Movements and New Communities, which was held in Rome on November 20-22, 2014, on the theme “The Joy of the Gospel: a Missionary Joy ...”

**D**ear brothers and sisters, Good morning! I offer cordial greetings to all of you taking part in this Congress sponsored by the Pontifical Council for the Laity. I thank Cardinal Ryłko for his words, as well as Archbishop Clemens. At the heart of your deliberations in these days are two elements that are essential for Christian life: *conversion* and *mission*. These are intimately connected. In fact, without an authentic conversion of heart and mind, the Gospel cannot be proclaimed; at the same time, if we are not open to mission, conversion is not possible and faith becomes sterile. The Movements and New Communities that you represent are moving towards a deeper sense of belonging to the Church, a maturity that requires vigilance in the path of daily conversion. This will enable an ever more dynamic and fruitful evangelization. I would like, therefore, to offer you a few suggestions for your journey of faith and ecclesial life.

**1. First, it is necessary to preserve the *freshness of your charism*, never lose that freshness, the freshness of your charism, always renewing that “first love” (cf. *Rev 2:4*). As time goes by, there is a greater temptation to become comfortable, to become hardened in set ways of doing things, which, while reassuring, are nonetheless sterile. There is the temptation to cage in the Holy Spirit: this is a temptation! However, “realities are more important than ideas” (cf. *Evangelii Gaudium*, 231-233); even if a certain institutionalization of the charism is necessary for its**

survival, we ought not delude ourselves into thinking that external structures can guarantee the working of the Holy Spirit. The newness of your experiences does not consist in methods or forms, or the newness itself—all of which are important—but rather in your willingness to respond with renewed enthusiasm to the Lord’s call. Such evangelical courage has allowed for the growth of your Movements and New Communities. If forms and methods become ends in themselves, they become ideological, removed from reality which is constantly developing; closed to the newness of the Spirit, such rigid forms and methods will eventually stifle the very charism which gave them life. We need always to return to the sources of our charism, and thus to rediscover the driving force needed to respond

**“If forms and methods become closed to the newness of the Spirit, such rigid forms and methods will eventually stifle the very charism which gave them life.”**

to challenges. You have not been schooled in such a spirituality. You have not attended an institution of spirituality in this way. You are not simply a small group. No! You are rather a movement, always on the way, always in movement, always open to God’s surprises which are in harmony with the first call of the movement, namely the founding charism.

**2. A further issue concerns the *way of welcoming and accompanying men and women of today*, in particular, the youth (cf. *Evangelii Gaudium*, 105-106). We are part of a wounded humanity—and we must be honest in saying this—in which all educational institutions, especially the most important one, the family, are experi-**

encing grave difficulties almost everywhere in the world. Men and women today experience serious identity problems and have difficulty making proper choices; as a result, they tend to be conditioned and to delegate important decisions about their own lives to others. We need to resist the temptation of usurping individual freedom, of directing them without allowing for their growth in genuine maturity. Every person has their own time, their own path, and we must accompany this journey. Moral or spiritual progress that manipulates a person's immaturity is only an apparent success, and one destined to fail. It is better to achieve less and move forward without seeking attention. Christian education, rather, requires a patient accompaniment that is capable of waiting for the right moment for each person, as the Lord does with each one of us. The Lord is patient with us! Patience is the only way to love truly and to lead others into a sincere relationship with the Lord.

**3. One other consideration we must never forget is that the most precious good, the seal of the Holy Spirit, is communion.** This is the supreme blessing that Jesus won for us on the Cross, the grace which the Risen Christ continually implores for us as he reveals to the Father his glorious wounds, "As you, Father, are in me, and I in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me" (*John* 17:21). For the world to believe that Jesus is Lord, it needs to see communion among Christians. If, on the other hand, the world sees divisions, rivalries, backbiting, the terrorism of gossip, please... if these things are seen, regardless of the cause, how can we evangelize? Remember this further principle: "Unity prevails over conflict" (*Evangelii Gaudium*, 226-230), because our brothers and sisters are always of greater value than our personal attitudes; indeed, it is for our brothers and sisters that Christ has shed his blood (1 *Pet* 1:18-19); it has not been shed for my ideas! In addition, real communion cannot exist in Movements or in New Communities unless these are integrated within the greater communion of our Holy Mother, the hierar-

chical Church. "The whole is greater than the part" (cf. *Evangelii Gaudium*, 234-237), and the part only has meaning in relation to the whole. Communion also consists in confronting together and in a united fashion the most pressing questions of our day, such as life, the family, peace, the fight against poverty in all its forms, religious freedom and education. In particular, New Movements and Communities are called to coordinate their efforts in caring for those wounded by a globalized mentality that places consumption at the center, neglecting God and those values that are essential for life.

In order to attain ecclesial maturity, therefore, maintain—I say again—the *freshness of your charisma*, respect the *freedom of each person*, and always strive for *communion*. Do not forget, however, that to reach this goal, conversion must be missionary: the strength to over-

come temptations and insufficiencies comes from the profound joy of proclaiming the Gospel, which is the foundation of your charisms. In fact, "when the Church summons Christians to take up the task of evangelization, she is simply pointing to the source of authentic personal fulfillment" (*Evangelii Gaudium*, 10), the true motivation for renewal of one's own life, since all mission is a sharing in the mission of Christ who always precedes and accompanies us in the work of evangelization. Dear brothers and sisters, you have already borne much

fruit for the Church and the world. You will bear even greater fruit with the help of the Holy Spirit, who raises up and renews his gifts and charisms, and through the intercession of Mary, who never ceases to assist and accompany her children. Go forward, always in movement... never stop but always keep moving! I assure you of my prayers and I ask you to pray for me—I have great need, truly—and I cordially impart to each of you my blessing. I now ask you, together, to pray to Our Lady who had the experience of keeping alive the freshness of the first encounter with God, of moving forward in humility, always being on the way, respecting each person's time. She never tired of having this missionary heart.

**"We need to resist the temptation directing [people] without allowing for their growth in genuine maturity. Patience is the only way to lead others into a relationship with the Lord."**





**CLOSE UP**

# CHRISTMAS IN ALEPPO

**Their third Christmas in a state of war. The marks of bombs and grenades still riddle the buildings. Electricity runs an hour each day. They've lost their jobs, their homes. Many have lost loved ones. Those who flee do not know if they will find life or death. Hana remains, with the baby she is expecting... Voices from Syria, waiting for peace.**

BY LUCA FIORE





Aleppo, Syria: a young girl with her brother. There are many children that pick up garbage to help their families.

**C**ome December 25<sup>th</sup>, two years, five months, and nine days will have passed since the confrontation that is known in Syria as “the mother of all battles.” Aleppo cannot survive much more. The city, whose population today is only half of its pre-war total of three million, is divided into two concentric circles. The external circle is in the hands of the rebels, and the inner one is governed by the military from Damascus. The one thing that keeps them from being surrounded is a small corridor under military control that connects them to the rest of the country. Some estimate that over 10,000 have died and 4,500 have been displaced. A border between the two territories has divided the streets and sidewalks for months on end. Barricades and checkpoints are like scars that torment this city that used to be one body. Outside of the city limits the fighting continues, and grenades and mortar shells occasionally find their way into the buildings in the urban area. To own a generator, and be able to find the fuel to keep it running, is to be extremely fortunate. Fresh fruit and vegetables can be found, and stores are regularly restocked, but prices continue to rise. Last summer the rebels damaged the aqueduct and entire neighborhoods were left without clean water for weeks. Wells became the most coveted possessions. Now the water is running again, but for how long?

Aleppo used to be the Syrian city with the largest population of Christians. Once boasting 200,000 faithful, it now numbers approximately half of that. For them, it will be the third Christmas in a state of war. Their last was a dangerous one: between December 15 and December 28, 2013, the Syrian army mounted an aerial attack that, according to some sources, killed over 500 people. And this year? The intensity of the violence has diminished, but the fear has not. Just 15



Children wait in line to receive food at a soup kitchen in the al-Myassar neighborhood.

miles away ISIS is pushing forward. If Assad’s army were to give in, Aleppo could face the same fate as Mosul.

And what about the Christians who are still there? What is life like for them? How do they prepare to celebrate the holiday that, at least in the rest of the world, is synonymous with peace and joy?

Elias Machek was forced to flee his home on Good Friday, 2013. That morning, he woke to the sound of gunshots, along with shouts of “Al-lahu akbar.” He took what little he could carry and headed for a safer neighborhood. “The streets were full of people fleeing,” he says. “I saw one man fall after being hit with a bullet. No one was able to rescue him. When I think back to those moments, I think of how God’s hand protected us and guided our steps. Pray for us,

that we do not give in to the temptation to deny our faith.”

**THE “BLUE MARISTS.”** Hana Krir is 25 years old, and she married Elias last July. Her Facebook page still displays the pictures from the wedding, which do not betray the fact that the celebration could have been threatened by bombs at any point. For now, they are living with relatives, because they cannot afford to pay rent. There is some good news: they are expecting a baby, but even that joy is not without some underlying anxiety. “They said at the hospital that they are not sure if they will be able to help me [to deliver],” Hana says. “We’ll see.” She teaches English in a Catholic school. “The students can’t concentrate. All of us have at least one relative

**It used to be the city with the largest population of Christians. It now numbers half of that.**





Hana Krir on her Wedding day.



Elias Machek.



Mia Hasal.



Some of the refugees hosted by the Marist Brothers.

who has been killed in the war?”

And what about Christmas? “We don’t feel like it’s coming at all. We have so many problems... Even the rich aren’t able to cover their most basic needs. Thankfully, we have Caritas. That helps us, by bringing us a little food and gas so that we can cook. What name will I give to my child? If it’s a boy, Abed Allah, which is my father-in-law’s name and means ‘slave of God.’ If it’s a girl, I don’t know.”

“We’d like to have a nice celebration, but how can we? We are living in fear,” says Mia Asal. “A few days ago, our house was hit by a mortar shell.” Mia is married to Umit. Because of the war, they both lost their jobs: she, at a bank; and he, as a tour guide. They have two daughters, one who is 20 and one who is 16. “Their studies continue, but there is a lot of tension for them, too. We’d like to leave, but we don’t have the money. I wish that my daughters

would smile again. What do we ask of Jesus who is coming? Peace, for Aleppo and for Syria. I don’t know what to say. I feel sad and defeated.”

“This Christmas, I decorated a tree. It’s the symbol of life,” Mrs. Raouik says, as she tells us her family’s story. They fled a year ago from Djabal el Sayed, a residential area of Aleppo. In the summer of 2012, they had found themselves hosting refugees from the various sections of the city that had been invaded by the rebels. Not all of their neighbors were willing to do the same. Some didn’t think they should aid Muslims. Mrs. Raouik had a different attitude.

“Looking at them, my husband and I saw people who had lost everything.” The following year, she was in the same situation. “One morning we woke to

the sound of gunshots and the rebels yelling. My oldest daughter panicked. The younger one went silent.” The next day the exodus began. The streets were packed with people. “We didn’t know if we were running toward life or death. Throughout that seemingly endless day, I kept saying to myself the words of the Psalm, ‘The Lord is my light and my salvation, whom shall I fear?’ In the end, we reached a safe neighborhood where we found some friends who were expecting us.” The following months were

difficult. She faced the struggles of trying to recuperate and begin again, and coming to terms with being among the survivors. The neighborhood where she was born and raised no longer exists. However, “little by little, we felt the presence of the Lord. >>

**“Pray for us, that we do not give in to the temptation to deny our faith.”**





A rebel guards the Karm al-Jabal district in Aleppo.



Some children during the activities arranged by the Marists.



Antonia Raouik and her daughters.

» We witnessed solidarity and the precious help from Fr. Georges Sabe and the other ‘blue Marists.’ Even though all roads seem to be blocked, Mary shows us, in our hearts, a path of hope. Despite everything, this Christmas, life will begin anew, as always.”

The “blue Marists” play a vital role in Aleppo. Every day, they oversee the distribution of a hot meal for 350 people, and they are helping to pay rent for 45 families. They provide free medical care for wounded civilians, since the two hospitals in the city are on the verge of collapse. For the children, they have organized a school with an enrollment of 280, made up of Christians and Muslims. Another 20 children between the ages of seven and 13, who cannot attend school for various reasons, are tutored to continue their studies. Aline, Laila, and Mony are three young women who work with them. Each has her own questions and her own story. Aline told us, “We lost everything, but the loss that hurts the most is not understanding *who* or *what* this is all for. Few painful experiences really affect me anymore. I ask God, ‘Why don’t you

**“Little by little, we felt the presence of the Lord. We witnessed solidarity.”**

intervene?’ Yes, I’m a believer, but I feel like I’m even losing the faith. And so I wonder if it still makes sense to celebrate.”

Laila explains the paradox of those who have lived for two years oppressed by violence. “War and peace; hope and desperation; impatience and waiting; faith and doubt. My actions don’t correspond with what I know of myself, and with St. Paul I say, ‘I do not do the good I want.’ Pain has permeated my life. Should I stay or should I leave? I don’t have an answer.”

Mony speaks of the battle not to fall into the trap of war; to not let war dominate her life. “It’s faith that illumines my choices. It makes me turn toward others, those who are different than I am, or who are wounded. These days, I can understand my life through the experience of the cross. Sometimes the way of the faith seems like a utopia; however, even if everything seems to suggest the opposite, it’s possible even now to have an attitude of peace, reconciliation and solidarity.”

About 100 miles south of Aleppo, the war also plagues Homs. The hostile overtaking of the historic center of the city, which was completed in

May, didn’t put an end to fighting. Yes, compared to last year, this Christmas will be calmer, but only from a military perspective.

**THE YOUNG PEOPLE OF HOMS.** “How are we preparing for the coming of Jesus? First, we are preparing our bodies. It will get very cold, and we have no fuel for heat. Here it can get down below zero,” says Fr. Ziad Hilal, director of Jesuit Refugee Services in Homs. Getting straight to the point he says, “The sanctions are not only affecting the government in Damascus; it’s the regular citizens who are suffering the most.” He speaks from experience, because the organization he directs is helping 3,000 people in need throughout the city, distributing food and basic necessities. He headed up a clinic and activity center for 85 people with mental disabilities, and another for those physically disabled by the war. In addition, around 2,000 Christian and Muslim children benefit daily from several Jesuit-run centers where they can study and play together.

Outside of her office, we see Nara Nasseif, a 22-year-old student in her second year of college. In the afternoon, she works for the Jesuits »

# AMEL NONA, THE REFUGEE BISHOP OF MOSUL

## “I AM SUSTAINED BY THE JOY OF THOSE I SERVE”

HE HAS BEEN LIVING IN ERBIL SINCE ISIS OCCUPIED HIS CITY. HE SEES THE FAITHFUL BEGIN TO LOSE THEIR TRUST, AND HELPS THEM TO FIND A HOUSE AND GAS TO COOK... “HERE AND NOW, IT’S MORE IMPORTANT TO STAY WITH THEM THAN TO SAY THE RIGHT WORDS.”

**T**he home of the Chaldean Archbishop of Mosul is now occupied by the militants of ISIS. They destroyed crosses and profaned churches. “I heard that they began to sell the furnishings of the cathedral,” Archbishop Amel Shamon Nona tells us. He is a refugee bishop who has sought asylum in the Kurdish territory of Iraq. We interviewed him in June, months after the fall of Mosul (see *Traces*, July 2014). Today, he is the shepherd of a scattered flock, of thousands of families fleeing fundamentalism. They are in need of everything.

Winter has arrived, and it promises to be the hardest season of their lives. One consolation is that they are totally free to celebrate Christmas as they are hosted by the local Christian communities. Archbishop Nona is preparing for Christmas night just as the father of a family would: seeking out gifts for his little ones.

### Your Excellency, how would you describe these months in exile?

It’s sad not being able to live in your own house, far from the land where you were born. People are sleeping in tents or in classrooms. They don’t have jobs; they have lost everything. In the beginning, we had the hope that the crisis would be resolved quickly. As time has passed, that has vanished because the signs are not good. What dominates now is discomfort.

### What is the greatest cause of suffering?

The spreading loss of trust: trust in our own country, Iraq, and in Muslims in general, though we have lived with them our whole lives. Today, I see people without hope for the future; they live one day at a time.

### Have they also lost faith?

No, this they haven’t lost. Our people are here precisely because they do not want to lose their faith. If they had converted to Islam, they could have stayed in their homes.

### Are they angry with God?

During the first days, there was anger. Not against God, but against the violence committed by man.

### Why do they choose exile and suffering rather than abandoning their faith?

In the Middle East, and especially in Iraq, the faith isn’t just an idea; it’s what constitutes your identity and personality. To deny one’s faith would be to deny oneself.

### What do you tell the faithful?

More than saying anything today, it’s necessary to take action, to do something, and to stay with them. This is more impor-

tant than any words. Of course, I try to explain that life does not end here, that not everything is lost; but I understand that, right now, it’s most important to live in service of their lives.

### What do you do to help them? How do you spend your days?

An hour ago, a director from a refugee center that shelters 76 families in Ankawa visited me. He told me that, as of 24 hours ago, they have no gas and they cannot cook. I called the mayor of the city and made him promise to send a truck with gas tomorrow. Earlier today, a family with a son who has a disability came to me. They are living in a classroom with other families. Due to complications with their situation, they asked me to help find a real house for them. Beyond these kinds of tasks, I visit the refugee center to meet people and understand their problems in person. Thus, the days go by. Every day there is something. I’ve been living this way for three months.

### What is sustaining you?

My mission is to serve these people. To serve does not mean just to preach or to speak about the faith. Here and now, it also means finding dignified conditions in which a person may live his or her humanity. Of course, faith and prayer sustain me. Then, there is the joy that I see in people when, serving, we manage to find a simple solution to the problems we face every day. This joy is the motivation to continue serving.

### Joy?

Yes, it is something that I see every day. People thank us. Not always, but often they do. I see that what we are doing helps them to regain a little trust. Still, there are many needs to which we are not able to respond. This is painful for me.

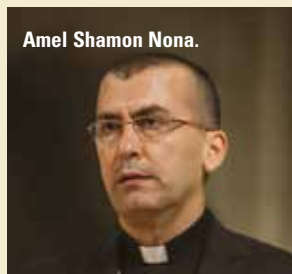
### How are you preparing for Christmas?

We are trying to organize something, especially for the children. We would like to be able to give them a gift, something small but worthwhile. We are looking for space to have a bit of a celebration. We hope we will manage.

### What is your prayer to the baby Jesus?

I ask that He help men and women to understand that violence is inhuman. I pray that we can find a solution to our situation that respects everyone, regardless of their religion, ethnicity, or skin color. Just like the manger in Bethlehem, where there were kings, shepherds, and even animals. I am asking Jesus for the gift to return to our homeland soon, and to live in peace with everyone.

(L.F.)



Amel Shamon Nona.



# THE GREAT DIVIDE BETWEEN GAZA AND THE MANGER OF BETHLEHEM

ISRAELI ATTACKS, THE *SHARIA* OF HAMAS, AND THE CHRISTIANS WHO WOULD LIKE TO SPEND CHRISTMAS IN THE HOLY LAND, BUT CANNOT, AND YET...

It is the dream of every Palestinian Christian living in Gaza to celebrate Christmas in Bethlehem; and yet, the little town is an almost unreachable destination for anyone who lives in the strip. George, an Arab Catholic and father of two, is well aware of this fact. Every year he asks permission from the Israeli authority. "I always try, but I'm too young to have any hope of getting a visa." Too young in this case means 33 years old. Authorization is given, in most cases, to those who are at least 40. The official explanation is that Israel must not run unnecessary risks by permitting, George says, "us terrorists to trample the Promised Land." Because of this, no one between the ages of 16 and 40 can pass through Erez Crossing—the long, fenced corridor along a row of buildings reduced to rubble by attacks—which leads to Yad Mordechai, the only road by which to reach the Holy Land and, a bit farther, Bethlehem.

It is a difficult time, and hope is beginning to falter. Visas are coming more slowly and tensions are increasing. "What a dream it would be to kiss the silver star that marks the place where Jesus was born!" Jad tells us with emotion. "We live in a city where the Holy Family stopped during their flight to Egypt, but we have never seen the city from which they set off." It's been like this for almost 30 years.

"Up until the First Intifada, it was possible," a woman, almost 70 years old, tells us. She is an active member of the only Latin Rite parish in Gaza. "It was a bustling city. Not without its problems, of course, but everything was more joyful. There was no wall yet, and my family and I went every year to celebrate Christmas in the sacred places."

Of the 1,500 visas requested this year, "most likely, fewer than 100 will be granted." Neeso, a mother who dreams of taking her son to the other

side of the wall, is not optimistic. She dreams of seeing the star, of touching a concrete sign of hope after months of difficulty, in which bombings began once again in Gaza. "We live every day in terror of the Israeli attacks, and in fear of Hamas." Eight years ago Hamas, led by Khaled Mashal, imposed *Sharia* law on the territory. Because of this, Neeso is required to wear a veil and to publicly follow all of the laws that originate from the Islamic integralist government. "For example, Sunday in Gaza is not a day off; it's a working day, as Christmas will be also: a day in which everyone goes to work, and then goes to Mass."

"We have to begin again, always," says Johny, who will spend Christmas in his home. "I'm still repairing it, after a missile damaged it in July. If Christmas is the birth of Jesus, then it must also

be the birth of a new life, here in my homeland." His five-year-old son Jamal is worried. "But, can Santa Claus make it across the wall to bring us presents?" Johny responds, smiling, "I don't know about Santa Claus, but the baby Jesus definitely can." The Holy Child is awaited by the people of the parish, who are like one big family. They make up the last 300 Catholics who have remained in the place that carries the memory of the Holy Family. "Who could be more in need of the birth of the One who brings peace, if not we who live with constant war?" Issa, one of the catechists, asked for permission to go to Bethlehem, "and if they grant it, I will go. Maybe the visa will come on the twenty-third, or even the twenty-fourth. I don't care; my bags are packed. They can do what they want to keep us out or discourage us. What they don't know is that Christmas comes anyway. Jesus is born all the same. He is born even in Gaza."

Andrea Avveduto



The Church of the Nativity.

» to help support her family. "People who want to receive assistance come to me. I have to try to understand what they need, and direct them to one of our centers. They are tired and often angry. A few of them yell and want us to respond immediately to what they've asked. It's not easy. I meet them and try to calm them down. In the beginning, it was really tough. I went home and prayed to God that He would give me passion for these people. I tried to relive the experience I had in my parish as a girl, and bring that to my work."

"I SEE LIFE." She would have met people like Josef, a 23-year-old pharmacy student, who helps the Jesuits to catechize the grade school students. "It would be understandable to think of Homs as a city of death, but when you come here and see what they are doing, you see life," explains the young man. "I've been a Christian since I was born. I've had my moments of difficulty and doubt about the faith, but every time I come back here I run into Fr. Ziad and the others and I see a light that I don't find anywhere else. Today it is the same, it's not an idea; it's something that I perceive and live." Walking the streets, no one would suspect that Christmas is coming to Homs. There are no lights and no decorated trees. "We began Advent explaining to the children the mystery of the Annunciation," Josef continues, "so that we can also seek to welcome the announcement in our hearts." This year, for the first time, thanks to a donation from Europe, Fr. Ziad will be able to buy a gift for each of the 5,000 children: chocolate, candy, t-shirts, and pajamas. "It will be another strange Christmas, but I can say that we are happy. When Christ came into this world, He didn't have electricity or heat. He was cold like we are, but that did not keep Him from being a friend to those that He met." **I**





# CRIES THAT CAN'T GO UNHEARD

**Nurseries in Ecuador, schools in Kenya, and nutrition centers throughout the world: these AVSI-supported works focus on what people need for a new beginning, as illustrated in the AVSI exhibit at the Rimini Meeting. This year AVSI is also raising funds for the Christians fleeing from ISIS, the victims of war in Syria, and for Sierra Leone, which is currently in the grip of an ebola epidemic.**

BY PAOLO PEREGO

**F**or many years now, the annual AVSI Tents Campaign has taken various local forms: as gazebos set up in the shopping districts of cities, fundraising concerts, dinners and performances, even aperitifs and gatherings with those who work in the field. And yet, these efforts have never become merely routine. For the 2014/2015 Tents Campaign, the key words

are *development* and *emergency*, which will be expressed through support for six projects in various parts of the world.

The first of the two themes was at the heart of the exhibit produced by AVSI and the Irish journalist John Waters, at The Meeting of Rimini. The exhibit recounted the experiences of nursery schools in Quito, Ecuador, >>



Exiles at Marj el Kok camp, in Liban. Left, a camp for Iraqi refugees in Erbil.

» schools and educational efforts in Kenya, and the network of nutrition centers that span the globe. These nutrition centers follow the example of the CREN in São Paulo, Brazil, which has been working in the field of nutrition education in the favelas since 1993 (see the box on p. 25). AVSI has also mobilized to respond to various emergency situations currently before the eyes of the world, and asks everyone's contribution in this effort. One such emergency is in Iraq, with the exodus of Christians persecuted by ISIS, and the refugees in the cities of the Iraqi region of Kurdistan.

"We don't have a presence in those areas," explains Maria Teresa Gatti, head of communications for AVSI, the Italian non-governmental organization. "But following the suggestion of Shlemon Warduni, Auxiliary Bishop of Bagdad of the Chaldeans, we have decided to support the Caritas project to help exiles in the area of Erbil, in Iraqi Kurdistan, with winter approaching and ISIS continuing its advance" (see *Traces*, 10/2014).

**FOOD, MEDICINE, AND BLANKETS.** In Iraq, Caritas has been collaborating with the local Churches since 1992. Early

on it battled the crisis caused by the embargo against Saddam Hussein's regime, offering help in many forms, from food to medicine. Then, in January 2014, with the arrival of ISIS, the emergency changed and the Caritas

workers were forced to abandon their centers throughout the country, including those in northern Iraq. The workers nevertheless remained in the area to give their help to those who were exiled from their homes. In June alone, Erbil saw more than \$800,000 in aid distributed in the form of food and basic supplies, often in collaboration with the bishops of the various Churches, themselves refugees. In addition to material support, Caritas seeks to help families reunite after having fled their homes. Caritas has presented a project to support one thousand such families in Erbil and Baghdad, with periodic distribution of food (rice, flour, legumes, oil, canned meat) and heavy clothes and blankets.

Similar support and hospitality is offered in Syria as well, for a population that has been the victim of an internecine war that has killed almost 200,000 people in three years. The Franciscan Custody of the Holy Land is doing this work today, and AVSI has decided to lend its

**With the war, the doors of churches have been opened to Christian and Muslim families in search of help. They provide sustenance for four thousand people every day.**





support. “The Custody has been in the country for centuries: this is the Holy Land, even though we often think of it only as Israel and Palestine,” explains Tommaso Saltini, director of the Association for the Holy Land which aids Emergency in Syria. The Association coordinates the work of the 14 friars who live in Aleppo, Homs, Damascus, and the border areas of Lebanon and Turkey. “The Custody represents 80% of the Latin Church in Syria. Its mission has always been pastoral work in the parishes and educational activity.” With the war, the doors of convents and churches have been opened to Christian and Muslim families in search of help, and four hospitality centers have been started in Knayeh, Yacoubieh, Jser-El Choughour, and Jdeideh. They host about two hundred people and provide sustenance for another four thousand people every day.

The Middle East has always been a crucible for different ethnicities and religions, with many examples of co-existence, often positive. “Today, it needs to find a road to delineate its future, which can only be built together,” says Fr. Pierbattista Pizzaballa, head of the Custody, who recently visited his brother Franciscans. Fr. Simon, for example, travels by car to bring food and aid to Damascus and its environs. “It is the only way, even though it is dangerous because of the rebels.”

In the north, the center in Knayeh no longer has glass

in their windows, and rain comes through the roof. In other villages, such as Ghassanieh, people have sought refuge in the convent because rebels have occupied their homes. There the friars have a small medical clinic, but lack medicine. “For some time we have not heard from them. There is no electricity and it is difficult to send aid. We know that water is scarce, and sometimes even 10 days can pass without any water. The wells are not enough, but building one costs \$25,000,” recounts Fr. Simon. That is a lot of money, if one considers that €150 supports a family of three for three weeks, €21 provides a medicine kit for four children, while complete medical assistance for two newborns costs only €63. And yet, the friar adds, in the midst of a thousand difficulties and bombs, “the people never stop going to church.”

**HIGH VELOCITY.** There is no longer a war in Sierra Leone; now the emergency is ebola. AVSI has been helping since 2000, supporting its local partner, the Family Homes Movement, founded by Fr. Giuseppe Berton, a Xaverian brother who died in 2013. AVSI and its partner have always cared for minors, first by responding to the emergency of child soldiers in the country’s last war, then by advancing education and new beginnings with the opening of two schools: >>





» Holy Family in the periphery of Freetown, with 1,600 students from nursery school to high school; and an elementary school in a village outside the city.

“Ebola arrived this summer, with a very high velocity of diffusion that still continues to increase, with consequences far beyond contagion and deaths,” explains Nicola Orsini, AVSI’s point person in Sierra Leone. Schools have been closed, people have been forbidden to gather together, and dangerous misinformation has worsened the situation. On the one hand there is fear. Six children were held in a mosque, in quarantine in a holy place, “cursed” because their parents had died of Ebola. It took days of negotiation with the local leader to approach them and see how they were, and to at least give them food and support. After 21 days they were released, none of them with the virus, though a three-year-old girl did not survive. And then there are the opposite cases, like the one recounted by Ernst Sesay of the Family Homes Movement. In a village in the north, a Muslim religious leader who died of ebola was buried by a team of physicians using safe techniques. The people of the village, not believing that such an important and venerated person could have died of the virus, disinterred him, washed him and buried him again in another place. Eleven of them

## THE OTHER PROJECTS

### ECUADOR, THE NURSERY SCHOOLS OF QUITO

In two provinces—Pisulli, on the periphery of Quito, and Manabi, farther from the urban center—AVSI has been working for more than a decade to follow the lives of over **1,500 children** with funds from international support efforts. In particular this year, the Tents seek to raise money to help support **five family nursery schools** (for a total of 30 children) that were established by their mothers, and the Ojos de Cielo nursery school of Quito (serving another 30 children between one and five years old). The project also foresees support for an **after-school program** in the same area for 150 young people.



### KENYA, THE “SISTERS” OF SAINT KIZITO

Development starts with education. Since its arrival in Nairobi, AVSI has always been focused on educational initiatives and other related activities, including **foreign adoption**, but with a fundamental commitment to opening **schools and centers of professional formation** like Saint Kizito School, and her younger “sisters” that have flourished over the years: the Emanuela Mazzola nursery school; the Little Prince elementary school in the slum of Kibera; the Urafiki Carovana elementary school and the Saint Riccardo Pampuri elementary school in Mutuati which sits at the base of Mount Kenya; and, most recently, the newly-founded Cardinal Otunga High School. For the next year, part of the contributions from the upcoming Tents campaign will serve to help these works.

### FROM BRAZIL TO HAITI FOR “FOOD SCHOOLS”

At the AVSI exhibit at the Rimini Meeting, many learned about the work of the Center for Nutritional Recovery and Education of **São Paulo**, Brazil, which has helped over 5,000 children of the favelas since 1994, through inquiries, studies, interventions in the field, and nutrition education for mothers. This year, AVSI has decided to support not only the life of its Paulist partner, but also all those similar projects that have been sparked by this work: the Meo center in **Burundi**, the Humure center in **Rwanda**, centers created in **Nigeria**, southern **Sudan**, and **Haiti**, a canteen and educational center in Mexico, garden schools in **Myanmar**, and projects supporting food production in the **Congo**.

died because of this.”

Thus the first effort of AVSI and the Family Homes Movement is to provide information. There is the idea of working with other organizations to create isolation centers not far from the villages, with medical personnel for patients suspected of having the virus, and the opportunity to receive visits from family members. In addition, the mission of education continues. Since schools are closed, the government is transmitting lessons by radio. “We are trying to re-transmit them in rural areas, through local broadcasters, and to organize ways to respond to the students’ questions, even by telephone.”

The work of hosting children orphaned by the virus goes on, with the attempt to re-unite them with family members or relatives. “Unfortunately, there is a stigma,” the AVSI point person tells us. “Fear of the virus generates rejection of those who have been in contact with the disease or those who have recovered from it. This happens for many of the three thousand orphans of the country. We have plans to renovate the old hospitality center of Saint Michael of Lakka, where years ago

we responded to the emergency of the child soldiers, to give a home to 200 orphans, children of this new emergency.”





# INVITED HOME

**He's been working with the elderly for 20 years, alternating over the last six between suburbs and ocean-front penthouses of Miami. ENRICO GRUGNETTI, the nurse who made a lasting impression at this year's MedConference in New York, reveals the adventure that begins each time he knocks on a patient's door, and how they become his "companions on the journey."**

BY ALESSANDRA STOPPA

**W**hen he knocks on the door, all he knows is a name, age, and gender. Each time there is an unknown face behind the door, whether it's the ornate door of a penthouse with an

ocean view, the nondescript door of an apartment in the suburbs, or the screen door of an old wood house amidst the green marshes. The setting is Miami, a cultural melting pot with a spring-like climate six months out of the year, which is now home for

Enrico Grugnetti, a 46-year-old Sardinian nurse who visits the elderly and homebound for a living.

In mid-October, Enrico made a lasting impression on the doctors, nurses, and students who came from all over the U.S. and other parts of >>



» the world for the annual Med-Conference in New York. He told stories illustrating the challenge and beauty of his work: the surprise when something “clicks”—to use his word—and he is able to form a relationship with a patient and experience their friendship enriching his life. “The elderly are always surprising you,” he insisted. He has worked with this age group for 20 years, first in a Cardiac Surgical Ward, later in a retirement community, and now by making home visits. His clients include an old man from Haiti who only speaks Creole, several Latinos, African-Americans who believe more in folk healing rituals than in medicine, and the former “Alabama boy” who has no love for foreigners. “The person is singular, not only the patient, but me, too,” Enrico said in New York. “When I meet a person, I meet a person. It would really take a tremendous effort to separate him from his medical problem.” It would be equally difficult to separate Enrico’s work from his person.

**THE NEED FOR MOZART.** Juan is a true gentleman. He is a Cuban exile who, like many in Miami, arrived in the U.S. shortly after the revolution. He sits silently in a corner of his home in Miami Beach while his caretaker explains his many health issues to Enrico. His wife, tired and laden with anxiety, adds to the list. They ask for more services, because they cannot keep up with the needs of a man who suffers the crippling effects of Parkinson’s and a broken hip. Enrico examines Juan, and gives his recommendations. As he works, he gets to know him better. He learns that Juan worked as an opera critic for a newspaper. “What is your favorite opera?” Enrico asks. “*The Marriage of Figaro*.” The opera is his passion. Their eyes



Enrico Grugnetti.

meet and they begin to sing “Non Più Andrai, Farfallone Amoroso,” together, by heart, from start to finish. “In that moment, everything changed. The tension melted away. It was still just the four of us in that room, but the worries were no longer there. There was instead the recognition of a possibility: something that can break into our life, something can surprise us and embrace our every circumstance. And it is not something that we make, it comes from the outside.” Juan’s wife ceased her complaints and walked Enrico to the door. “Come again; come back and sing with him. This is what he needs.” These visits could become for Enrico mere acts of sympathy, but have instead had the power to transform his life and his job. Patients fling

all their needs in his face, with their fragile bodies and fragile spirits. They have grave illnesses, sometimes chronic and sometimes unpredictable. Often, they are hospitalized, and he takes care of them once they are released: “I accompany them in the transition; I help to understand their needs, to help them to accept the loss of autonomy, which is a cause of great suffering, and to create the best possible situation for them to stay at home, where they want to be.” Every day he visits five or six patients; at any given time he is attending to a total of 40 people. Usually, he is the only one caring for them outside of family members, who prepare their meals, help them get around, bathe them and keep track of their medicines. “To listen, to pay attention to family members and to educate them is an essential part of my job,” he tells us. Some patients live alone, and En-





riches your life.” Friedrich passed away two years ago and Enrico thinks of him often. “Not as another thing that happened to me, but because he was the dear companion that God gave me along the journey of life.”

**MIA AND HER DOLL.** Another story came from a visit with Luis. It was the second time Enrico had visited the house where his patient lived with relatives, including his three-year-old granddaughter, Mia. Enrico checked his blood pressure, temperature, listened to his heart and his lungs, and then spoke to his daughter about his health. Mia came over to Enrico and gave him her doll. She wanted him to give it a checkup, too. Enrico, who is 6’3”, bent over and, with the greatest care and attention, listened to the little doll’s heart, pulse, and stomach. “This doll is very healthy!” Mia was pleased. “When I was leaving, I waved good-bye from the door, but she ran over and hugged my knees.” It could have been brushed off as just a sweet moment, but something deeper happened in him. His entire life passed in front of him. “In that moment, I realized that everything that had happened to me, *everything*, had led me to be there, with those people, to

rico is the only one who comes to see them. Most of them are impoverished; almost all of them are American ‘transplants,’ whether steeped in African culture or hailing from the northeast suburb Hialeah, which is 100% Cuban.

Each elderly person has a story to tell, and could tell it the same way a hundred times. Friedrich was a Jewish man who lived to age 90. His story was his own dramatic life. Enrico never tired of hearing it. Born in Austria, Friedrich had escaped the Nazis when he was a young boy, fought in the war and ended up in America, where he built a business from the ground up and became wealthy. “He was a very intelligent man, who portioned out the right medicine for himself and for his diabetic wife every morning.” One day, he accidentally mixed up the two medicines and was found collapsed

on the sidewalk in hypoglycemic shock. “The first time that I visited him it was the end of the day. I remember that I wanted to put off that last patient to go home, but I said to myself, ‘Come on, I can make it quick.’ I stayed with him for hours.” He was disagreeable and argumentative, without an ounce of sentimentality. He was a hardened man who refused help. Enrico went to his house once a week for three years. One day, Friedrich told him, “You are my friend.” “It was a breakthrough for me,” Enrico said. “Who am I to have come into contact with a man with an extraordinary life like his? He was expressing something that I had never clearly understood: any relationship with anyone can be a real, deep friendship that en-

**“Everything that had happened to me had led me to be there, with those people.”**

recognize with them that all we have is the present, and that within the present there is something of the eternal.” No statistic or probability could explain his meeting them; he grew up in in Sar-

dinia, Italy. When he was little, he used to look at a map and wonder if he would ever see Rome, and now he has been living in Florida for six years. He became a nurse “by chance,” because a friend told him, “I’m going to take the exam, do you want to come?” and he, who had quit school, decided to follow her lead. “I can say that the people I meet are >>



» a part of my life because I recognize that Destiny is present, and brings us together.” He doesn’t know why the realization came in that moment and not in another, “but I know that if I am open, the possibility is always there... always. It’s simple.”

**HIDDEN MEDICINES.** He has the growing desire to live this way every day, “not to be concerned with arriving and fixing everything, but to let myself be surprised by life that is happening around me, and to live with an infinite horizon. I experience it in the simplicity of a human encounter, through my own fragility and that of others. This is Jesus who comes.” Enrico never imagined being able to call Him by name. “If I hadn’t encountered Christ, then that dizzying sensation at the mystery of the person in front of me would have remained a confused thought. Instead, I see it is Jesus’s gaze on things. I can live without the awareness of the depths of reality, but these facts reveal the true nature of things to me. Reality is the Mystery that is happening, and that touches us.”

The relationship between a medical professional and a patient is delicate. “If you yourself are not sustained, you cannot face the drama. Especially here, the pressures of the system are overbearing, and to protect themselves, many stick to giving formulaic instructions; but it’s not enough to say, ‘These are the medicines you need to take.’” Even if they have access to drugs, patients don’t necessarily take them, especially the elderly, and the worst are those who are alone.

When Emma, a Cuban woman, finally began to trust Enrico, she pulled from under her table a bag full of hidden medicines. Of her 20 prescriptions, she took only four. “Some

**“I can discover what I am capable of only within a relationship.”**

worry about the side effects, others don’t believe in medicine or are generally confused, which could be dangerous. If you go there just to repeat that they need to take care of themselves, you’ve done nothing.” When you enter into a relationship, the results are exceptional: you can even help the other to uncover medical issues that doctors have missed. “It’s a profession that requires intelligence, knowledge, and affection. These three aspects always go together. I can discover what I am capable of, and when I’m capable of it, only within a relationship.” Sometimes he seems to have failed,

as in the sad case of a terminally ill man whose family gave him chili powder because of an old Jamaican tradition. They didn’t realize it was going into his lungs. “They didn’t want to let me help, and I didn’t have the patience or the right words or gaze to help. I stopped going, because I was more of a problem than a help.” The only thing he was able to do for him was give him a bath. “God who became man was a nurse,” Pope Francis said recently.

“God gets involved, He comes close to our wounds and heals them with His hands. It’s Jesus’s personal labor. God doesn’t save us merely by a decree or a law, He saves us with His tenderness, with caresses; He saves us by His life, given for us.”

**YES OR NO.** Enrico’s first homebound patient was Fr. Giussani. He cared for him, along with others, for three years. In that time he learned to be open, to not object to reality. “For [Fr. Giussani], everything was relationship with the Mystery, even things that I rebelled against and said, ‘But not this, that aspect needs to be fixed, it’s all wonderful *except*...’ For him, everything was given, and to see him was to participate in the gaze of Christ, which makes all things new.” He was not talking about mysticism, but of knowing things as they truly are, right there in the houses of his patients, and as their needs transform him. “The other has two eyes that look at me and ask, ‘Are you with me?’ It’s not something calculated. And perhaps I’m not all there, but reality invites me to be present, and I can say Yes or No. My greatest desire is to accept the invitation.” **I**



The door of a patient’s house.  
“Don’t be afraid, open your heart to Christ.”



## THE STORY

### ON THE DOORSTEP

“Gianna, what’s on the doorstep?” The woman, arm in arm with her husband, stops and looks. “I think it’s a bag...” It is dark under the portico of their home in Milan. As they get closer, the smell of alcohol overpowers them. It’s not a bag. Crouched on the doormat is a man, a few meters away from a battered wheelchair with a few bags hanging on it. “And now what do we do?” “He’s sleeping. We step over him and go in before he wakes up.”

Once we are in the house Gianna exclaims, “That’s all we need, a hobo! Did you see how he’s dressed? What if he stays all winter? Maybe he’s even dangerous. I’m going to notify the police.”

The next morning, Gianna hopes that everything will have resolved itself. She opens the front door to check and instead finds that the man is still there, sleeping. Nervous, she shakes him. “Come on, wake up. You can’t stay here. I’m going to call the police, they’ll be here soon.” The man slowly begins to move, and half opens his eyes, not saying anything, staring at her. It is a moment. Gianna stops and looks at him and something inside of her changes. Her voice softens: “What’s your name?” “Valentino.” “It’s cold. Do you want to come in?” The man holds on to the handle to get up. He has an amputated leg. “I’m sorry, there’s a flight of stairs to get to my house. Stay here, I’ll bring you something hot.” Over a cup of tea, Valentino tells her that he has been reduced to being a hobo, to begging, but that he wants to go home. And he asks, “Can I sleep in front of your house? I’ll leave early tomorrow morning. You won’t see me.”

“Ok,” Gianna replies, but she thinks that this is not enough. That moment on the doorstep is embedded in her heart. During the next few days she looks for him. She finds him in front of a small supermarket. “Hello, how are you?”

After a few minutes, Stefano, the owner of the store, approaches her, “Do you know him? I’ve seen him wandering around for the past few days. He doesn’t seem bad. On the contrary. Do you think there is anything we can do for him?” She did not expect this. It’s a spark.

**SHE STARTS TALKING ABOUT HIM** with her neighbors and everybody begins moving. Gianna is shocked. People whom she barely says hello to want to help. They stop her and ask. A chain of relationship begins that, in the many years she has lived in the neighborhood, had never been born. Someone brings clothes, others bring food, one woman keeps Valentino company for two hours. And from that moment she never abandons him. She goes and visits him every day. Slowly, they discover that he is about thirty years old and that he has been away from home for fifteen years. A messy life, but now he wants to go back to his sister in Krakow. They take up a collection to pay for his bus ticket. Everything seems taken care of until the bus driver refuses to let him board the bus: because he is handicapped, he needs an escort. They are not discouraged. Gianna and one of her neighbors go to the Polish consulate and after two hours have a passport and an airplane ticket in hand. Stefano has the car ready to take him to the airport. Valentino squeezes Gianna’s hand: “Here, I found Paradise. I have never been so loved in my life.”

**AFTER A FEW DAYS**, Gianna is in line at the grocery store. When it is her turn to pay, Stefano asks, “Do you have any news of Valentino? I talked to him the other day.” Behind her, a woman calls out, “He called me yesterday. He keeps telling me to go visit him.” Gianna turns around, “What do you think? We could go in the spring.” Stefano stops. “What a great idea Mrs. Gianna! Everyone who met him. Will you organize it?” “Of course. We’ll need a bus.” They laugh. As she is walking home, Gianna remembers that morning, that look, that moment in which something changed, as if Someone had taken her by the hand. That longing that made her move, to live that moment with intensity. It’s something that she does not want to lose.





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